



# **Pushing Boundaries, Expanding Vistas:**

*Celebrating the Work of John Coolahan*

Thomas Walsh and Rose Dolan (Eds.)



**Maynooth  
University**

National University  
of Ireland Maynooth

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## Notes on Contributors

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**John Bean** was principal of Hartstown Community School from 2009 to 2019 and deputy principal from 2001 to 2009. Previously, he taught French, Irish and German in Hartstown C.S. and in the Donahies Community School. He was a lecturer in Special Methods (French) in Maynooth University from 1995 – 2009.

**Niamh Bhreathnach** practiced as a ‘remedial’ teacher before entering politics. She was chairperson of the Labour Party from 1990 until 1993. She served as Minister for Education from 1993-1997 and was responsible for the introduction of a wide range of policy and legislation, including the White Paper on Education in 1995. She was a Councillor on Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council from June 2009 to June 2014 and served as Cathaoirleach from June 2004 to June 2005.

**Catherine Byrne** is currently chair of DICE, an Irish Aid Programme that promotes the integration of Development Education and Intercultural Education in initial teacher education. She is also on the board of Early Childhood Ireland. Catherine was formerly chair of the Ark, a cultural centre for children, and a member of the board of the Abbey Theatre. She was also Deputy General Secretary of the INTO and Deputy Chair of the NCCA.

**John Coolahan** played a pivotal role across all sectors of the Irish education system in the last five decades. He was a teacher, an academic, a researcher, a policy maker, an author, a government adviser and international consultant. John played a critical role in developing the policy and legislative architecture of the current education system.

**Marc Depaepe** (1953) was deputy chancellor at the *KU Leuven* (2013-2017). Since 2005, he was co-editor-in-chief of *Paedagogica Historica*. He is former president of the *International Standing Conference for the History of Education* (1991-1994) and member of the *International Academy of Education* (2012-). In 2015, he was awarded an honorary doctorate at the University of Latvia.

**Rose Dolan**, PhD (Cantab), is a lecturer and Ed D programme leader in Maynooth University Department of Education. Rose, a former secondary school teacher, joined the Department in 2003 and lectures and researches on teacher education practice and policy, with a particular focus on teacher educator professional development across the continuum.

**Sheelagh Drudy**, PhD (Cantab), is Emeritus Professor at UCD. She is a former Research Fellow and Visiting Fellow at Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge. She was formerly a colleague of John Coolahan at Maynooth Education Department. She was a Council Member and Chair of the Research Committee of the NCSE 2013-2018.

**Thomas Walsh** is a lecturer and Deputy Head of Department (2019-2020) in the Maynooth University Department of Education. Tom joined the Department in 2014 having previously worked as a primary school teacher, an education researcher and a primary school inspector at the Department of Education and Skills.

# Preface

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## *Pádraig Hogan*

The following short story might serve as a suitable Preface to a book that explores John Coolahan's vast and varied contributions to education. In autumn of 1988, a year after he came to Maynooth as Professor of Education, John took a bold initiative. He suggested the idea of bringing together in a series of one-day symposia the established interest bodies in post-primary schooling in Ireland: religious authorities, managerial bodies, teachers' unions, school leaders, parents' representative bodies. Also participating were some colleagues from the Maynooth Education Department and others from the educational research community in Ireland. The familiar pattern among the main interest bodies at the time was for each to do its business separately with the Department of Education in Marlborough Street and to fight steadfastly for its own domain. There were some enduring inter-group acrimonies underlying the conduct of affairs and too little attention was being given to policy issues of long-term importance. Nor was there sufficient alertness to ominous new policy developments in the UK and internationally, associated with the landmark 1988 Education Reform Act (238 sections) that had been passed in London in July of that year.

The invitation John issued to the various bodies noted the lack of a tradition for open dialogue on policy matters in the Republic and the absence of a neutral forum to engage together in exploratory discussion. It added that the aim was 'to clarify issues, to increase the overall understanding of the position of involved parties and to try to establish some guidelines that might help in the resolution of problems.' Some of the invited participants may have felt their existing prerogatives to be threatened by this initiative, but no one who was invited declined. We were regularly told afterwards that it would have been difficult to do so, John's standing being so high across the professional community – including the unions, managerial bodies, researchers, policymakers and, in a special way, among teachers and school leaders. The first symposium took place on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1988 and the venue, like that for the presentation of the contributions published in this book, was the Renehan Hall; a venue associated with some of the most far-reaching decisions affecting the previous century-and-a-half of Irish education.

The initiative proved to be not only successful, but also a seminal event. Over the course of a year, four well-attended symposia were held, with colleagues in the Maynooth Education Department writing summary reports and drafting position papers in the intervals between the symposia. True to form, some of the contributions to the first symposium revealed desires to retain the status quo – ‘if it isn’t broken why fix it?’ By the final symposium, however, there was an emerging and shared recognition that, while there were many achievements to be proud of since the introduction of ‘free education’ in 1967, there were some ingrained shortcomings that needed to be acknowledged, and addressed in a concerted way. These included: deep-seated inequities in the provision of educational opportunities; wastefulness in the deployment of energies and resources, often arising from each interest group’s sectional preoccupations; the need to identify and share professionally instances of high-quality educational practice and to remedy weaknesses; the need for a proper recognition of the wide plurality in Ireland’s school-going population; the need for greater transparency and accountability in normal educational procedures – ranging from the allocation of resources to the conduct of evaluations.

Although focused on post-primary education, these symposia prefigured in central respects the new and more comprehensive policy discourse of the 1990s. That decade became one of intense developments that saw Ireland take a largely different path in educational policy to the neoliberal path taken in most of the English-speaking world. John’s efforts were ever at the heart of the matter in shaping the Irish path. The products included the pioneering 1995 White Paper, *Charting our Education Future*, which grew out of the 1993-94 National Education Convention. This White Paper won the approval of widely different groups and, remarkably, provoked not a single serious criticism. It also included, for the first time, a succinct philosophical rationale for educational policy in Ireland. Not surprisingly, the five key principles of that rationale – that served in turn as the foundations for the 1998 Education Act – were: equality, partnership, quality, pluralism, accountability.

In truth John, with his informed historian’s eye and his keen vision for a transformed educational landscape, had something of this larger aspiration in mind from the outset. To put it in a sporting parlance he would promptly appreciate, the Maynooth initiative of 1988-89 served as the ‘minor match’, to be followed by the key contributions that defined his illustrious career on the national and international stage thereafter; contributions that are perceptively reviewed in the chapters that follow.

# Introduction

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## **Thomas Walsh & Rose Dolan**

### **Introduction**

It is with great pleasure that we introduce this publication celebrating the work and contribution of Professor John Coolahan to education. The publication captures the wide range of inputs and buoyant mood that characterised the specially organised colloquium held in Renehan Hall, Maynooth in October 2017 to celebrate John's wide-ranging involvements in the education system over the past five decades. Hosted by the President of Maynooth University, Professor Philip Nolan, the purpose of the colloquium was to reflect on and celebrate John's remarkable contribution to education in Ireland, much during the time when he was the Professor and Head of Department in Maynooth's Department of Education. The evening in Renehan Hall was attended by an array of invited guests including John's former colleagues, professional associates, academics, politicians, policy makers, students, family and friends.

The title for the colloquium, *Pushing Boundaries, Expanding Vistas: Celebrating the Work of John Coolahan*, encapsulated the visionary nature of much of John's work throughout his long and distinguished career. This capacity to push boundaries, expand vistas and challenge received wisdom on the educational landscape makes John's contribution to many aspects of education all the more significant and enduring. While grounded in the past and informed by the present, his practice, policy work and research most definitely had an eye to the future.

### **Format of the colloquium**

In order to ground the contributions which are captured in this publication, a brief overview of the format of the evening is useful. Professor Sharon Todd, Professor and Head of the Department of Education in Maynooth, opened the colloquium. Professor Philip Nolan then welcomed John and invited guests and offered his own reflections on John's contribution. Each of the five contributors on the night whose chapters appear in this publication was introduced in turn by an 'interlude speaker'. The role of the interlude speakers was to share briefly their own thoughts and memories of working with John and the impact he had on their professional and personal lives, ahead of introducing the next contributor. The interlude speakers on the night were Professor Aidan Mulkeen, Dr Maeve Martin, Dr Thomas Walsh, Dr Rose Dolan and Dr Anthony Malone. The main contributors on the night

were selected carefully to encapsulate the breadth and range of John's contribution to education. These were:

- Mr John Bean (principal of Hartstown Community School) who delivered an overview of the transformative changes to post-primary education in Ireland in recent decades, attributing much of this success to John's vision.
- Ms Niamh Bhreathnach (former Minister for Education) who addressed John's significant impact on policy development in education in the 1990s.
- Professor Marc Depaepe (KU Leuven, Belgium) who spoke about John's contribution to historical research and his role as a social historian of education.
- Ms Catherine Byrne (Chair of the Ark and former Deputy General Secretary of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation) who provided insights in relation to John's championing of the arts in education.
- Emeritus Professor Sheelagh Drudy (University College Dublin) who conveyed the breadth and significance of John's research in education.

The final address of the night was delivered by Professor Coolahan. With great skill, expertise and insight, John summarised and critically analysed the transformative changes in education in the last five decades. In his normal, humble and unassuming way, John did not make claim to his central role in the fashioning and facilitation of these changes and left us all with the challenge of continuing the work of developing and improving the education system.

The evening concluded with dinner in Pugin Hall where all attendees had an opportunity to reflect on the various inputs across the evening and to share their own personal stories and insights on John's remarkable contribution to education.

### ***The John Coolahan Education Scholarship***

The colloquium also provided a context for Professor Philip Nolan to announce the John Coolahan Education Scholarship within Maynooth University. Alumni of the university are asked to contribute to the scholarship to support students of education in Maynooth University in their studies. The scholarship is also a fitting and enduring recognition of John's long-standing commitment to education in Maynooth University and beyond.

All profits from the sale of this book will be lodged to the John Coolahan Education Scholarship fund to support the future research of students in education in Maynooth University.

### ***Themes from the contributions***

Before providing a summary of the individual contributions on the night, it is fitting to distil a number of cross-cutting themes that emerged and which are evident in this publication. First, it is evident that John's drive and enthusiasm was underpinned by a core belief in the critical importance and transformative possibilities of education. Much of his work across the education system was also underscored by his conviction that a knowledge of the past was a prerequisite to planning for the present and the future. Second, his commitment to public service and his relentless efforts to advance practice, policy and research across all sectors of the education system are palpable. John viewed it as a privilege to be able to contribute and serve. Third, his visionary nature and capacity to use his deep historical knowledge to influence the present and build towards the future was a hallmark of his ability to plan incrementally for change in context. Fourth, John placed great value on the importance of working in a consultative and collaborative way, engaging with multiple viewpoints, building relationships and sharing understandings. Fifth, it is evident from John's own contribution on the night that he felt a deep pride in Ireland's education system and the many transformations he had witnessed and contributed to in his life time.

It is no surprise to note the strong connection between the themes and the underpinning philosophy of the 1998 Education Act. A publicly funded education system needs to be cognisant of its key purposes and responsibilities, and of its underpinning principles, namely to "...make provisions in the interests of the common good for the education of every person in the state...accountable to students, their parents and the state... respect[ing] the diversity of values, beliefs, languages and traditions...and is conducted in a spirit of partnership"<sup>1</sup> The implications of these themes for those who work within the field of education and for those who are deeply interested in education are simultaneously simple and profound.

### ***Chapter Summaries***

This publication is comprised of six chapters, the last of which was delivered by John in response to the inputs on the night regarding his contribution to education.

**John Bean's** chapter provides a comprehensive and impressive overview of the key developments in second-level education over the past three decades. These are itemised at both a national and school level and span many areas including curriculum reform, legislative provisions and teacher professional development. The chapter concludes that education has been transformed in this period and is now better positioned to provide for the needs of all students in the system. John Bean asserts that John Coolahan's vision was central in establishing and progressing many of the reforms in second-level education through his involvement in the development of the Green Paper (1992), his secretarial role at the National Education Convention (1993) and his engagement in developing the White Paper (1995).

**Niamh Bhreathnach** begins her chapter by hailing John Coolahan a national treasure. Throughout the chapter, Niamh provides valuable insights into the key and influential role played by John in the early 1990s when many of the foundations of the modern education system were laid. She gives an honest review of the challenges she faced as Minister, the achievements and shortcomings of her term and, critically, the impact that John's involvement had on the shaping of policy and legislation. Central to this influence was his role as Secretary General of the National Education Convention and author of the Convention report, which informed both the White Paper (1995) and subsequent education legislation. Niamh identifies that one of John's main contributions was identifying the need for an underpinning philosophy of education for the system in the 1990s. Despite progress, the chapter concludes with the challenges still facing the education system and the mission to continue John's work.

John Coolahan's role as a social historian of education is the focus of **Marc Depaepe's** chapter. Marc traces the origins of the discipline of history of education and notes John's contribution to the paradigm shifts in the field in the late twentieth century. The chapter provides insights into John's role both as a social historian and as a contemporary policy maker, highlighting the unique insights and distinct advantages his grasp of historical events offered contemporary developments. Marc lauds the considerable contribution John's book on the history and structure of Irish education made to Irish historiography in the early 1980s. Fortunately, John updated and revised this book in 2017 and no doubt it will remain a central text for education students into the future.

**Catherine Byrne's** chapter focuses on John's role in advocating for and promoting the centrality of the arts in education. This is an aspect of

John's work that may have been less familiar to many but was a central and ongoing commitment throughout his career. The chapter documents many of John's affiliations in the arts world and his key achievements in the course of this work. To honour John's contribution, the Ark has instituted the John Coolahan Early Years Artist Residency programme to support artists across a range of disciplines. Although there have been recent successes, including increased investment and creative schemes, the chapter concludes that much more needs to be achieved to realise John's vision for the role of arts in education.

**Sheelagh Drudy** focuses on John's immense contribution to research in Irish education in her chapter. In her estimation, the significant quantity of publications John produced is equally matched in terms of their quality and impact. The thorough and ethical nature of John's research is lauded as a key characteristic. Furthermore, Sheelagh argues that the drive behind the quality and quantity of John's research output was his core belief that understanding or reforming the current system can only be successfully achieved through a comprehensive analysis and understanding of past developments. For over fifty years, John produced research that greatly enhanced our grasp of the history of education and used these insights in his role as a policy developer in Ireland and internationally. Sheelagh concludes the chapter by asserting that the work of the researcher is never complete – there are ongoing challenges and issues in the education system that will only be ameliorated through high quality research to inform policy development into the future.

The final words on the night, and the final chapter of this book, are offered by **John Coolahan**. In his substantial input, John reminisced on the many ways in which education was transformed during recent decades. In his normal humble way, he takes little credit for the transformation and instead asserts the privilege it had been for him to be able to contribute and to work in partnership with others. Indeed, partnership, collaboration and consultation were central themes in John's contribution, concepts he saw as fundamental to progress and development in education. His remarkable capacity to look at the big picture is evident in the chapter and he concludes that the transformation has resulted in the achievement of a 'lifelong learning system' for Ireland. What shines through in particular in John's chapter is his sense of pride in the extent of the transformation that he witnessed in education during his lifetime, and a pride in the teachers, educators and policy makers who realised the reforms. While urging ongoing progress and development of the education system, he concludes proudly that Ireland boasts "one of the best education systems

in the developed world.” While this is a feat for which John does not claim any responsibility, his remarkable contribution across myriad aspects of the education system has been fundamental in pushing the boundaries and expanding the vistas of education in Ireland in recent decades.

### ***And ‘thank you’ to a few!***

The smooth organisation of the colloquium was only possible by the substantial input of a range of individuals, departments and sections within Maynooth University. A committee comprised of Professor Sharon Todd, Dr Anthony Malone, Dr Rose Dolan and Dr Thomas Walsh planned the event with the support of the wider academic and administrative staff of the Department of Education. The evening and refreshments were hosted by Professor Philip Nolan and the Communications and Marketing Office coordinated the invites and schedule for the evening. A number of photos from the colloquium are included in the publication which hopefully capture the richness and buoyancy of the night. Many thanks to the Communications Office for permission to use these.

Our thanks also go to Campus Services and the Pugin Hall staff who looked after us so well on the night. Sincerest thanks are extended to the contributors and interlude speakers on the night who captured so eloquently the contribution John has made to Irish education. Most importantly, a heartfelt thank you to John, to his wife Mary and to his family who attended and contributed on the night. The publication of this book has been made possible by the support of the Maynooth University Publication Fund of the Research Development Office.

### ***Parting words***

It was with great sadness that we learned of John’s passing in early June 2018. The very large attendance at his funeral and the heartfelt tributes that were paid to John testify to the impact he had on education and to the personal relationships he had fostered across so many sectors and strata of Irish society. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

### ***References***

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Ireland (1998). *Education Act, 1998*. Dublin: The Stationery Office, p. 1.



President Philip Nolan welcomes guests to the colloquium

# Chapter 1

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*“As a nation, we owe you a great debt of gratitude”*

John Coolahan's contribution to post-primary education  
– **John Bean**

I met John Coolahan in 1993 when I was a student on the first part-time Masters in Education course here in Maynooth University. It was an exciting time in Irish education. The Green Paper, *Education for a Changing World*,<sup>1</sup> for which John had acted as advisor to the Department of Education, had been published in 1992. In 1993, the National Education Convention was convened with John as Secretary General. The breadth and sheer ambition of the consultation undertaken was unprecedented in the context of Irish education. Our Master's course ran for the period of the Convention, the preparation of the Report on the Convention<sup>2</sup> in 1994 (which John edited), and the publication of the White Paper<sup>3</sup> in April 1995. We were privileged to have John as our lecturer during that time and to share his excitement and optimism. He was certain that the Irish educational landscape was on the cusp of a great transformation.

My own experience in education is predominantly at second-level as a student in the 1970s, as a teacher through the 1980s and 1990s and as a senior manager for almost 20 years. It is fair to say that the learner experience and the job of the teacher have both changed radically since my time in school. I will talk this evening about some of the key changes, at both a school and national policy level, which I believe have made schools better places for students and for teachers.

## ***National Policy Level***

One of the considerations informing the proposals in the 1990s was Equality, which the White Paper describes as being “*at the heart of the protection of individual rights and the promotion of community well-being*” where “*the State should seek to eliminate or compensate for the sources*

*and consequences of educational disadvantage” to enable “each and every pupil to make the most of [their] potentials.”<sup>4</sup>*

Second-level education is undoubtedly more equitable and inclusive than it was prior to the Education Act<sup>5</sup> and the Education (Welfare) Act 2000.<sup>6</sup> The right of the child to an education and the responsibility of the State to ensure that an education is provided are now enshrined in legislation. Delivering Equality of Opportunity (DEIS) initiatives, improved pupil-teacher ratios in disadvantaged schools and improved provision for children with special educational needs have helped to mitigate some of the inequalities caused by social, economic, physical and intellectual disadvantage.

There is now a clear understanding that literacy and numeracy are critical if a child is to benefit from formal education. The great success of the literacy programmes in the DEIS primary schools has enabled many children to participate more fully at second-level. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) directive that Literacy and Numeracy be the first and second strands of School Self-Evaluation in second-level schools has also been successful. Irish children’s levels of literacy and numeracy are now among the highest in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, as evidenced by its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores.

Participation rates of Traveller children at second-level have improved considerably. There is a greater appreciation among this generation of Traveller parents of the value of second-level education and while completion rates need to improve, participation rates are much higher than before.

Special Needs Education has evolved greatly. Twenty-five years ago, a non-DEIS school of 1,000 students, even one in a very mixed area, might have had just a single “remedial” teacher. That same school now has an allocation of up to ten teachers to cater for the special learning needs of its students. Mainstream schools now have the knowledge, skills and resources (including Special Needs Assistants) to cater for a broad spectrum of needs. There are families who can now send all their children to the local school in the knowledge that they will all be supported.

There is flexibility now that allows students to follow reduced and tailor-made timetables and curricula. The development of Level 2 Learning Programmes in the context of the new Junior Cycle provides for those students who cannot follow a regular Junior Cycle programme.

Arrangements for Reasonable Accommodations at the State Exams, thorough assistive technology, the provision of scribes and readers along with spelling and grammar waivers, enable more children to achieve their potential.

The White Paper identified the need to devolve administration from the DES in order to make the best use of resources, introduce best management practices and strengthen policy making. While the Regional Education Boards envisaged at the time did not materialise, other bodies such as, for example, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the National Education Psychological Service (NEPS), the State Exams Commission (SEC) and the National Education and Welfare Board (NEWB, now subsumed into Tusla) have been very successful in managing specific areas of planning and policy development. As a consequence of the devolution of tasks to these and other agencies, the DES and the Inspectorate have indeed been freed, as envisaged in the White Paper, to concentrate on strategic issues allied to policy making.

The NEWB, for example, was established on foot of the Education (Welfare) Act 2000. In 2008, following a broad consultative process, it published *Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools*, which “recognises the value of engaging everyone in the school community, especially the students themselves, in the task of shaping the school environment and making it a happy place for teaching and learning”.<sup>7</sup> These guidelines, in tandem with sections 28 and 29 of the Education Act 1998, have provided a framework for managing student behaviour, which is principled, fair and transparent.

Considerable advances have been made in improving the quality of teaching and learning as well as school development and planning. The roles and responsibilities of senior management in schools have been clearly articulated. A range of inspection models along with the publication of school inspection reports have been particularly instrumental in raising standards in schools and in improving the teaching and learning environment. The Inspectorate published three documents in 2016. One of these, *A Guide to Inspection in Post Primary Schools*,<sup>8</sup> describes the inspection process and is the first point of reference following the dreaded call announcing an imminent visit by the cigire!

*Looking at Our Schools 2016*<sup>9</sup> provides a unified and coherent set of standards for teaching and learning and for leadership and management. It describes clearly what constitutes good teaching and learning in terms

of learner outcomes and experiences and the individual and collaborative practice of teachers. Some examples are:

Students' enjoyment in learning is evident and arises from a sense of making progress and of achievement. Their engagement with learning contributes to their sense of wellbeing.

Relationships and interactions in classrooms and learning areas create and sustain a co-operative, affirming learning environment.

Teachers strategically select and use approaches to match the learning intentions of the lesson, meet the learning needs of students and open up further learning opportunities.

*Looking at Our Schools* also describes what constitutes good leadership and management across the four domains of Leading Teaching and Learning, Managing the Organisation, Leading School Development and Developing Leadership Capacity in the organisation.

The third publication, *School Self-Evaluation Guidelines 2016-2020*,<sup>10</sup> provides practical support for schools in action planning for improvement that is informed by evidence gathered within each school's unique context.

### ***Local School Level***

At school level, properly constituted Boards of Management, representative of parents, trustees, teachers and the community, are responsible for managing schools. They oversee the development of the school plan, establish policy objectives and publish an annual report on the management of the school for parents and the local community. Parents and students are more involved as partners in decision-making through Student and Parent Councils, which are properly constituted and are involved in the development of school policies such as the Code of Behaviour, Anti-Bullying policies, the school uniform and various protocols around the use of, for example, mobile phones and digital technology. Schools have policies for dealing with student and parent complaints and concerns, which teachers now understand and accept.

In the past two years, extra deputy principals have been appointed increasing the capacity of school management to lead teaching and learning, as well as school development and planning. The appointment of middle managers on merit using a competency-based selection process and the removal of seniority as a stand-alone criterion for promotion has

enhanced the capacity of middle management to support students and to enhance the teaching and learning environment. These changes have released tremendous energy in schools as teachers seek out opportunities to take on responsibility and initiate action projects aimed at improving teaching and learning.

### ***Senior Cycle Education***

The White Paper announced a major restructuring of the senior cycle. A significant development was the introduction of a discrete and distinct Transition Year (TY) Programme as an option for all second-level schools followed by a two-year Leaving Certificate programme. Previously, some schools had offered a three-year Leaving Certificate programme, which combined elements of TY. The three-year programme conferred considerable advantage on the students who took it, usually in what may reasonably be referred to as privileged schools. The development of the TY programme open to all has been one of the great success stories of Irish education over the past 25 years. It has been established statistically that students who do TY score approximately 50 points more in the Leaving Certificate than those who don't. The progress students make in terms of their personal development and discovering their talents and strengths is impressive. A very important consequence of TY was that it empowered teachers to develop their own modules and showed that students can be motivated to learn without having an end of year exam.

Raising the school leaving age from 15 to 16 was not broadly welcomed by teachers. An extra year in school meant that most students would have to progress to senior cycle and the traditional, academic Leaving Cert course was not suited to many of them. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme existed but apart from the link and enterprise modules, students were still required to follow the regular Leaving Certificate syllabi and sit challenging terminal examinations.

The introduction of the Leaving Cert Applied (LCA) has been transformative for schools and students. Previously, some students undertook a traditional Leaving Cert programme for which they were not suited and which they were doomed to fail, or they simply left school without a Leaving Certificate. The LCA now provides a broad education incorporating vocational training with work experience, programmes in the Arts and Languages, and technical skills such as computer and digital literacy. Students graduate not only with a Leaving Certificate qualification, but also literate, articulate, well prepared for the world of work and very importantly, with a positive

experience of senior cycle education and a good image of themselves as capable, successful young people.

The restructured senior cycle has meant that the target of 90% completion rates for senior cycle set out in the White Paper (1995) has been achieved and even surpassed. Indeed, completion rates in DEIS schools improved from 68% to 81% between 2005 and 2010. By international standards, Ireland has high rates of second-level completion and third-level progression.

### ***Junior Cycle Education***

Progress was made in the Junior Cycle curriculum in the areas of literacy and numeracy, Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and the introduction of the very successful and engaging programme of Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE). The revised Junior Cycle is finally being implemented with its increased emphasis on literacy and numeracy along with a focus on wellbeing, self-management, communicating, creativity, co-operation, information management and thinking, combined with continuous and formative assessment.

Implementation has taken longer than might have been expected, but there is now a broad welcome in schools for the Junior Cycle with its strong emphasis on wellbeing and the development of key skills. The Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement which replaces the Junior Certificate recognises and captures a much broader range of learner experiences than terminal examinations. The current vision for the Junior Cycle is remarkably similar to that outlined in the White Paper and will, I believe, be transformative. As the White Paper stated:

The programme for all students at junior cycle will include a core of Irish, English, Mathematics, a science or a technological subject, and at least three further subjects from a wide range of full courses and short courses. All students should have access to the study of a modern European language and to a recognised full course in at least one creative or performing art form.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Teacher Professional Development***

The concept of the teacher as a reflective practitioner or self-directed action researcher was not common in schools in the 1980s. An objective set out in the White Paper was to train and develop teachers so as to equip them for a constantly changing environment. The range of professional development opportunities for teachers is considerably better than it was at the start

of my teaching career. The establishment of a part-time Master's degree for school leaders in Trinity College in the early 1990s and for aspiring school leaders in Maynooth University gave a generation of school leaders exposure to international literature around instructional leadership and the management of change. The recently established Centre for School leadership offers one-to-one support to newly appointed principals and deputies to complement the *Tóraíocht* and *Tánaiste* programmes.

The Droichead programme, run by the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT), formalises the induction process for newly-qualified teachers who are now all qualified to Master's level. Education Centres serve as regional hubs offering a range of in-career development options. The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) offers a wide range of supports to teachers and schools. At school level, subject planning meetings and Subject Learning and Assessment Reviews (SLARs) recently introduced in conjunction with the new Junior Cycle have provided for a rich professional dialogue.

### **Conclusion**

Looking back at the documents from the first half of the 1990s, one is struck by the depth and clarity of the vision they articulate for Irish education, and as Marc Depaepe rightly says, display a clear view of the long term. Crucially too, the drivers of change knew that very little of what was proposed would actually happen without legislation.

John, I hope that you and your fellow visionaries look back with satisfaction and pride on what you achieved. It is a testament to the coherence of your vision that the type of change you envisaged has happened and continues to this day in our second-level schools.

Yesterday, I spoke briefly to the chairperson of my Board of Management about this evening and that our purpose was to reflect on and celebrate John's remarkable work and vision. He made the point that John Coolahan is to Irish education what TK Whittaker was to the developing Irish economy. I think that is a fair assessment.

Second-level education has indeed been transformed and our schools are better places for learners and for teachers. As a nation, we owe you a great debt of gratitude. Thank you.

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President Philip Nolan with Ms Niamh Bhreathnach

## Chapter 2

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*“Declaring Johnny Coolahan as a national treasure”*

John Coolahan's contribution to public policy development in education

– **Niamh Bhreathnach**

I have come to Maynooth tonight to declare Johnny Coolahan a national treasure! Already recognised as the “man who knows more than anyone about Irish education”, Professor John Coolahan, long of this house, is rightly being honoured. On the occasion when friends, colleagues and family have been invited to celebrate his leading role in an evolving Irish education system, given this time to speak, the *ancient* Minister of those times, can assure you that without Professor Coolahan, there only would have been more of the same, only the same.

New Ministers do come with new brooms. And when Dick Spring surprisingly appointed me, Niamh Bhreathnach, as his Government's Minister for Education, sparks had to fly. Sparks flew when I appointed an outsider Secretary General to the Department, Don Thornhill. A new Minister and a newly appointed Secretary General got ready to challenge the team of dedicated civil servants in the Roinn Oideachais to bring the simmering public debate on education to a conclusion, towards a White Paper. Under Mary O'Rourke (Minister for Education 1987-1991), John Coolahan had advised on the Green Paper, *Educating for a Changing World*.<sup>1</sup> Following a Cabinet reshuffle, Séamus Brennan's (Minister for Education 1992-1993) revamped Green Paper invited public submissions. The tone of the Brennan debate raised hairs in the world of Irish education. A new Minister and a new Government were expected to react. So when I took up office in Marlborough Street, the coalition government agreement, *A Programme for Government*, issued by the Fianna Fáil/Labour partners, promised that the Minister would deliver on the education chapter of its programme, publish a White Paper on Education “by the end of 1993 and a new Education Act ..... shortly afterwards.”<sup>2</sup> I am glad I was such a green horn.

As a passionate young teacher who believed that education was 'the key to your life's chances', I had taken my Sion Hill Froebel qualification into St Audoen's inner city school and attempted to inculcate changes in its school curriculum. But except for the Rutland Street project<sup>3</sup>, the 1960s saw 60 children in a classroom, a teacher-centred curriculum, no Boards of Management and ownership by the Church that offered little to this neglected inner city parish school. By the 1980s, quoting from John's recent publication, *Towards the Era of Life Long Learning*, the next 30 years "was a period of huge change in educational policy...huge changes in the infrastructure of institutions...very significant curricular policy changes...It was a complex period, and educational policy was not consistent, giving rise to some stress and confusion."<sup>4</sup> Gemma Hussey, a Fine Gael Minister, who initiated some interesting changes in curriculum policy, was ousted from the Education portfolio by her own Government in favour of a more conservative colleague and many of her initiatives were shelved.

Twenty years after leaving St. Audoen's N.S. in Cook Street, I returned, now a Minister, to find little there had really changed. Yes classes were smaller, about 40 pupils in a mixed classroom in an area where the population was declining and the very survival of the school itself was in doubt. Despite all the changes in the curriculum, moves to a child-centred classroom and famously free second-level education, no child from Oliver Bond Flats had walked down Dame Street in through the gates of Trinity College.

To pull off a change of direction in the Irish education system, I needed to find a national treasure. Secretary Thornhill had been concerned that the countywide tour debating educational needs had become too self-serving, giving all the interest groups, over 30 of them, a stick to bang only their own drum, little choral harmony and much more competitive cacophony. The absence of a genuine listening debate was palpable; Union against Union, sector against sector, owner-managers not even on speaking terms. What emerged was the National Education Convention, hosted by the Department of Education, chaired by Professor Dervilla Donnelly of University College Dublin and Professor Coolahan as its Secretary General. John Coolahan did indeed put the Irish education system centre stage. The man from Maynooth with the pen would write its report<sup>5</sup> and its history was now centre stage. We listened as each sector addressed its own need for reform and took questions from the other attendees, their partners in education. The general public was at last introduced to Professor Coolahan. The Convention was a success.

John Coolahan's final report reflected those wonderful weeks of debate. The outcomes of some of its most delicate negotiations informed many parts of the subsequent White Paper, *Charting our Education Future*.<sup>6</sup> Behind the scenes, the interest groups were being schooled in the areas of agreement and reform and were even negotiating truces. In the Convention Report, John Coolahan had declared “[G]iven that every educational action unavoidably presupposes a philosophy of some kind or other, the provision of an adequate philosophical rationale, from which both structures and practice draw their coherence and strength, remains a priority.”<sup>7</sup> This was indeed long-term planning being given a philosophical underpinning, something that all previous occupants of the Minister's Office studiously avoided. Searching back into major speeches from previous Ministers, I had been surprised that even Paddy Hillery, in his major 1963 speech outlining his ground breaking reforms, avoided the term philosophy.

Alerted by the Convention, spelt out in the subsequent White Paper, my objective, to give legislative underpinning to a system that had survived for over 100 years on circulars from An Roinn Oideachais, was achieved. Coherence and strength had been badly missing in the decision-making process. Now plans to govern the Irish education system into the new millennium could be given a solid philosophical base. But political posturing, manifesto infighting and a crowded legislative agenda at the end of that second Government, then with Fine Gael, meant the Education Act was not introduced by me but waited for the new administration and came minus the chapter on Regional Boards. I still think that was a shame. Slowly, slowly over decades, changes that seemed exciting and forward looking and agreed at the time of the Convention were pulled reluctantly from the system. Only recently, Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), promised at the time of the White Paper, became a working reality. Twenty years ago, I had got to name the Further Education sector but waited until last month for the announcement that it was to be rationalised, organised and properly recognised. Perhaps it is time now to revisit the Leaving Cert Applied so that the Further Education sector will be ready to address problems coming down the road when Ireland faces full employment, with 4% of our long term unemployed still stubbornly unprepared for work. Professor Coolahan captured all those needs in his public and private reports for the Department and his many published papers. How many years have passed John? We must ask ourselves why any and all of the stakeholders in education see retrenchment as their default position?

What of the Third Level institutions? In its time, in my time, the need for change did not find favour with all of your sector either. Guiding the

university legislation through the two Houses of the Oireachtas during my last months in office left me with some visible scars and a lost election.<sup>8</sup> I was of course pleased that in passing the university legislation, Maynooth separated from the Pontifical College and that your very helpful Master William Smyth was renamed President. Safeguarding your entitlement to regulate your own affairs was now underpinned in this historic piece of legislation, while public accountability did become a reality and archaic procedures in all colleges are well on the path to reform and modernisation. So despite the public outcry at my attempts to legislate, today the jury suggests that a reasonable balance has been struck.

Now that we the warriors of those exciting years are retired or are about to retire from public life, another generation of troops must come forward to ensure that governments and Ministers for Education are held to account. I was a little disappointed that in my time, Third Level never sought to lead reform, indeed your sector entrenched more than most. Are you up to the challenge today to continue John Coolahan's work? There is a need to bring the public into a national conversation. I failed to embed parents into the system, but they are your real partners in education and by ignoring them, keeping them outside your walls, you are ignoring a great source of political support. So while great work is being conducted on your campuses and yes, today, the children of Cook Street are walking through the gates of all the colleges, I do not believe the public has decided that investing in that "great education system" that Ministers annually boast about is really the public's top spending priority.

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Dr Thomas Walsh, Dr Pat Callan, Professor John Coolahan and Dr Anthony Malone

## Chapter 3

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*“An indirect policymaker next to his career as a historical researcher”*

John Coolahan as a social historian of education  
– **Marc Depaepe**

Mr. President, dear colleagues and friends of John Coolahan – dear John,

It is an honour and great pleasure for me to be back at the National University of Ireland in Maynooth, where I attended, in 1997 (20 years ago), the 19<sup>th</sup> International Standing Conference for the History of Education (ISCHE), organised and chaired by nobody less than John Coolahan.<sup>1</sup> Already in 1983 I had the opportunity to meet him in Birmingham, at one of the conferences of the (British) History of Education Society (HES), and to learn to appreciate him for his contribution to the paradigm shifts of the time. Although he was primarily trained as an educator (and functioned respectively as a primary teacher, a secondary teacher, a teacher-trainer, and a university professor), he was aware of the dangers of what I have called afterwards an educationalised version of the history of education. He certainly belonged to the promoters of the so-called “new” social history of education, which had been inspiring not only in the founding and the development of the (British) HES (in 1967 – i.e. 30 years earlier), but also in the founding and development of ISCHE which started in 1979 under the impetus of, among others, Maurits De Vroede, my promoter, and Brian Simon, who became ISCHE’s first president.<sup>2</sup>

John Coolahan’s input was not that much by writing theoretical and/or methodological articles, but by the publishing a sound history of Irish education. For a realist like John, the proof of the pudding was undeniably in the eating. Whatever the implications of such a historicisation of the old-fashioned history of education might have been – there is indeed until today the danger that the research of educational historians, who work traditionally in pedagogical institutions, are considered as unnecessary

luxury – Coolahan remained convinced that history is still indispensable for researchers as well for educational policymakers to understand the nature, identity and intellectual foundations of all pedagogical activities.

Hereafter, I want to demonstrate these claims by looking back briefly at the history of our field (and John's contribution to it), and to indicate the present issues we are facing as well as the ways in which we can address these issues in future.

From the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the success of the history of education in teacher training depended in most European countries and also in the United States on the relevance of the educational thought of the "great masters" like Montaigne, Comenius, Locke, Rousseau, Pestalozzi and so on. Pedagogues responsible for teacher training aimed to inculcate a pedagogically correct attitude in teachers, using the heritage of the educational past. Gabriel Compayré, the French standard bearer of this "history of pedagogy" (or if you want "history of ideas" in education), stated for example in 1884 that the various pedagogical systems of the so-called great thinkers elevated the level of moral exhortation in the coming generations. Such a canonising encounter with the educational valuable heritage remained popular until deep in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, certainly in the context of teacher training, as it continued to offer a good platform for legitimising contemporary educational actions.<sup>3</sup>

However, we cannot imagine that John Coolahan in his courses simply wanted to restore this moralising history of education (which existed, of course, also in the context of the normative philosophy of pre-conciliar Catholic pedagogy). To quote the Catholic priest and Flemish pedagogue Frans De Hovre, the study of past theories and practices would lead to "a rebirth ... of Catholic educational philosophy", "the prototype, the Platonic idea, the essence of all real pedagogical thinking, (...) the herald of educational truth".<sup>4</sup>

The paradigm shift in the direction of the new social history of education, which is said to have taken place in the 1960s and 1970s, replaced more and more (at least on the level of research) such outdated points of view from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. As was stated in one of the first publications of the HES:

the history of education was in an urgent need of local research to actualize and substantiate its generalizations, its large statements of legislative, administrative or academic intent, and also to investigate

the undergrowth of provision of education of widely varied sorts as response to social and personal needs, owing little or nothing to policy at any level but servicing society and the economy, as well as enriching personal life. If we want to know what did happen rather than what was supposed to be done, we have to go into the field and find out.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, there was “an almost complete lack of historical work in connection with social change and social mobility, of the part played by education in modernisation, or of its function in relation to changing and modifying values”.<sup>6</sup>

In his book *Irish Education. History and Structure* (first published in 1981) Coolahan precisely attempted:

...to fulfil the need for a single work which provides a general history of education at all levels from the early nineteenth century up to the 1980s and which also treats contemporary institutions, policies and trends in the light of their evolving historical context. In this way, the formative influences on the system are related to current developments. As well as knowing about the education system, there is a need to understand why it is as it is and the parameters within which change and reform operate.<sup>7</sup>

Understanding is indeed the essential act, the key word in the historiographical operation, as the unfortunate Marc Bloch already stipulated in his *Apologie pour l'histoire ou Metier d'historien* (translated as the *Historian's Craft*). Historical facts by themselves say nothing. Historiography, also that of education, is the product of the interaction between facts and interpretation. Historiography based on facts alone, as Leopold von Ranke, who started teaching history in 1825 at the University in Berlin, made us believe, is founded on an illusion, whereas historiography without facts belongs self-evidently to the realm of imagination. The historical reality is not a reality specified *a priori* but a reality that has to be created in the interpretation, thus *a posteriori* – a truth of which John was fully aware.

Maybe it was therefore why he has chosen to become an indirect policymaker next to his career as a historical researcher. His advisory work behind the public scene of big politics instructed him anyhow about the way in which the implementation of some educational reforms, educational ideas and mentalities are used and appropriated to underpin the social

discourse of modernity and the ideology of progress. He also learned that some policymakers wanted to use historical perspectives to advance their own agendas and that the history of education could not immediately yield the results that policymakers and politicians wanted to hear. Rather than sharing this functional fallacy of a useful history of education, he as a researcher subscribed to the more critical and distant view of the long term, the necessity of writing a history of education in its own right and own terms, as, for example, his book with Patrick O'Donovan, *History of Ireland's School Inspectorate 1831-2008*, witnessed.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, educational historiography itself emerges even less in a political, social and cultural vacuum and must be equally understood in relation to its connection to society. The use of contemporary paradigms (like the new cultural history of education), the use of recently forged concepts (like the grammar of schooling) and theoretical insights (like the postmodern ability of changing mutual perspectives), the writing of history in general and the writing of history of education in particular remain a child of its time. As a result it cannot call on absoluteness, but must be constantly questioned and, from time to time, rewritten by the coming generations.<sup>9</sup> But this relativity need not degenerate into relativism. As John amply has demonstrated, as a policymaker as well as a researcher, its power is wisdom. Wisdom, which is able to transcend diverse standpoints throughout history by putting them into perspective.

I believe this changing of perspectives is crucial, not only for the further development of the history of education as a discipline and a field of research, but also as a gatekeeper of our democratic society. It is only through debate that a continuously "improved" story about the educational past can be developed. And in my view, this improved story can be found in the critical corrective that history offers, an increasingly cleansing vision which disproves, breaks up, sobers, suppresses, in short demythologises and demystifies the often exaggerated and "educationalised" claims of former generations of educators on history. In the same sense, it is in the interests of any democratic society to facilitate and maintain such discussions. And thus also to invest money in research that is not profitable at first glance, if only because it dares go against the grain of current policy by proclaiming matters that do not fit with the official discourse.

This does not only apply to the political-ideological yoke of any dictator who wished to use history (also of education) to his or her own ends, but perhaps also within the framework of a neo-liberal society in which an "alternative" (and, also often a highly a-theoretical and a-historical) view

of the past is propagated, which benefits sponsors and/or administrators (certainly, if these two actions become entwined, as might be, for example, the case with Donald Trump). Nevertheless, as long as the debate remains possible from the inside-out, there is hope. Therefore, let us continue to nurture and cultivate a diversity of insights, viewpoints and approaches, undisturbed. I am sure that John Coolahan, as a gentleman but also a world citizen, will share this plea for more tolerance and diversity in history, history of education, educational science(s) as well as in educational policy.

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President Philip Nolan, Professor John Coolahan and Professor Sharon Todd

## Chapter 4

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*“A relentless endeavour over five decades to bring the Arts centre stage”*

John Coolahan’s contribution to the Arts in education  
– **Catherine Byrne**

It is my great pleasure and honour to pay tribute to a tireless advocate for the rights of all children to fulfil their creative potential through access to the Arts both in formal education settings and through Arts organisations and settings such as The Ark, the national cultural centre for Children, of which I am Chair. Professor John Coolahan was a member of the board of this children’s cultural center, which is unique in Europe, for 13 years until he retired in June of this year as a director.

John, I have chosen a quote from the *Arts in Education Charter* to begin my reflection. I think it sums up eloquently the essence of your lifelong commitment to and endeavour for the rightful place of the Arts in Education. The charter states:

We truly believe that creativity must be placed at the heart of our future as a society and as a country. The arts are our first encounter with that rich world of creativity, and we believe in placing the arts, alongside other subjects, at the core of our education system.<sup>1</sup>

That has been your lifelong ambition. In fact I have often wondered if you had a hand in penning those words as I know you played an instrumental role in ensuring that Ministers Deenehan and Quinn established the charter for the Arts in Education and indeed you chaired the implementation group which brought together the key players responsible for its delivery (i.e., the Arts Council, the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, and the Department of Education and Skills).

Everyone in this gathering is well aware and proud of your illustrious career both at home and internationally, as an academic, a researcher, an author, a primary and second level teacher and as a teacher educator. The breath of your involvement in the formation of policy in Irish education from the early 1970s through every decade to this very day is truly mind-boggling.

I have been asked to shine the light on one aspect of your work (we know it permeated everything you did ) – your relentless endeavour over five decades to bring the Arts centre stage in government thinking and planning. Central to this has been your efforts to align the players in the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, the Department of Education and Skills and the Arts Council to deliver an integrated approach to the delivery of Arts and Culture to children throughout this country from their earliest years.

I would like to pick out a few highlights from your achievements, even at the risk of leaving something critical out. In 1978-79, as part of an Arts Council team, together with Ciarán Benson, Seamus Heaney and Seán Ó Tuama, you produced the report on the Arts in Irish Education.<sup>2</sup> This became the foundation stone for so many of the developments that have occurred since, including the establishment of the Ark itself. The report is still relevant today and much referenced in recent developments such as the *Points of Alignment*<sup>3</sup> which set out to open up partnerships between the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, the Department of Education and Skills and the Arts Council. More recently, the *Arts in Education Charter*<sup>4</sup>, and the implementation group for that Charter which you chaired, and the *Creative Ireland Programme 2017 to 2022*<sup>5</sup> have moved the debate and policy to the heart of government.

I think it is fair to say that the stars appear to be aligning and that your vision and effort is about to blossom. €1.2 million has now been allocated in the budget for the *Creative Children Initiative* to be run by Department of Education and Skills and the Arts Council. This is the successor to the *Arts Rich Schools* proposal contained in the Charter and is a direct result of your advocacy and clearly one of your great legacies to the Arts in education.

But it is the only gesture in this budget to *Creative Ireland Pillar 1* and falls short of demonstrating a national commitment to children's right to an Arts-rich childhood. We have a long way to go to secure the vision that you have advocated for over many decades, through your contribution

on early childhood policy, the *Arts in Education Charter* or the *Points of Alignment*.

I know that all of us assembled here today who are involved in the business of developing and delivering Arts policy and Arts Education for children could pay no greater accolade to Professor John Coolahan than to continue to build on your lifetime of work and commitment, to fulfil your dream of giving every child access to the highest quality art and cultural experiences and real opportunities to engage in the full spectrum of the Arts. We all need to work together across disciplines; we need to continue to advocate for more investment.

On that note, I am delighted to share with this audience that the Ark, as part of our commitment to nurture Arts practice for children in the earliest years of their education, has set up an early years Artist residency beginning in 2018 in recognition of the sterling contribution of Professor John Coolahan to Arts education for the early years. The residency will focus each year on a different Arts discipline.... theatre, music, dance and visual art.

I am delighted and proud as your former student in Carysfort College of Education, as former Deputy General secretary of the INTO, and as your fellow director and Chair of the Ark, to have had this opportunity to showcase in a small way your central role in advancing the case for placing creative, artistic and cultural experiences at the heart of learning from the earliest years of children's lives.

We know that you have been dealing with serious health challenges over recent months with the same qualities that have marked your illustrious career – courage, humility, diplomacy, determination and optimism, always keeping your face to the rising sun. I hope you will draw on the warmth, friendship and regard of all of us gathered here today in the times ahead.

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The interlude speakers: Professor Aidan Mulkeen, Dr Thomas Walsh, Professor John Coolahan, Dr Rose Dolan, Dr Anthony Malone and Dr Maeve Martin

## Chapter 5

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*“A prodigious and influential research output”*

John Coolahan’s contribution to educational research  
– **Sheelagh Drudy**

I was very pleased indeed to be invited by Maynooth University to pay tribute to Professor John Coolahan’s contribution to educational research. I worked for almost 14 years with John in Maynooth Education Department. During that time, he proved to be an excellent and most congenial colleague and the very model of an educational leader. After I went to University College Dublin, John remained a wonderful colleague and a dear friend.

John had a prodigious and influential research output. It seems to me that a key to understanding his work centres on a core belief. That is, it is impossible to comprehend and analyse fully our present circumstances in education and to choose the most propitious direction of future policy unless we know the circumstances from which we came and the factors which facilitated and circumscribed the development of educational policy.

In the conduct of his research, John demonstrated a meticulous approach to method and a commitment to accuracy. I am aware from a very well-placed source that he often checked and re-checked the archives in the Department of Education and elsewhere to verify the facts. He always provided an ethical and impartial assessment of developments and events in what are (or were) frequently highly contested areas of study and policy development. It is no surprise, then, that his published work has been so highly cited and has been such a valued source for researchers, students and policy makers alike.

### ***John's achievements in research***

John's research output over the years was remarkable. To give an indication, he was the author of 11 books, and literally hundreds of published articles, conference presentations and public lectures. He also edited and co-edited numerous books and proceedings and was on the editorial boards of a number of key bodies and journals. As well as having served as a member of a significant number of national and international research associations, he was a founder member of two central Irish educational research organisations – the Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) and the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS).

The citation indices show that the two most highly cited of John's publications neatly summarise the themes of his research. These are, first, the *History and Structure of Irish Education*<sup>1</sup> and, second, *Teacher Education and the Teaching Career in an era of Lifelong Learning*.<sup>2</sup> A further enduring theme of John's contribution is that of educational leadership. Citations, of course, tell only part of the story of the influence of John's research. Many people are aware of the impact of John's work on educational policy. This was very significant indeed. As well as that, there are other forms of impact. I would venture to say that there are few teachers and educational researchers in Ireland who have qualified since the early 1980s who are not familiar with the *History and Structure of Irish Education*. This book has been a most valued resource which has enabled many to take the long view of Irish education and to understand how the system developed. It is very helpful also to those teachers who qualified overseas and who wish to familiarise themselves with the Irish system. It has been an invaluable resource to those who simply wish to check when this or that event took place, or how a certain policy developed or, indeed, why other policies were not implemented.

John's research and publications covered not only the history of education, teacher education and leadership but also a range of other topics. These included educational broadcasting in Ireland, the history of the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI), the history of the inspectorate, higher education, curriculum, lifelong learning, the arts in education, education in a European context, religion, politics and education and, of course, his many involvements in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports on a variety of education systems internationally.

His extraordinary research output was rounded off in 2017 by two substantial publications. In one, *Towards a Better Future: a Review of the Irish School System*,<sup>3</sup> myself, Áine Hyland, Pádraig Hogan and Séamus McGuinness were privileged to be co-authors with him. As we developed the project, our joint work, research and debates allowed us all to experience John's erudition. Also, quite frankly, the whole process was fun. The second of these major works was launched by the Minister for Education and Skills – *Towards the Era of Lifelong Learning: A History of Irish Education 1800-2016*.<sup>4</sup> This volume is a veritable *tour de force* encompassing material from the earlier volume but also a synopsis of the many changes which have taken place in Irish education in the past three decades, including developments in early childhood education, primary, post-primary, higher, further and adult education, teacher education and the school inspectorate. This book will be an extraordinarily valuable resource for years to come.

In addition to his own research, John supported and encouraged the research of others through the supervision of more than 150 masters theses and more than 20 PhDs.

### ***The current issues still to be faced in education and research and how they might be addressed***

Although John's work illustrates the many achievements in education in this country, particularly over the past 25 years, his research also highlighted the fact that much remains to be done. His work, like that of many others, signalled the need for evidence-based policy, and for continuing the practice of widespread consultation in the formation of education policy in order that new developments will involve ownership by key stakeholders. His research also highlights the need for adequate resources to be provided to make the right things happen at the right time.

There is one theme to which John returned again and again. That is, the theme of the governance and administration of the system. As John himself frequently pointed out, in Ireland, there is no intermediate tier of administration between the Department of Education and Skills and the individual school. While Education and Training Boards (ETBs) fulfil some such role for about 35% of post-primary schools, for the remainder of post-primary and almost all primary schools the result is that there is a heavy burden of administration on the individual schools. Most of this falls on the principal. Both national and international research on school effectiveness and high performing schools and systems places a very strong emphasis on the quality of educational leadership. The difficulty, as John often pointed out, is that in Ireland there is such a multiplicity

of tasks and responsibilities with which principals and deputy principals must grapple that they are seriously impeded from close engagement with the leadership of teaching and learning.

Many school principals experience great stress in coping with the very varied and burdensome workload. Indeed, there is evidence that the post of principal is not now attractive to many high quality teachers, who see it as an unwelcome distraction from their core educational interests. However it is achieved, remedy is needed in this area and in the characterisation of responsibility posts in schools, if the aspired-for quality of educational leadership is to be realised. These issues, and also the persistence of inequality and the great challenges of effectively addressing diversity, require ongoing research and evidence gathering in order to provide a solid foundation for policy development.

It is very fitting that the Teaching Council of Ireland has established the John Coolahan Research Support Framework to mark the immense contribution of Professor John Coolahan to the field of education at home and abroad.

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The Coolahan family present on the night: Iseult, John, Deirdre, Mary and William

## Chapter 6

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*“I am never happier than when I am with teachers and school leaders”*

Reflections on five decades in education  
– **John Coolahan**

Dear President, Distinguished Guests, Colleagues and Friends,

It is a great honour and privilege for me to share this occasion with you. I express my sincere thanks for all the planning and organisation that has gone into the event. I wish to thank all the contributors to the proceedings. My thanks to all of you who have taken time from busy schedules to be with us. I am never happier than when I am with teachers and school leaders.

I see this Colloquium as part of a range of education fora that Maynooth University has been hosting on Irish educational themes over a sequence of years. At these fora, the President invited a range of contributors and participants to engage in open, democratic debate on on-going problems and issues. This is why I find this evening’s theme attractive – “Pushing Boundaries, Expanding Vistas”. However, I am uneasy about the emphasis on my personal contribution to educational policy and development – I have always seen it as a collective, collaborative process, and regard it as a privilege to have been enabled to make a contribution.

From my point of view, the Colloquium is occurring at an interesting time. It was just this autumn, 30 years ago, in 1987, that I was appointed as Professor of Education in Maynooth, and 20 years ago, in 1997, the Irish Universities Act established the National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM) as an independent university. It was a very interesting and exciting time, from which the University has gone from strength to strength.

On an occasion such as this, I would like to stand back and try to interpret key changes which have taken place within and between key agencies of

the education system over recent years. Against that background, I would like to sketch new approaches which were set afoot for education policy in terms of process, mode of engagement, range of content, nurturing new dimensions, enriching outcomes, reform of teacher education and an unprecedented range of education legislation. In this context, one can track new key changes within and between core agencies – the Universities, the University Education Departments and the State Department of Education.

Traditionally, in the past, it is true to say that Irish Universities did not hold Education as a subject with its practical, theoretical and research dimensions close to their core concerns. As a subject, Education tended to be marginalised and on the periphery of universities. Thankfully, that is no longer the case, and I hold that Maynooth led the way in this regard and, happily, others followed.

My predecessor, An Bráthair Ó Súilleabháin, operated a very high quality Higher Diploma in Education at that time. However, when I took over in 1987, we had very few postgraduate students, no Continuing Professional Development (CPD), limited research and poor facilities. The key thing was that a sequence of Presidents – Mons. Ledwith, Prof. W. Smyth, Prof. John Hughes, Prof. Tom Collins (interim 2010 – 2011), President Philip Nolan and various academics, gave their backing to Education and, gradually, a vast range of changes were made for Education within the University, in partnership with school personnel. This included expansion of a range of postgraduate courses, including the postgraduate course in School Leadership, expansion of CPD, of research, and partnership with agencies such as the Department of Education (DES), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), etc. It also involved the obtaining of financial support from groups such as the Gulbenkian Foundation, Atlantic Philanthropies and the DES. The Maynooth Education Department engaged in major joint initiatives with the teaching profession in projects such as *Schools for Active Learning*, *The School and Curriculum*, and *TL21 – Teaching and Learning for the Twenty-First Century* – which is still operational. However, I wish to emphasise that this was very much a team effort by a united staff.

It was also the case in the pre-1990s that the State Department of Education did not engage with the Education Departments of the Universities. The State Department of Education remained very much in the distance with no influence on the content of courses, the research dimension, or how courses were delivered. In the past, it was also the case that the Education Departments of the Universities had been seriously under-staffed and

under-resourced. However, by the 1990s, significant improvements had been made and greater respect had been paid to the work of the University Departments at home and internationally.

My point here is the potential for a new relationship between the three entities, central to educational progress – the Universities, the Education Departments and the State Department of Education – in association with the teaching profession, while tentative initially, blossomed into a constructive partnership which has led, since 1990, to a transformed education system. It is also the case that each of these key components has undergone significant change in their evolution as part of this transformative process.

This evening, time only allows for a brief summary of the stages in the transformation process, which I will go on to address. But I would like to give a flavour of the initial stage of the process. I was here in my office in Maynooth, this time 29 years ago, October 1988, when I was visited by two senior officials of the State Department of Education. They informed me that the Department of Education was planning to seek a review of the Irish education system from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). They asked me would I write the “Background Report” for the OECD. While I was surprised by the request, I agreed to do it.s

I was subsequently invited to discuss my draft at a meeting with the Secretary of the Department and five Assistant Secretaries in Tyrone House. While it was a daunting occasion, with varying views, I only agreed to two minor amendments. The paper was dispatched to the OECD and its officials came to visit the Irish Education Departments, including our own, for a worthwhile discussion. I also had the opportunity for a long meeting with the OECD team in Paris, when I visited the 1989 bicentenary of the French Revolution. The OECD Report was published in 1991.<sup>1</sup> It got very little official attention, but we held an important Symposium on it in Maynooth in Autumn 1991. As my recent history of Irish education emphasises<sup>2</sup>, both the OECD Report and one by Clive Hopes in 1990, made forceful critiques of weaknesses of the education system in Ireland and urged many reforms. To the credit of the Government and the Department of Education, they took on the challenge and the new reform process of the Irish education system got underway. Over subsequent years, mutual understanding and collaboration became more operative between the key entities we have identified, to the great benefit of the reform process.

Since 1990, Ireland has been undergoing a transformation of its education system. The approach taken to policy formulation, the extent of policy documentation made available, the range of reflection and discussion, the level of agreement achieved, the quality of the outcomes of the process and the extensive range of legislation was in striking contrast to the previous tradition and procedures.

Education in this transformative phase was characterised by a consultative and collaborative process. The OECD Review in 1991 was followed by two Green Papers (1992, 1998)<sup>3</sup> and three White Papers (1995, 1999, 2000)<sup>4</sup>. Four landmark national consultative fora took place – the National Education Convention in 1993<sup>5</sup>; Year of Lifelong Learning in 1996<sup>6</sup>; the National Forum on Early Childhood Education in 1998<sup>7</sup>; and the Forum on School Patronage and Pluralism in 2011<sup>8</sup>. Building agreement was a key theme throughout this transformative phase. Two unprecedented landmark pieces of legislation, namely the Universities Act, 1997<sup>9</sup> and the Irish Education Act, 1998<sup>10</sup> were passed. These were followed by numerous other legislative Acts relating to Special Agencies – the NQAI-QQI Act (1999)<sup>11</sup>; the Education (Welfare) Act (2000)<sup>12</sup>; the Teaching Council Act (2001)<sup>13</sup>; the Secondary Education Commission Act (2003)<sup>14</sup>; the Special Education Act (2004)<sup>15</sup>; and the Education And Training Boards Act (2013)<sup>16</sup>. The impact of this legislation has been transformative for Irish education. Among outcomes were the reform and restructuring of the Inspectorate and the DES. From a range of very varied and multidisciplinary functions, these agencies were now in a position to focus their attention on key strategic, advisory, evaluative and accountability roles, appropriate to their national responsibilities. Both the DES and the Inspectorate used the opportunity to reform and restructure themselves, to the benefit of the system.

Reflecting the landmark changes and legislative reform that were occurring, the Irish education system was transforming into a Lifelong Learning System in various ways. The incorporation of Early Childhood Education was of major import. As an aspect of transformation, early childhood education (ECE) is a good example. Following the Forum on ECE, a White Paper was issued on it in 1999<sup>17</sup>. There was an OECD Report on Irish ECE in 2004<sup>18</sup>, and the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) issued an ECE Report in 2005<sup>19</sup>. The NCCA engaged with the curriculum for ECE. The Government supports two years of ECE making it a core feature of the education system now. The 1999 Primary Curriculum Reform remains an ongoing process. There has been a focus on disadvantage; DEIS schools; expansion of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) and pupil supports. There have also been significant breakthroughs on special education.

Furthermore, numerous other changes and developments with regard to the emergence of a Lifelong Learning System are noteworthy – Junior Cycle Reform is underway; at senior cycle, Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), as well as Traditional Leaving Cert are all in place; the reform of the Points System is in process.

Further Education and Training (FET) and Adult Education is on a new footing following the 2013 Act (SOLAS, Apprenticeships); Higher Education has been undergoing major reforms – IOTs, and Universities – numbers, teaching and learning, evaluation, research, international links etc. Then the role of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) has been of major import for lifelong learning. Ireland has also benefitted from more international linkages with the OECD and the European Union (EU).

Reflecting the policy changes, schools as institutions have been changing during this time. Pupils' identities and destinations are more fluid; Intelligence is now regarded as multi-dimensional; School is culturally heterogenous (inclusive); the focus is on personalised education, not a mass product; a 'learning to learn' motif is embraced; Creativity regarding curriculum and assessment is encouraged; we see a broad repertoire of teaching styles including the value of group work; and the integration of technologies into the teaching and learning life of the school.

Furthermore, within the changing school context, teaching is now recognised as part of teachers' wider role in education; Leadership style is consultative; school planning, School Self-Evaluation and Whole School Evaluation are part of the remit of schools. Schools are urged to link with external agencies and to have close engagement with parents/community.

A major landmark development from 2005 was the establishment and development of the Teaching Council for Ireland, with extensive powers in developing and promoting the initial education, induction and CPD of the teaching force.

I would like to return to make a comment on our Colloquium title – “Pushing Boundaries, Expanding Vistas.” Last March a group of five authors published *“Towards a Better Future: A Review of the Irish School System”*, prompted by key agencies, the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD).<sup>20</sup> Three of the authors had been Maynooth staff – Prof. Sheelagh Drudy, Dr. Pádraig Hogan and myself, while our cherished colleagues, Dr. Séamus

McGuinness and Professor Áine Hyland, were the others. The book set out to identify strengths of the system, to highlight shortcomings and to identify opportunities for development. Thus, the shared concern of that book and of the inputs to the Colloquium today involve the recognition of achievements which have been made but focussing on how advances and reforms can continue to be made. In other words, within a dynamic education system, complacency has no place. Complacency, however is not the same as lack of awareness and appreciation of what has been achieved in the education system.

Thus, one can conclude that over a short period of years, through the agency of a consultative approach and informed planning guidelines, the Irish education system has been transformed. It has adopted the paradigm of being a lifelong learning system for the whole age spectrum, from early childhood to old age.

The system has a rapidly growing student population at all levels. It is noteworthy that 90% of boys and 92% of girls complete second-level education which places us second in the OECD. Over 60% of post-primary students go on to higher education, which places it in the top third of 28 OECD countries. It is noteworthy that Irish people in the age group 25-34 years who have completed higher education amount to 49%, well ahead of the EU average of 37% and the OECD average of 39%.

It may also be worth noting how well Irish school pupils have been performing in the international tests as the comparative studies reveal: The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and Trends in International Mathematics And Science Study (TIMSS).

Evidence from international research also indicates the contemporary quality of Irish researchers' engagement. The international citation of Irish research findings for 2015 was recorded as 53% above average. Eleven Irish researchers are listed among the top 1% of researchers currently practising worldwide. As a country overall, Ireland is now listed in ninth place on the most recent Thomson-Reuters Indices Global Scientific Rankings.

One considers that there has been an underestimation of the range, extent and quality of the reforms which have taken place in Irish education in the recent past. There would also seem to be an under-valuation of the consultative and collaborative process within which the reform process was

conducted. It is quite clear that so much significant reform could not have been achieved without the goodwill and the efforts of key stakeholders. So much sustained work was put in by the various sectors that, perhaps, the broad picture has been somewhat missed as concentration was focussed on specific sectoral concerns. While it is understandable that personnel in individual sectors tend to concentrate on their area of responsibility, it is desirable that we also stand back and reflect on how the various elements are cohering to form one of the best education systems in the developed world.

One considers that the time is ripe for greater recognition of what has been achieved and how it has been achieved. One suggests that a sense of pride and ownership of the educational reforms in the public arena would not be out of place.

I think that today's Colloquium has contributed to this process while also keeping the focus on "Pushing Boundaries, Expanding Vistas". I wish to thank you for your interest in, and attention to contributions here at the Colloquium. I wish you all continued and sustained success in your various contributions to the continued development of our education system.

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Professor Emeritus John Coolahan was a central figure in educational reform both in Ireland and abroad. His work has profoundly reshaped the educational landscape across four decades from early childhood education through to higher education policy and practice. It has consistently challenged received wisdom and opened up new horizons for the future.

This book presents the proceedings of a colloquium held in October 2017 to celebrate John's multifaceted contributions to education.



**Contributors on the night were:** Ms Niamh Bhreathnach, Ms Catherine Byrne, Professor Marc Depaep, Professor John Coolahan, Professor Sheelagh Drudy and Mr John Bean