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Overview of the Adult Literacy System in Ireland and Current Issues in Its Implementation

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INTRODUCTION

It is only since 2000 that adult literacy has had a place in the education system in Ireland in a meaningful sense.¹ Prior to this Ireland had no national literacy policy and only a very small fund to cover minimal adult literacy services. Today, literacy is the top priority in national policy on further education² and is firmly embedded in policy agendas outside of the education sector. This change has been largely the consequence of the Irish results of the first-ever national adult literacy survey, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), which was carried out in 1995. It showed

¹The term *adult literacy* is most commonly used in Ireland, particularly in policy. There is concern, however, that adult literacy is often interpreted too narrowly and excludes numeracy. Some practitioners use the term *adult basic education* to overcome this difficulty and not to denote something different from adult literacy.

²Further education is defined as “systematic learning undertaken by adults who return to learning having concluded initial education or training” (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 12).

that one in four of the Irish adult population scored at the lowest level of literacy on a scale of one to five (Morgan, Hickey, & Kellaghan, 1997). The IALS also showed how poor literacy skills among the adult population negatively affected family, community, and work life. This led to government recognition of the importance of improving adult literacy levels for wider social and economic development.

Since the publication of the IALS, the funding has increased 18-fold and participation in literacy services has increased almost 6-fold. The National Development Plan (NDP) 2000–2006 outlines a vision of the future that provides for greater economic and social development. Adult literacy is part of the NDP as a clear contributing factor to upskilling the workforce and facilitating greater participation of those on the margins of society (Government of Ireland, 1999, pp. 191–192). Also, in 2000, the Department of Education and Science (DES) published the first-ever policy on adult education, containing a national adult literacy strategy as the top priority in the document. This policy document, *Learning for Life*, recognizes that adult education can make a major contribution in meeting the skill requirements of a rapidly changing workforce, as well as improving social cohesion and equity in the emergence of a broadly inclusive and proactive civil society. The inclusion of a philosophy of literacy as broader than just workforce development distinguishes literacy in Ireland from the market-driven rhetoric that is dominant in U.K. and U.S. policy in this area (Hamilton, Macrae, & Tett, 2001, p. 32). A further distinguishing element of adult literacy in Ireland is that the core national body overseeing the development of the sector is a membership-based nongovernmental organization with relatively good public funding and influence.

This chapter provides an overview of adult literacy in Ireland, beginning with where adult literacy is situated in the Irish education system and outlining the key stakeholders involved. The chapter traces the development of adult literacy policy and practice over the last 35 years and then describes the philosophy of literacy and the core service provided in Ireland today. It also highlights the innovative work being carried out to address the diverse needs of adult learners and the issues and opportunities in adult literacy as it moves forward.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Republic of Ireland is a small, trade-dependent country that is slightly larger than West Virginia and about three times the size of Massachu-

setts, with a population of almost four million (2002 census). The vast majority of the population is Irish-born and Roman Catholic, with non-Irish-born residents coming mostly from other European Union countries. After a period of heightened economic growth between 1995 and 2001 (9% growth rate), the growth rate has slowed to about 4%. Unemployment currently stands at around 4% and poverty is estimated at around 10%.

1960 to 1972: Before Entering the European Communities (EC)

Vocational Education Committees (VECs) were established in 1930 to provide vocational education and training to young people and adults, with most funding and subsequently provision available for people aged 12 to 18.

Prior to the 1970s, there was no official recognition of the adult literacy problem in Ireland. There was no commitment to equality of educational opportunity nor to a critical evaluation of the effectiveness of the national school system. Sean Moylon, Minister for Education (1951–1954) stated, “It is my opinion that this system of ours, of which there is no comparable system on earth, is very appropriate to this country” (O’Buachala, 1988). By 1960, Charles McCarthy, then General Secretary of the Vocational Teachers’ Association of Ireland, said that the population in Ireland “. . . is almost universally literate; or more accurately . . . only the unteachable are illiterate. I have nothing more to say on illiteracy . . .” (O’Buachala, 1988).

Free second-level education (similar to high school in the United States) was introduced in Ireland in 1967, far later than in most of its European counterparts (Clancy, 1999). The government increased spending at this level and made a concerted effort to develop the higher education system, leaving few resources for further education. There was no state-funded adult literacy provision; however, in 1969 a group of people interested and involved in adult education established the National Association of Adult Education (AONTAS). Local communities organized a community development movement, including an educational aspect.

With the benefits of economic expansion that began in the 1960s, Ireland entered the European Communities, as it was then known, in 1972. This heralded a period of great social and economic development, during which Ireland strove to emulate the wealth and prosperity it saw in other countries. The soundest route out of poverty for a nation with few natural resources was through its educated people. Therefore, the government and

the general population placed a high premium on education. People who did not have a good education themselves worked hard to ensure that the next generation would get the opportunity to have one.

1973 to 1992: Efforts to Build an Adult Literacy Service

In 1969, the government set up a commission, chaired by Con Murphy, a Rights Commissioner in the Labour Court and one of those involved in establishing AONTAS, to advise on the development of adult education in Ireland. The findings of the commission, known as the Murphy Report and titled *Adult Education in Ireland* (1973), detailed 22 points necessary to develop the adult education system in Ireland, including the need for a special report on how to address the needs of adults with low literacy. This was the first national acknowledgment of an adult literacy problem in Ireland, although little resulted from the report.

At a community level, however, people were beginning to volunteer as tutors for individuals who wanted help developing their literacy skills. Because of the stigma attached to having a literacy difficulty, much of this activity was done on a covert basis in people's homes, protecting the identity of learners. One-to-one tuition was the dominant form of instruction at the time, keeping the adult literacy movement low-key and the problem invisible.

In the 1970s, Britain launched the *Right to Read* campaign to raise awareness about adult literacy, encourage participation in learning opportunities, and secure greater resources for literacy programs. The British media supported the campaign, which raised awareness of adult literacy in Irish society because many households had access to British television stations. The British campaign also had an impact on the Irish state broadcasting station (RTE), which produced a radio program on adult literacy entitled *Helping Adults to Read*, subsequently used as a resource for tutors.

In 1974, the Archdiocese of Dublin set up the first adult literacy service, the Dublin Literacy Scheme, in their Dublin Institute of Adult Education, spearheaded by the Director, Fr. Liam Carey, who had returned from adult education studies at Columbia University in 1967 and had been instrumental in establishing AONTAS. Cork, the second-largest city, established a similar service at the same time, using funds from a wider program aimed at addressing poverty in disadvantaged communities, establishing one of the first links between literacy and antipoverty work.

By the mid-1970s, as the numbers of people using the Dublin Literacy Scheme increased, AONTAS set up a subcommittee on adult literacy, which recommended the establishment of a separate body to focus solely on adult literacy. As a result, in 1980, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) was formed. NALA was set up as a membership organization for all those interested or involved in adult literacy. After 5 years of lobbying the government, the Department of Education gave NALA a small grant to open an office and employ three staff.

NALA acted as a coordinating body, harnessing the efforts of all those involved in adult literacy, raising awareness, and lobbying the government for funding and recognition of the issue. NALA organized annual campaigns, targeted at the Government, to achieve the three *Rs*: resources, recognition, and representation. To this end, NALA mailed questionnaires in 1982 and 1983 to voluntary literacy providers, training centers catering to people with a disability or who were unemployed, and psychiatric hospitals, to ascertain the extent and organization of adult literacy services in Ireland. The data they collected was not complete but showed there were approximately 1,000 learners involved in one-to-one tuition (NALA, 1987).

In 1983, the government appointed another commission on adult education, this time chaired by Dr. Ivor Kenny, Director General of the Irish Management Institute. The Kenny Report, *Lifelong Learning* (1984), was the first state report to have lifelong learning as its central theme. It highlighted the importance of developing a structured adult education system, catering to the needs of all adults, including those with basic education needs. This report noted that such developments were an economic imperative, not just a narrow educational issue. Unfortunately:

the report had little impact on an education system already straining to cope with a greatly expanded provision for a rapidly increasing youth population and the financial crisis of the mid-1980s. This led the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to conclude that, despite considerable reference to the ideal of lifelong learning, as in nearly all other countries, there is no evidence of any concerted efforts to render it a reality. (DES, 2000, p. 54)

In 1985 the government granted NALA its first funding and provided the VECs with the first dedicated resources for adult literacy and community education. This enabled VECs to cover some of the costs of an Adult Literacy Organizer (ALO), an individual who organized tuition, trained volunteers to work with individual learners, and provided tuition to small groups of learners.

In 1986, the Department of Education circulated a discussion document, *Adult Education in Disadvantaged Areas*, which contained the estimate that 110,000 adults had very serious literacy difficulties and a further 286,000 had insufficient skills for everyday life. However, the Department then concluded that their official had employed a flawed methodology in determining the statistics and so the document was never formally published. In the same year, NALA conducted another, wider survey of adult literacy provision, sending questionnaires to the adult literacy services, which were now receiving funding from their local VEC. They also sent the survey to state employment training workshops, Traveler's workshops (a small indigenous minority group), centers for people with disabilities, prison educational units, community groups, and psychiatric hospitals. The findings of the survey revealed that 3,022 learners were involved in literacy tuition, over half of whom were in the adult literacy service. The remainder was receiving tuition in the other education and training centers mentioned earlier as part of their broader vocational education and training program. The survey also showed that although most learners and tutors were working within the adult literacy service, the other education and training centers were using most of the available resources. NALA hoped that the findings of the survey would influence the Department of Education to increase funding for literacy provision, which was described as "grossly inadequate and of a temporary nature" (NALA, 1987, p. 37). However, a change of government in 1987 and an economic crisis led to major cutbacks in government spending, including cuts in spending on adult literacy.

During the economic crisis of the late 1980s, unemployment levels spiraled upward. Ireland was beginning to lose much of its low skilled and manual industry to economies with cheaper labor. In addition, Ireland had a growing number of young people and, despite high levels of emigration, far more educated people than jobs, leaving those with the lowest levels of educational attainment—employed or not—most vulnerable.

In an attempt to lift the country out of recession, in the late 1980s, the government initiated a partnership to galvanize the nation into collective action. In the National Social Partnership (NSP) agreements, the Irish government brought together three groups—employers, trade unions, and farmers—and got them to agree to a common agenda for employment conditions, such as wage increases. The government also recognized the need to address the adult literacy issue; this resulted in increased resources being channeled into adult literacy.

In 1990, Dr. Patrick Hillary, President of Ireland, agreed to act as patron of the work of NALA and the following year, his successor, President

Mary Robinson, took on the role. At the same time, the Department of Education established a Consultative Group on Adult Education that provided a forum for meetings between NALA, the VEC adult literacy service, and themselves. The adult literacy service was by now established throughout Ireland, and those involved participated in NALA work to document their practices. NALA published guidelines on good practice in adult literacy that outlined the philosophy underpinning the work of the sector, and in 1991 it established a major 2-year training of trainers in adult literacy services programs. Despite a very small budget, determined, committed individuals, most of whom worked on a voluntary basis, were making progress toward gaining increased funds and recognition of the work of the adult literacy service.

1993 to 1997: Building a Foundation for Adult Literacy

Although adult educators in Ireland had always subscribed to the idea of lifelong learning as an integral part of the philosophy of adult education, and the European Union (EU), through a series of publications and policy documents (European Parliament and Council, 1995; OECD, 1996), promoted it as necessary for industrialized countries to survive in a global context, the government in Ireland had always viewed education and training as a linear progression from school to college or training center. Adult educators felt that a government policy embracing lifelong learning would bring about the infrastructural change to set up a permanent adult education system that would include adult literacy.

The government was focused on training for workers. In 1993, the Irish government submitted a national development plan to the European Commission, in which one of the two central objectives of the Community Support Framework for Ireland, 1994–1999, was to reintegrate long-term unemployed people (and those at risk of becoming so) into the economic mainstream. The government built their strategy around the priority of developing “the skills and aptitudes of those in work and those seeking employment by both addressing the needs of the productive sectors and by integrating those who are marginalized and disadvantaged” (Government of Ireland, 1999, p. 272). Under its Operational Program, which ran from 1994 to 1999, the government provided a significant percentage of the population with education and training courses.

By the mid-1990s, the Irish economy experienced an unprecedented boom, with growth rates outstripping most, if not all, of its trading partners.

The education and training system, specifically the Operational Program, played an important role in providing trained people in sufficient numbers to contribute to employment growth at this time (Government of Ireland, 1999). The government marketed the educated Irish workforce around the world, attracting foreign direct investment, particularly in the software and pharmaceutical industries.

The incoming tide, however, did not lift all boats, and government still had concerns about the number of people at risk in society. Persistent long-term unemployment and poverty led the government to conduct a study to determine how to combat poverty; although educational disadvantage was among the contributing factors highlighted, the study concentrated on primary and secondary school education and not on the adult population already poorly served by the mainstream education system (Department of Social Welfare, 1997). As a result of this study, the government introduced the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS), a nationally agreed-upon set of policy targets, proposals, and programs to eliminate the main factors contributing to the prevalence of poverty and social exclusion in Irish society. It has as its mandate the inclusion of all those marginalized socially, culturally, and economically. One of the key targets was addressing educational disadvantage by ensuring that programs were in place for people wishing to improve their level of literacy.

Another study, a 1992 survey by the OECD, revealed that the proportion of adults in Ireland who had left school at or before the junior cycle of second level (state examination at the age of 15) stood at 58% (just over 930,000 people), which was among the highest in the EU at the time (OECD, 1996). The OECD survey also highlighted the role of adult literacy in promoting competitiveness and employment, addressing poverty, promoting democracy and social cohesion, building a knowledge society, and strengthening people, families, communities, and ultimately nations.

However, in 1995, the government issued a White Paper on Education, *Charting our Education Future* (Department of Education, 1995) that, although referencing the importance of lifelong learning, was mainly concerned with primary, secondary, and higher education.

From 1993 until 1997, provision of adult literacy services grew incrementally each year. However, the rate of annual increase in the Adult Literacy and Community Education budget declined each year, dropping most significantly in 1996. By 1997, although there were approximately 5,000 adults participating in the adult literacy service, the adult literacy service relied on a “totally inadequate” budget, according to the Minis-

ter of State at the Department of Education and Science (Houses of the Oireachtas, 1998, p. 43).

The International Adult Literacy Survey

The International Adult Literacy Survey (Morgan et al., 1997), conducted in 1995 and published in 1997, provided Ireland with its first profile of the literacy skills of adults aged 16 to 64. The survey found that about 25% of the population, or at least 500,000 adults, scored at the lowest level (Level 1), performing at best tasks that required the reader to locate a simple piece of information in a text, with no distracting information, when the structure of the text assisted the task. A further 30% of the population was at Level 2. Ireland thus had a total of 55% of those aged between 16 and 64 scoring below the minimum desirable threshold for a Western industrialized nation. The survey showed, however, that people in the older age quintiles had poorer performance than those in the younger age groups. The survey concluded that one reason for this was that many older Irish people had not participated in second-level education, because it was fee paying until 1967 (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 1997). The findings were met with shock and disbelief (Houses of the Oireachtas, 1998).

The publication of IALS, which provided a comparative analysis of the numbers of adults in many Western industrialized populations who have difficulties with everyday reading tasks, greatly affected the adult literacy sector in Ireland. Up to that time, there had been no published adult literacy survey and very little attention paid to the area by successive Irish government administrations. NALA prepared a campaign to publicize the IALS results and suggest solutions; the campaign attracted considerable media attention. In addition, NALA set up meetings with, and prepared papers for, identified policy representatives and service providers, who heretofore had little or no involvement in the adult literacy issue, including the Department of An Taoiseach, Department of Enterprise, Trade, and Employment, and FÁS (the State Employment and Training Agency).

In 1997, as a result of the OECD survey, constant lobbying by NALA, and the initial ranking of Ireland as second-last in the first IALS publication, the government budget for literacy increased by 16%, starting a trend that was to continue for the next 5 years. Provision for adult literacy increased from a base of \$1.2 million (€1 million) in 1997 to \$21.6 million (€18 million) in 2003. Literacy had become a top priority. At the launch of the NALA International Literacy Day conference in 1999, our government leader, An Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern had the following to say:

I am convinced that literacy is one of the key ways to build an Ireland where people have the chance to build their own futures and have full access to a full and decent life. The Government I lead is determined to work with you to put in place a forward looking strategy in order to ensure that, as a society, we promote higher standards of literacy for all. I can assure you that the National Development Plan currently being finalized will reflect this priority. . . . [A]n underfunded and underresourced service too easily gets the label of being a service about a special problem. A problem that affects one in four of us is not a special problem, but a problem for all of us and we need to start saying so even more loudly and clearly and unapologetically. (NALA Newsletter, November 1999)

Also in 1997, the Government introduced another group to the partnership process, the Community and Voluntary pillar, through the “Partnership 2000” agreement. The agreement, consisting of tax measures to assist those with low incomes, and specific funding for equality initiatives on gender, people with disabilities, and members of the Traveling community (a small, indigenous minority group that is nomadic), was in essence a social inclusion package.³ The Partnership 2000 agreement coincided with the publication of the Government White Paper on Human Resource Development (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 1997), which highlighted the comparatively low levels of education of Irish adults within an OECD context and signaled the negative impact on the economy and the labor market. Acknowledging that the link between educational disadvantage, unemployment, and social exclusion was well documented at the time, this agreement served to orient education policy “in such a way as to give priority in the allocation of resources to those in greatest need” (Government of Ireland, 1996).

1998 to Present: Adult Literacy Service Expansion and Improvement

First National Adult Literacy Strategy

In the past 6 years, numerous policy initiatives and dedicated funding from the government through a variety of schemes has permitted the

³The Combat Poverty Agency (CPA), a statutory body, defines social inclusion as “ensuring the fullest participation of the marginalized and those living in poverty in decision-making processes as a means to raise their standard of living and improve their quality of life.” The CPA defines social exclusion as “the process by which certain groups are pushed to the edge of society and prevented from participating fully by virtue of their poverty, inadequate education or lifeskills” (CPA, 2002, p. 42).

adult literacy service to expand and improve, reaching a greater number of adults. This has been accomplished through three primary components: national policy on adult education, *Learning for Life*; the first national strategy on adult literacy; and the inclusion of an adult literacy target in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy.

In 1997, the new government appointed the first ever Minister for State at the Department of Education and Science, with responsibility for Adult Education. After discussions with key stakeholders involved in adult education, the new administration published a Green Paper on Adult Education (DES, 1998), including a broad definition of adult literacy that encapsulated the philosophy of Irish adult literacy practice. It outlined the requirements necessary for the development of the adult literacy service to meet the needs of a greater number of adults wishing to improve their basic education.

Learning for Life. After 2 years of consultation concerning the Green Paper, and advances to the adult literacy budget, the Department of Education and Science (2000) published the first ever White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life*, with adult literacy policy as its top priority. The approach to adult literacy developed since the 1970s thus became embedded in national policy, an important victory for adult literacy.

Learning for Life sets out a holistic approach to the development of a national program of adult education, recognizing its contribution to the six priority areas:

1. Consciousness raising
2. Citizenship
3. Cohesion
4. Competitiveness
5. Cultural development
6. Community building

Three core principles underpin this framework for adult education: life-long learning as a systemic approach, equality, and interculturalism. This broad vision of adult education equally applies to adult literacy and highlights that both areas are not just about the development of skills and the resultant effect on the economy, but the role of adult learning in the development of social, cultural, and civil society as well.

The qualities that characterize good adult literacy practice are outlined in *Learning for Life*:

- A holistic curriculum.
- A view of the student as a self-directed, self-motivated learner.
- A recognition of the learner as the center of the learning process; that is, learning as construction rather than as instruction.
- A core-learning objective of preparing the learner for a life of learning rather than for a terminal, end-of-learning examination.

The National Adult Literacy Program. The *Learning for Life* White Paper also established the National Adult Literacy Program, a strategy to improve adult literacy levels among the adult population in Ireland. This is the first strategy of this kind in Ireland and represents the blueprint for adult literacy development up to 2006. The goals of this plan over 6 years are:

- Increase the number of clients reached so that by the end of 2006, an estimated 113,000 will have benefited from these services.
- Prioritize those with the lowest literacy levels.
- Implement a quality framework to monitor the effectiveness of the service.
- Develop new modes of reaching out and recruiting people.
- Ensure adult literacy education is available for the unemployed.
- Develop new strategies to address the underrepresentation of men in adult literacy classes.
- Explore the potential of Information Communication Technology and broadcasting.
- Continue to develop specific initiatives for disadvantaged groups.
- Expand provision of workplace literacy.
- Increase collaboration with the public library service, as well as other organizations working with relevant sections of the population.

The current National Development Plan 2000–2006, with a commitment to provide comprehensive and diverse education and training opportunities, catering to the needs of specific groups from early childhood through adulthood, particularly those experiencing social disadvantage, funds the National Adult Literacy Program at \$106 million (€93.7 million). Since 2000, the program has ensured that:

- The clients catered to annually have increased from 5,000 to 28,000 from 1997 to 2003, surpassing published targets.

- Provision includes free nighttime and daytime classes, typically of 2 to 4 hours duration per week.
- The adult literacy service is developing a continuum from one-to-one voluntary tuition to group work to progression to certified learning options, in recognition of the need to provide a suite of learning options.
- The adult literacy service is expanding and strengthening referral networks and typically includes libraries, farming organizations, community groups, trade unions, social welfare centers, and so forth.
- Additional practitioner training programs provided by NALA are underway on a modular in-service basis, as part of a higher education accreditation framework for adult literacy practitioners.
- NALA is mainstreaming the Quality Framework, a strategy to guide and monitor quality standards, for the adult literacy service after a 3-year development process involving learners, practitioners, and senior management.
- In conjunction with adult literacy practitioners and learners, NALA has developed a national assessment framework, building on the Equipped for the Future program from the United States.
- NALA has successfully piloted and evaluated literacy and dedicated numeracy programs broadcast on radio and television, which are now part of the mainstream provision, most notably the *READ WRITE NOW* television series.
- Adult literacy services and their local authority are rolling out national workplace basic education programs for local authority workers in the public sector, after pilot programs were 50% oversubscribed.
- The DES has established an Inter-Departmental Group on Literacy for the Unemployed to develop an integrated response to addressing the literacy needs of the unemployed. *Return to Education* programs have been expanded throughout Ireland, providing long-term unemployed people with an opportunity to combine supported employment with a 9-hour basic education course.
- The adult literacy service is successfully running a small number of family literacy groups and piloting open learning centers, along with literacy groups for migrant women, the Traveling community, and supported programs for the unemployed.
- The adult literacy service is developing ESOL to meet the needs of an ever-increasing number of asylum seekers and refugees. NALA has published a set of guidelines for ESOL work drawn up by a national working group made up of adult literacy and ESOL practitioners, as well as representatives of agencies supporting the integration of non-nationals.

National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS). In line with the government policy just outlined, the current NAPS, *Building An Inclusive Society* program (2002), includes a greater focus on educational disadvantage and more specifically, literacy, and sets out three targets:

1. To halve the proportion of pupils in primary school with serious literacy difficulties by 2006.
2. To reduce the proportion of the population aged 16 to 64 with restricted literacy to below 10% to 20% by 2007 (restricted literacy being defined as falling into Level 1 on the IALS scale or equivalent).
3. To reduce the number of young people who leave the school system early, so that the percentage of those who complete upper secondary level or equivalent will reach 85% by 2003 and 90% by 2006 (p. 12).

This is the first time a target has been set for adult literacy, and there has been some debate about how this target came about and how it will be measured. The target is to be achieved by 2007 and as yet there are no plans for a further survey of adult literacy levels of the adult population.

The national policy context outlined here shows the government of Ireland's commitment to addressing the adult literacy issue in Ireland, and for the first time ever it has security for the future. However, it is not possible to ascertain where Ireland would rate in a future IALS, and the Irish government has not signed up to be part of the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALLS), the successor to the OECD's IALS, which not only covers literacy skills but measures a broader range of skills in the adult population. However, the inclusion of a quality framework devised by adult literacy learners, practitioners, and senior management has given previously unknown legitimacy to the sector and ensured that the ethos of adult literacy work in Ireland will underpin all developments in the area in the future.

THE PRESENT SYSTEM: PHILOSOPHY, THE ROLE OF NALA, AND STRUCTURE OF ADULT LITERACY SERVICES

Two aspects of the adult literacy services that are unique to Ireland are the philosophy underpinning adult literacy and NALA, which is a nonprofit membership organization concerned with national coordination, policy, and training in the adult literacy sector. The structure of the current system is also detailed in this section.

Philosophy

The NALA (2002a) definition of literacy states:

Literacy involves the integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and numeracy. It also encompasses aspects of personal development—social, economic, emotional—and is concerned with improving self-esteem and building confidence. It goes far beyond mere technical skills for communication. The underlying aim of good practice is to enable people to understand and reflect critically on their life circumstances with a view to exploring new possibilities and initiating constructive change. (p. 8)

This definition encapsulates the main approaches to adult literacy work in Ireland, namely, that it is learner centered and promotes social action. It is the definition used by adult literacy providers.

The need to ensure respect for the dignity and autonomy of adult learners in all aspects of adult literacy work is central to national adult literacy policy and practice. In order to support the development of this ethos in adult literacy programs, NALA provides a wide variety of training and development opportunities, funded by the DES and designed in consultation with the key stakeholders. Moving away from the school model, the adult literacy service embraces new approaches to tutoring and new learning materials. Trainers discourage the deficit model—identifying a learner's weaknesses in order to develop an individualized learning plan—as it often reinforces the feeling of failure experienced by learners when they attended school. Instead, practitioners are trained to identify both strengths and weaknesses and to develop programs that build on the individual's strengths while addressing their literacy problem.

Maintaining the Philosophy

Can the adult literacy service remain truly learner-centered in a rapidly changing environment? Will adult literacy be seen merely as the skills of communication and not also as a means by which people critically reflect on their lives? As one practitioner stated:

The ethos of the Irish Adult Literacy service is grounded in one to one tuition where the student is the central point. The individualised approach is integral to the provision. With the rapid expansion of the service over the last few years organisers are determined to hold dear to this ethos.

—Frances Ward

Embracing change while holding onto this philosophy is a great challenge and one that needs to be built into adult literacy work through

in-service training and development opportunities, but also should be enshrined in policy. With increasing numbers engaging in tuition, it will not be possible to offer one-to-one tuition to all new entrants.

To maintain the philosophy, NALA consults with all those involved in adult literacy, particularly the learners themselves, not just senior management. *Learning for Life* reflects that position, which is testimony to a bottom-up consultative process involving learners, practitioners, and other key players. Because NALA is a membership organization, broad views are present, not solely those of providers or funders. Training is another vital part of keeping the ethos central to adult literacy practice, and this is equally valid for paid professionals as it is for the much-valued volunteers. In addition, the accredited training framework for practitioners and the quality and assessment frameworks that have been developed in Ireland are all infused with the ethos of adult literacy work and to that end, they are key elements of sustaining the philosophy into the future.

It can be said that the adult literacy philosophy in Ireland is the antithesis of the dominant education ideology of an economically driven society, where the focus is strongly on the acquisition of knowledge and skills for the sustenance of the labor market. In that context, such an ethos will have to be guarded on an ongoing basis.

The Role of NALA

NALA, as already mentioned, is a unique, nonprofit membership organization concerned with national coordination, policy, and training in the adult literacy sector. A key objective of NALA, enshrined in its constitution, is to encourage the involvement of adult learners in all aspects of planning, organization, and research, which is a departure from the overly protective policies of the past.

The transition of the adult literacy service from a purely small-scale voluntary activity to a professionalized national service was the primary focus of NALA's work for the last 20 years. NALA acted as a national engine in the development of qualifications for practitioners, lobbied for additional resources for adequate staffing and resourcing of the service, and developed new ways of providing literacy tuition. This has been achieved in cooperation with adult literacy practitioners within the VEC sector—the VECs are the largest and most active NALA membership group. The Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA)—the VEC sector's own national engine who have a greater focus on the development and integration of the service as part of the wider VEC provision—now

have greater involvement in the service. This will be the most effective means by which the adult literacy service will embrace the future and continue its development.

NALA has been responsible for disseminating this philosophy of adult literacy, most notably through the *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* in 1985 (with an updated version in 1991), which became *the* manual for adult literacy services. This publication came about as a result of facilitated discussion between practitioners and learners about how they work together. The document sets out four basic principles that underpin good adult literacy provision:

1. Adult literacy work encompasses aspects of personal development—social, economic, emotional. It covers much more than reading and writing skills.
2. Adult literacy workers must always recognize and respect the adult status of the learners. All of their work must be developed with this in mind and should never rely on procedures and materials developed for children.
3. Adult literacy students need to become active, not passive, learners. They should always be enabled to contribute their skills, knowledge, and experience, both to the learning process and to the organization of provision at all levels. Students not only have the right to learn but also the right to choose how to learn.
4. Learning is a lifelong process. Adult literacy provision needs to establish links with other existing educational activities and to initiate new developments in continuing education. (NALA, 1991)

Each of these principles are further detailed within the guidelines, which also cover areas such as how to respond to the needs of learners in relation to their learning and encourage their involvement in how literacy instruction is provided. The manual also describes how literacy services should be organized (and the resources required), which include the need to:

- Provide full-time tuition.
- Enhance numeracy provision.
- Address special needs.
- Provide accreditation for learners and tutors.
- Embrace counseling skills.
- Conduct research.

*A Profile of Learners—Access and Participation
in Irish Adult Literacy Programs*

From 1996 to 1998, NALA conducted research into access and participation in adult literacy programs in Ireland, with the aid of EU funding (Bailey & Coleman, 1998). The rationale for this research lay in the very low participation rates in adult literacy programs in Ireland and abroad. One hundred fifty-nine learners participated in interviews in which they outlined their experience of having a literacy difficulty and deciding to do something about it. The study found that young people were leaving school early due to poverty, overcrowded classrooms, alienation from the curriculum, inadequate support for those with special learning needs, and ill health. The major cause of low literacy is linked to broader socioeconomic indicators and not due to large numbers of the population experiencing learning disabilities (the term *learning difficulties* is used in Ireland). However, there has been no survey to estimate the number of adults with a learning disability in Ireland and data that exist give an estimate of between 4% and 7% (<http://www.dyslexia.ie/>; <http://www.aspire-irl.com>).

Based on the interviews done during the study, *Access and Participation in Adult Literacy Schemes in Ireland*, the main barriers to participation were categorized as follows:

- Dispositional (e.g., negative attitude toward education, learning seen as irrelevant)
- Informational (e.g., material was too difficult to read or understand, lack of appropriate information)
- Institutional (e.g., difficulties using applications forms, dislike or distrust of traditional classroom setting)
- Situational (e.g., not enough time, lack of child care)

Before attending the adult literacy programs, many of the interviewees reported negative views of themselves as learners, acute embarrassment and shame about their low educational attainment, and crippling memories of their school days. As a result, they avoided situations where their literacy difficulties might be discovered. It is not surprising, therefore, that most adult education courses in Ireland are of a formal nature and utilized by those who have found success in the formal school system.

You'd feel you wouldn't be as educated as other people and you'd be shy-
ing away from getting into a conversation. I was always looking at courses

but being that I knew I had difficulty with spelling I never went into any course that involved writing.

—Man in his 20s

And you were constantly told you were stupid . . . when they asked us was there anybody who would clean the toilets, we'd put up our hands, just to get out of the class. About four of us, who were pals. It was pointless trying to teach us, the teachers said. And it wasn't pointless.

—Woman in her 40s

In almost all cases, the dominant barrier was dispositional. A quote from one of the interviewees illustrates this.

Well to tell you the truth, I don't even try to tell my friends. I wouldn't even tell my next-door neighbour that I'm coming here. There was a chap from our road here and when I seen him first I wanted to hide, like I felt ashamed. I had a chat with him and he said he wouldn't breathe a word. . . . You just feel that people might look down on you.

—Man in his 30s

Many of the interviewees highlighted how their experience of poverty had contributed to their literacy difficulty. As children, they knew that “better off” children were given the attention in school. The attitude of the interviewees' parents was also highlighted, as many regretted that their parents did not play a more significant role in their education.

These people returned to the local adult literacy service in order to help their children, improve their job prospects or change jobs, and simply to meet their own developmental needs. For almost 60% of those interviewed, joining the adult literacy program was their first experience of any form of education and training since leaving compulsory schooling. All the learners who participated in the survey provided ample evidence that nonformal adult basic education is having a profoundly positive outcome on people who are regarded as “hard to reach.” All detailed a variety of benefits that ensued, including the pleasure of reading the newspaper, increased participation in social and community activities, improved mental health, and empowerment.

There were few adults seeking employment within the 16 literacy programs that participated in the survey. Almost half of the research participants were in paid employment (mainly men), and a significant number of those not in paid employment were working full time in the home (mainly women). Many spoke about their frustration with their jobs or lack of them and felt that their education levels had severely limited their lifestyle options.

In relation to those who were not in adult literacy programs, the survey identified certain groups who were underrepresented. These included the unemployed, women under the age of 30, men over the age of 50, and older people in general. NALA began a number of initiatives to provide opportunities to those adults and to increase participation rates generally, including the *Return to Education* program for people on Community Employment, radio and television tuition, and referral networks; these became the core of the National Adult Literacy Program (DES, 2000), already outlined.

Many of the factors that in the past have led people in Ireland to seek adult literacy services now have been addressed. There is free second-level education, class sizes are smaller, and there are a variety of support measures that address educational disadvantage caused by poverty. In addition, there is greater awareness in schools of learning disabilities, and specialist teachers and resources are on hand. Despite all of this, a recent survey carried out by the Education Research Centre estimated that one in ten children are finishing primary school with insufficient literacy skills (Kellaghan, Cosgrove, Forde, & Morgan, 2000).

Structure of Adult Literacy Services

The education system in Ireland consists of five main components:

1. Early childhood (nursery).
2. Primary (elementary): starts at the age of 4 or 5 and finishes by the age of 12.
3. Secondary (high): 5 or 6 years of education; requires two state examinations.
4. Higher (college).
5. Further (adult), which includes adult literacy services.

The Department of Education and Science (DES) is responsible for all of these areas and funds most primary and secondary schools directly. Early childhood and further education are the newest additions to the education family. Further education is administered through the following infrastructure:

- The DES funds the bulk of the further education sector through Vocational Education Committees (VECs), of which there are 33 throughout Ireland. VECs are made up of locally elected councilors, as well as parents

and representatives of students and staff. Each VEC is an autonomous and independent body, so there are differences in how each provides service. Further education provision within the VECs includes programs targeted at early school leavers (those receiving welfare benefits and those not) and people wishing to improve their adult literacy or get a post Leaving Certificate qualification. All VECs, as well as their individual literacy services, are members of NALA.

- The Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA), a national representative employer body, formulates policy and advances the cause of the VECs by advocating with the DES. In 2002, the IVEA established a National Literacy Forum, which is comprised of representatives from various groups, within the VEC sector, concerned with provision of education services. This is the first time the core provider body of the VEC adult literacy service in Ireland has come together to address adult literacy issues.

- An Adult Literacy Organizer (ALO) manages the adult literacy service within the VEC.

- NALA, the umbrella organization concerned with adult literacy, includes individual learners, tutors, and those involved in adult literacy that work outside the VEC sector. From its membership, individuals are elected for a 2-year term to the NALA Executive Committee to guide the policy direction of the Agency and monitor the work as outlined in the organization's strategic plan. On an annual basis, NALA applies to the DES for core funding to carry out work, identified through consultation with members, and research into best practices in adult literacy internationally.

Adult Literacy Services in Ireland

The core adult literacy service is provided by the VEC in 135 locations. Although each VEC is unique in its approach to the provision of adult literacy, especially in structural matters, in most cases service is available during the day and in the evening, Monday to Friday. Adult Literacy Organizers (ALOs) manage the service, working alongside paid group tutors and volunteer one-on-one tutors. Most adult learners are now in tuition groups, although some are given the option of starting with a tutor on a one-on-one basis. Most services offer classes on a 2-hour-a-week basis; some services are able to offer more where requested. However, in a small number of locations, only 1-hour sessions can be offered, due to a shortage of facilities.

Some programs have private rooms for one-to-one tuition. Other programs, usually in urban areas, offer one-to-one tuition workshops, where

several one-to-one pairs work in the same room. This can be a more sociable and less isolating way of offering one-to-one tuition for both the learner and the tutor. In many cases, a support tutor—an experienced group tutor who provides back-up support to the tutor as required—is also available in the room. Adult literacy services also have a resource room, of varying quality, which can be used by learners and tutors.

Tutor Profile. The NALA survey of adult literacy provisions published in 1987 showed that of the 1,255 tutors in the service at the time, the vast majority were volunteers and 82% were female. Today there are just over 4,000 volunteer tutors and 1,500 paid tutors. A recent NALA-commissioned survey, undertaken in order to inform a training-needs analysis, found that the majority of paid tutors work part-time, averaging between 5 and 10 hours per week (CHL Consulting, 2002). Most tutors are women, making up 95% of all paid tutors. Two-fifths of tutors are between the ages of 45 and 60, with another third between 31 and 45 years of age. Almost three quarters of tutors have been working for fewer than 5 years.

The educational background of tutors is generally of a high standard. Over three quarters of tutors, paid and voluntary, have a higher education qualification and another 13% have postgraduate certification. In addition to existing qualifications, 31% of tutors are currently studying for some type of additional qualification. As might be expected, this group is made up of a greater number of paid tutors.

Although the adult literacy service has gained funding through VECs, the service has retained volunteer tutors as the only feasible means by which to provide one-to-one tuition. In addition, there is a strong feeling within the NALA membership that volunteer involvement in the adult literacy service adds value, enriches the type of service provided, and maintains its deep roots in civil society. As funding for adult literacy has increased over the last 6 years, the role of the volunteer tutor has not been eroded, as was feared by some practitioners.

Adult Literacy Organizer Profile. When CHL Consulting conducted the NALA-commissioned training-needs analysis survey, they also surveyed Adult Literacy Organizers (ALOs). The role of the ALO has changed as a result of the rapid growth and development of the adult literacy service. Originally, the ALO worked on a part-time basis recruiting and teaching learners, as well as training volunteer tutors to work on a one-to-one basis with learners. Over the years, the role has evolved to include the management of a larger number of paid tutors, as well as volunteers.

This has brought up a range of management issues, including managing staff and reporting to line managers, integrating the adult literacy service into the wider further education service provided by the VEC, as well as other provisions beyond the VEC. The number of learners entering the service has also increased, requiring ALOs to secure additional facilities and provide more diverse programs. With heightened public awareness of the adult literacy issue, ALOs are also directly involved in local development groups representing their service. These groups include local area development committees and drugs task forces, as well as education networks.

As a result of these changes, ALOs, through their professional association (the Adult Literacy Organizers Association—ALOA), devised a new role outline, which was presented and accepted by their employer's representative body, the IVEA, and the DES. ALOA's aims are to: enhance the status of adult literacy provision within the adult education system; promote a high quality adult literacy service; and secure recognition of the social, cultural, and economic context of adult literacy (ALOA, 2001).

The national average number of tutors per ALO is just over 36, with the number of literacy clients per ALO averaging 129. Over half of the ALOs are between the ages of 45 and 60, with another third between 31 and 45 years of age. The overwhelming majority of ALOs are female. Two thirds of ALOs have been working for up to 5 years, with another fifth working for 6 to 10 years. Most ALOs have been recruited from the ranks of tutors.

The majority of ALOs hold a third-level qualification, with almost half holding postgraduate degrees. A relatively small number of ALOs stated they had qualifications specific to literacy and adult basic education. However, almost half of ALOs surveyed are currently studying for some type of qualification, the majority through the NALA/WIT project, which is discussed later in this chapter.

Career Structure. For the most part, there are no full-time permanent tutors or resource workers assisting ALOs employed within the VEC adult literacy service, which is a major gap in the infrastructure of the service. Many tutors working part time eventually find more secure employment in other parts of the education-and-training sector. Losing its most experienced and competent practitioners is not a new phenomenon, but is less acceptable at a time when the service has ample financing.

The adult literacy sector does not appear to be attracting people to work in the area due to the lack of career structure. Although this was the case

when most of the present incumbents became involved, the Irish economy and society were also very different at the time. When the current generation of practitioners retires, it will be interesting to see who is there to take their place.

Recently, paid professional tutors organized an association, the Basic Education Tutors Association (BETA), which is principally concerned with advancing tutors' terms and conditions of employment within the VEC sector.

Key Components of the Current System

Teacher and Tutor Preparation and Certification. *Learning for Life* (DES, 2000) acknowledges the unique and invaluable contribution made by volunteers (over 70% of all tutors) to the development of the adult literacy service and commits to providing opportunities to upgrade their knowledge and skills and help them gain certification through flexible procedures. With additional funding and staff in the 1990s from the DES, NALA devised a professional development program that enabled local literacy organizers to train their own tutors locally and to then use NALA in-service training to train tutors in additional areas. The most common of these 1-day sessions, delivered by experienced tutors, covered creating materials and group work.

Adult literacy tutors need a thorough understanding of the basic principles that underlie the philosophy and methods of adult education, as set out in the *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* (NALA, 1991). Therefore, the initial tutor training course includes three types of learning—attitude, skills, and knowledge—and allows sufficient time to explore the development of these areas in adult literacy work. During the training course, tutors also examine what it means to be an active learner, exploring the process by which learners can identify what they want to learn, how they as learners can best learn, and how to assess the learning that has taken place. The tutor training employs methods the tutors themselves will use in their teaching, such as role-play, practical work, and group discussion. During the training, the trainers evaluate the course through participant feedback during and immediately after the session, and trainers are encouraged to conduct a follow-up meeting with tutors after they have had time to implement what they have learned. The materials used for tutor training cover getting started with reading and writing using the language-experience approach, using cloze passages, and the Look Say Cover Write Check method of developing spelling skills (NALA, 1995). Initial tutor training is generally delivered over 20 hours, by experienced tutors or ALOs once

or twice a year. Adult literacy learners are often involved in the design and delivery of initial tutor training.

During the 1990s, practitioners realized that if the service were to become more professionalized, they would need recognized qualifications in order to attain permanent, better-paid jobs. With this in mind, practitioners mandated NALA, through a resolution at the NALA Annual General Meeting in 1992, to develop such qualifications with the relevant authorities, ensuring that there would be recognition of prior experiential learning. Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) agreed to work in partnership with NALA to provide accreditation for adult literacy workers. NALA and WIT spent considerable time working through—with practitioners and academics—the content of this university-level program, ensuring that it built on and was respectful of, the previous training developed over the years through NALA (McSkeane, 1998, p. iii). NALA and WIT developed a number of certificate and diploma programs, in response to an identified need for university-level training courses that would assist literacy organizers and tutors in upgrading their skills and also in gaining accreditation for the knowledge and skills they had accumulated during their years of work in the field of adult literacy.

The NALA/WIT project was established initially on a pilot basis, with funding from the DES. NALA/WIT now provides full certificate and diploma programs, as well as single-certificate modules, and is developing degree and postgraduate qualifications. The certificate program requires students to complete 12 modules (out of a possible 20) and the diploma program requires completion of 6 out of 8 modules. Each module contains 50 contact hours, 35 with a tutor and the remaining 15 made up by group work, peer learning, and support. The program is offered to VEC-based practitioners who usually are released by their employer to attend. There is no nationally agreed-upon VEC protocol that supports practitioners to attend training, so some do pay their own registration fee and attend on their own time; however, they must have approval from their manager to take the course.

The NALA/WIT program qualifications are designed for practitioners currently serving as tutors, but NALA and WIT are considering making them entry qualifications. NALA/WIT are also considering how to include field practice in the program, as they designed the existing body of qualifications for people with a minimum period of job experience. Also, the DES would likely require that trainees agree to serve a designated time with the adult literacy service in exchange for participation in the program. The current career structure does not extend to tutors, who at best

find themselves on part-time contracts that run according to the academic year.

The recognition of the NALA/WIT qualifications by the IVEA is a key objective. Although the DES funds the project, it is the VECs who are the main employer for adult literacy workers and therefore it is important that they recognize and value these specific qualifications. To date the IVEA has mandated that ALOs possess the relevant NALA/WIT qualification, or an unspecified adult education equivalent, within 5 years of taking a full-time position.

The Quality Framework for Adult Literacy. In the late 1990s, McDonagh (1999) found that standards of practice were inconsistent across programs and that those involved in adult literacy services felt that the development of quality standards would improve their practice. NALA, working with learners, practitioners, senior management, and the DES, subsidized by the European fund Socrates, developed the Quality Framework, a strategy to guide and monitor quality standards in adult literacy.

The Quality Framework has five guiding principles or values:

- The adult literacy program will support the learner's right to attend on a voluntary basis and to set his/her own goals.
- The organization will operate under an ethical code of confidentiality, respect, and trust.
- All levels of the organization will respect cultural differences.
- The adult literacy program will pay particular attention to creating and maintaining an atmosphere of social interaction, informality, and enjoyment.
- The organization will enable learners to participate in all aspects of the program, including evaluation.

The framework provides a way of looking at five main quality areas involved in running a local adult literacy service. Within each of these five quality areas—Resources, Management, Teaching and Learning, Outreach and Promotion, and Progression—are statements of quality. Combined, these statements of quality are the standards a program should work toward. Each statement describes a key element of a quality adult literacy program. For example, in relation to the quality statement on assessment, a quality local service will:

- Assess the learner's needs and level of literacy during an initial interview and/or in the course of the first few tuition sessions, as appropriate.
- Ensure that tutors engage in ongoing assessment with learners.
- Refer learners with specific needs for an appropriate professional assessment.

The Quality Framework can be used as a tool for self-evaluation of adult literacy sites, promoting planning and continuous improvement, and improving accountability. Over half of programs in Ireland (28 out of 33) are now using the Quality Framework, following an initial piloting of this new system. NALA has developed a mainstreaming plan that gives details of supports it provides to adult literacy services wishing to use the Quality Framework. These include funding for a team facilitator, an anchorperson to support the process, and the expenses of participating learners and volunteers, as well as advice and guidance.

The programs that do not use the framework most often cite the burden of other work commitments as the reason for not doing so. Therefore, the adult literacy service is promoting its use and detailing the benefits reported by VECs who are using the framework. The current national reporting requirements for local literacy services are quantitative biannual reports to the DES, which fails to capture true indicators of quality at the local level that translate to the national level. The DES's endorsement of the process-oriented Quality Framework in *Learning for Life* and the adoption of the Quality Framework by programs highlight this point. The challenge ahead, therefore, is how to develop a link between the Quality Framework and the national reporting system in order to strengthen the connection between quality and accountability.

Structure Challenges

Raising capacity is a difficult task facing the adult literacy service. ALOs are developing and implementing strategic plans for their programs that cover (in two phases) the period of funding and targets set out in the National Development Plan 2000–2006. These plans are being incorporated into wider strategic plans for each VEC, which will enable practitioners to answer the burning question in Ireland at the moment, “When is a literacy program full?” In order to attract new learners, practitioners need to provide a wider range of services to adults with literacy difficulties, including more flexible instruction times. This will also entail an

expansion of family and workplace initiatives, as well as an increased usage of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and open and distance-education modes of learning.

Each local VEC needs to develop the local infrastructure. There is a shortage of existing premises for adult learners, and the national capital budget made available to the VECs does not cover expenses. VECs are seeking local solutions, with the emphasis on greater utilization of all local public premises; however, these facilities are often temporary and do not meet ideal standards.

VECs also need to provide classes on weekends and during the summer and other holiday periods. (Traditionally, literacy services closed completely for 3 months over the summer.) Different staffing arrangements will be required to facilitate greater access.

The adult literacy service also needs to review how it provides services. Most VECs provide classes in cities and towns. There has been little exploration of how services could be expanded to provide support to people engaged in self-study and what would be required to make this happen.

Adult literacy providers have, however, increased their capacity to use ICT. A NALA ICT survey showed that access to ICT equipment has risen by 50% since 2001, and access to the Internet has risen to 80% (NALA, 2003). Approximately 51% of tutors integrated ICT into their teaching, primarily by using Microsoft Word and other literacy packages. However, ICT is mainly delivered separately, as an ICT course. Providers will need training, not just in ICT skills, but in integrating ICT in the learning situation.

OTHER ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS

In addition to the traditional method of provision of adult literacy services—through the VECs—there are a number of other literacy programs in Ireland.

TV and Radio Distance Education— The Low-Tech Approach to Reaching the Hard to Reach

Since 1997, the number of adults participating in local VEC literacy centers has increased from 5,000 to almost 30,000. However, with a potential target population of 500,000 adults with literacy difficulties, there is a

need to look at providing alternative options for adults wishing to improve their skills. At a time when high-tech solutions to adult literacy (e.g., CD-ROMS) were being explored in other countries, NALA turned its attention to what low tech could offer.

In 1998, NALA and a local commercial radio station teamed up to provide *Literacy over the Airwaves*, in cooperation with two local VECs. To raise awareness of the adult literacy issue in general, and to aid recruitment, it was felt that even if the radio series did not succeed in enabling people to learn, it would be of benefit on these other fronts. The DES and the Independent Radio and Television Commission provided funds for the program.

The radio broadcast was available in three rural provincial towns only, from 7–8 P.M. and then repeated from 8–9 P.M., Monday to Friday. *Literacy over the Airwaves* registered a total of 145 participants; 19 (or 13%) were independent learners. Participants reported some progress in their reading and writing skills. The specific gains made by learners varied, according to their level of skill before starting the program, their interests, and requirements. The most frequently mentioned gains included: filling out forms, writing letters, using the dictionary, and increasing vocabulary. Learners also reported general benefits from the programs; for example, feeling that they were not the only one with a problem in reading and writing and feeling that they were doing something about the problem.

With the success and the learning from this small-scale initiative, NALA, with the support of the DES, approached RTE, the national state broadcaster, and proposed a TV literacy series. The DES committed funding to the project and RTE donated two time slots for the proposed series. One was a late-evening slot to allow adults to watch the program—children would be in bed and most people would be free of home and work commitments—the other was a daytime repeat slot that would accommodate a different audience. The media company AV Edge won the contract to develop the series, in close collaboration with NALA.

READ WRITE NOW was broadcast in the autumn of 2000. It was accompanied by a learner pack, which was distributed free to the general public on request and supported by experienced tutors available via a free telephone line.

After the program concluded, NALA commissioned an evaluation and concluded that the series had successfully attracted an audience of new independent and existing center-based learners. Viewing numbers for these television programs were very high, averaging 136,000 viewers for the evening timeslot and 19,000 viewers for the repeat, morning broadcast.

Viewing figures for the *READ WRITE NOW* series were equivalent to other mainstream programs broadcast at these times. This was an achievement for an educational broadcast aimed at adults with low literacy levels.

Of the 30,000 learner packs distributed in conjunction with the program, significantly, 11,000 were sent to independent learners. Participants interviewed by the NALA evaluation stated that the series and the learning pack helped them learn in a very practical and proactive way.

As a result of the success of the first TV broadcast, NALA commissioned *READ WRITE NOW 2* in 2001 and efforts were made to build on the lessons from the previous series. The series was designed to support an integrated approach to literacy work. For example, the learning points were situated in the context of everyday life, with each program covering different themes.

The evaluation report (McSkeane, 2002) concluded that the vast majority of learners surveyed favored contextualized learning rather than a skills-based approach and had learned things in addition to reading and writing skills. As a result, information about the learning process was integrated into the third series. *READ WRITE NOW 3* included a specific focus on the theme of “learning to learn,” which influenced the format and structure of the programs. Each program contained new things to learn, new ways of learning, and learners telling their own stories. The fourth series was developed and broadcast in autumn 2003.

ESOL

Unlike the United States, the numbers of non-English-speaking people coming to live in Ireland has been very small. However, over the last 5 years, there has been a significant increase in people whose first language is not English, including refugee and asylum seekers, residing in Ireland. Asylum seekers do not have the right to work, and the state restricts their access to public educational services, except for the adult literacy service, which will provide asylum seekers with “free access to adult literacy, English language and mother culture supports” (DES, 2000, p. 173). To accomplish this, the adult literacy service has been developing an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision.

Much more research in the area of ESOL is needed, focusing on the effectiveness of provision and ensuring that ESOL tuition is meeting the needs of all potential learners. Anecdotal evidence shows that asylum seekers without the right to work who are taking ESOL classes want more than the 2 or 4 hours tuition per week currently offered. There is also an

ongoing debate about how best to structure services in this area and it is unclear what the extent of the role, if any, of the adult literacy will be in the future, in particular if there is a dedicated ESOL service established. The DES needs to develop an interdepartmental approach to address the needs of asylum seekers, refugees, and nonnationals, as well as develop a national ESOL strategy.

Family Literacy

A key issue for research, training, and policy is to define an approach to family literacy that builds on the philosophy of adult literacy work, which recognizes and respects the experience and views of learners. This is particularly important as some family literacy programs are designed to increase the child's literacy skills, using the parent as an instrument in that process, whereas others are concerned with the literacy needs of both children and parents.

NALA has set up a project with the aim of developing a family literacy policy and guidelines for adult literacy services. NALA is undertaking this through research and consultation with parents, educators, and those working in family services. The coordinator working on this project outlined the work involved:

Family learning in Ireland is at an early stage of development. At present the key issue is to define an approach based on respect for a variety of family life and the learning that happens in all homes. Just as adult literacy work in Ireland is based on a learner-directed ethos, so family learning programmes aim to involve families in planning programmes and approaches that best support their learning.

—Jenny Derbyshire

Over the last decade, a small number of adult literacy services developed family literacy programs to meet particular needs. For example, in the early 1990s, one VEC developed a family literacy program for parents of children up to 12 years, with the focus on preschool. Important features of this project included day care provision for younger children and an emphasis on an adult education approach to working with parents and caregivers.

Another model that has become a popular feature of family literacy work in various settings involves encouraging and supporting parents and caregivers to read to babies and young children. The National Reading Initiative promoted this in 2000 and it has been adapted to suit local needs

and conditions. Recent programs, such as “Dads and Lads” courses, have also focused on encouraging fathers to become more involved in their children’s learning, as most family literacy participants are women.

At present, about half of the 135 adult literacy services provide family literacy programs, drawn from the models outlined. However, development has slowed recently due largely to limited funding for such outreach work. In particular, lack of funding for day care makes it difficult to run family-literacy courses with parents of preschool children, especially as preschool care is, in general, underdeveloped in Ireland. However, it may now be possible to move forward through the promotion of partnerships between adult literacy services and schools, preschools, libraries, and training centers for young people, as well as community development and family centers. Schools in particular expend considerable energy trying to involve parents in their children’s education, while many of the same parents are involved in local adult literacy and community projects. Linking educational and other community services is also part of a wider phenomenon of joining government and public services, aimed at providing a better service to those who need it. From an adult literacy perspective, this is a great opportunity to be part of a wider educational agenda, sharing experience and expertise with other educators.

Workplace Basic Education (WBE): Return to Learning Workplace Project in the Local Authorities

Ireland is divided into 34 local government administrations (called Local Authorities) that have responsibility for housing provision, sanitation, planning, roads, and amenities in their area. The Local Authority sector employs approximately 30,000 people across a range of disciplines, and provides education and training opportunities to their workforce.

The *Return to Learning Project*, supported by NALA (through the provision of a template for the program, as well as training and contact with a national coordinator), is a partnership initiative between the Local Authority National Partnership Advisory Group (LANPAG) and the DES. The focus of the *Return to Learning* program is on ensuring that employees have an opportunity to access training in literacy, communications, computers, numeracy, personal development, and job skills. The objective of the workplace literacy program is to create a “safe” and supportive learning environment for staff.

In 2000–2001, the project was piloted in five counties, with a budget of \$150,365 (€133,000), funded 50% by LANPAG and 50% by DES. The

local VEC literacy service provided the program in each of these areas, and the VEC appointed Project Coordinators who ran the program in conjunction with the VEC ALOs.

The program consisted of 4 hours per week over a 20-week period, on work time. NALA designed and VEC adult literacy service delivered the program in a flexible and adaptable way to meet the needs of the participants. The course cost an estimated \$10,062 (€8,900) for each group of seven to eight people. This included 80 hours of promotion/awareness and recruitment by the Project Coordinator.

In the pilot project, a total of 120 people (twice the anticipated number), mainly men, completed the course in the five pilot areas. The evaluation (Conboy, 2002) shows that employees benefited from the course in the following ways:

- Increased self-confidence, as well as improved communication and interaction with others.
- Literacy skill development (e.g., filling out forms, writing letters, and reading the newspaper).
- Greater familiarity with computers and some development in computer skills.
- A positive influence on their home and family lives.
- Reawakening of interest in learning.

The VEC adult literacy service and NALA have begun making efforts to extend WBE into the private sector, with a very small number of projects operating in local areas in large industry. It remains difficult to implement these types of programs in Ireland due to a weak culture of workplace learning, especially in regard to basic education, as well as the lack of entitlement to paid educational leave. In addition, there is no dedicated fund for WBE initiatives available to employers or the adult literacy service. However, with EU funds covering in-company training, NALA and one of the VECs are currently developing a model of WBE for small-to-medium enterprises.

Unemployment: Return to Education—An Intensive Basic Education Model for Unemployed People With Adult Literacy Needs

The 1997 OECD survey concluded that an Irish person at Level 1 would experience a higher incidence of unemployment than people who scored at Level 1 in any other country surveyed (OECD, 1997). The ratio of

unemployed to employed people scoring at the lowest literacy level in the Irish survey was 2:1.

Research done in Belgium (Sterq, 1993) highlighted the fact that many social-inclusion measures targeted at the long-term unemployed actually excluded the participation of those with insufficient basic skills. Irish initiatives targeted at such a group also appear to mirror this experience. It is clear that the integration of basic skills development within existing training programs targeted at disadvantaged groups is highly beneficial to the participant, as it ensures a planned approach to the development of literacy in the context of the overall program, as well as wider access to such programs for people with literacy needs.

The *Return to Education* program was initiated by NALA to provide for the needs of unemployed adults with literacy difficulties. NALA brought together FÁS, the national employment and training authority, and the VECs, to see how mixing their expertise and resources could result in better provision for this client group. Community Employment (CE), funded and administered by FÁS, is the main state-funded work-experience program for unemployed people. People unemployed for more than 6 months are eligible to apply for supported work in their local area and are paid a salary for 19.5 hours of work. In addition, participants are given a small budget to pay for limited specific training they might require. For participants with literacy difficulties, the training available was insufficient to meet their needs, and a barrier to their progress into mainstream employment resulted.

Return to Education aims to give participants in CE programs an opportunity to attend a basic reading and writing skills course as part of their CE work-experience program. Participants are released from their CE work for 9 hours per week to attend this course. CE participants receive the same entitlements as if they were working for the full 19.5 hours.

The course was designed to ease participants, no matter what education level, back into education. Participants receive accreditation in some cases, depending on level achieved. Due to the nature of the course, a flexible approach is adapted to suit the requirements of each student. One-on-one or small-group instruction is available to suit the needs of the students. The program concentrates on English, communication skills, computers, and numeracy. It also teaches personal-development and job skills.

An external evaluator (McArdle, 1999), rating the pilot programs from March to June 1999, highlighted a variety of gains from this program for long-term unemployed adults with literacy difficulties: educational advances, including certification in many cases; increases in self-confidence; changes in outlook in terms of further education/training or

work; and, in some cases, actual movement of learners into mainstream training or jobs (subsequent to the evaluation).

The program continues to expand and at the start of 2003, there were 46 CE programs in 26 VEC areas, catering to approximately 700 participants with literacy difficulties.

Integration of Adult Literacy Into Vocational Education and Training Targeted at the Socially Excluded

In addition to the local VEC adult literacy programs, adult literacy tuition takes place in a number of other settings, including the Prison Education Service, Centers for the Unemployed, Youthreach (early school leavers), SIPTU (trade union), Community Training Centers, Travelers' Workshops, and centers providing services for people with disabilities. In most cases tuition is an "add on" to the main vocational-training program and is therefore not fully integrated.

An integrated approach to the teaching of adult literacy within vocational education and training programs is an effective way of providing more intensive basic education to a greater number of people. Vocational education and training programs aim to help participants acquire specific work-related skills and were designed for people with a minimum of upper-second-level education (Sterq, 1993). However, some individuals may not possess the level of adult literacy required to successfully complete the training program. Many training programs have sought to address this by providing separate literacy instruction. The isolation of literacy skills in this manner "is in conflict with current thinking regarding good practice" (City of Limerick VEC, 1998, p. 19).

However, NALA has been promoting the integration of adult literacy within the core-training framework. The integration of adult literacy into training programs combats social exclusion by ensuring that no person is, or feels, excluded from these programs because of a literacy difficulty. Integration also ensures that programs help every participant to develop the literacy skills necessary for successful completion of the course and for progression in further education, training, or employment. In order for this to be effective, NALA identified that trainers needed to make these skills an explicit part of their program, which requires a planned and purposeful approach.

NALA, in conjunction with the National University of Ireland Maynooth, has developed a training program for vocational-skills educators

and trainers, to enable them to integrate adult literacy into their programs. NALA also published *Guidelines on Integrating Literacy* (NALA, 2002b), which outlined the key features of an integrated, whole-center approach to literacy within vocational education and training programs. The document presents 10 guidelines, indicating (a) the systems and procedures needed to ensure that adult literacy development is built into every phase of an education and training program, from induction through to progression, and (b) methods individual trainers and teachers can use to build adult literacy into their program delivery. Education and training centers are using the *Guidelines*, particularly in vocational training programs for young people, as an aid to developing integrated, whole-center policy and practice on literacy.

To complement the *Guidelines*, NALA recently published *Skillwords* (NALA, 2003), a resource pack of literacy materials related to vocational training areas. These are edited versions of materials developed by vocational trainers from FÁS Community Training Centers, VEC Youthreach Centers, and Senior Travelers' Training Centers, in cooperation with their learners. They are offered as resources that can be photocopied, but can also be used as models and examples of integrated adult literacy materials. The pack also provides further guidelines for vocational trainers on how to design and use vocationally relevant adult literacy materials.

CURRENT ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

One could say that the adult literacy movement in Ireland has come out of obscurity and into an intense spotlight in the past 35 years. Under such scrutiny, practitioners and providers, despite getting a lot of what they have lobbied for, may feel somewhat overwhelmed by current challenges, as well as those that lie ahead. Fundamental to ensuring that their fears are heard and addressed is the availability of a range of forums for debate and support, as well as a means by which they can feed into the policy realm. Following are some key areas of debate.

Adult Literacy Policy in the European Union

Individual members states of the EU have responsibility for their own education and training systems; however, the EU has taken a strong role in the promotion of lifelong learning for many years. Lifelong learning is now

seen as an “overarching strategy of European co-operation in education and training policies and for the individual” (Commission of the European Communities, 2002, p. 4).

The EU’s focus on adult literacy is of great benefit to an area that has traditionally had a low profile. The EU has prioritized adult literacy in the context of their work in stimulating and supporting the implementation of lifelong learning across the European area and this has raised several issues, both positive and negative:

- Developing basic skills and upgrading existing skills are eligible for support under the European Social Fund (ESF) and this is currently providing the bulk of resources for adult literacy work in Ireland (although these funds come with some restrictions).
- Adult literacy is now firmly embedded in the EU agenda for lifelong learning and is fully supported by Ireland, which provides additional security to adult literacy development into the future.
- The EU focus on new basic skills (such as foreign languages and computer skills) may overshadow the traditional areas of literacy and numeracy, as well as lose sight of the needs of adult learners. In the wider context of what the EU wants to achieve, there needs to be a focus on both the traditional and new basic skills as the foundations for EU citizens in the knowledge society.
- The approach to adult literacy work in Ireland, which is beyond a skills approach, may be threatened by an overriding narrower focus on upskilling the labor force. A critical factor in achieving common goals within the EU is that all involved can agree on priorities for future action.

Staffing

Adult Literacy Organizers established their own association, primarily so they could join a trade union to negotiate for better pay and conditions at a time of mass expansion. The Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) represents the ALOs and has recently offered membership to paid, part-time tutors as well. The TUI negotiates from the position that members with mainstream teaching qualifications are entitled to a permanent job and the appropriate pay scale. However, members that do not hold such qualifications but do have adult education qualifications are not guaranteed permanent jobs because they are not entitled to new jobs if their current jobs cease to exist. In a climate of relatively low unemployment and high inflation, it remains difficult to recruit and retain staff—paid and voluntary—pending the

development of attractive career structures and better employment conditions, and joining trade unions has not greatly enhanced the career structure for adult education practitioners.

Certification

Certification systems for adult learners used in the 1990s set the bar too high; many adult learners were not able to achieve them through their coursework and thus could not get on the qualifications ladder. In 2003, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) launched the National Qualifications Framework, which will bring about significant changes in the systems and structures of education and training. It is the single entity through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a logical way (NQAI, 2003). The framework defines the relationship between all education and training awards. The result is a clearer and more understandable qualifications system, enabling and encouraging learners to achieve awards for learning on a lifelong basis. The framework contains a grid of level indicators, which cover knowledge (breadth and kind), skill (range and selectivity), and competence (context, role, learning to learn, and insight) and denote learning outcomes within these areas. The framework has 10 levels covering a very low level of learning up to a PhD. This has created an opportunity for people to get recognition for smaller learning achievements and is particularly useful for adult literacy learners.

NALA is launching an assessment framework for adult literacy called *Mapping the Learning Journey* (NALA, 2005). It has been designed and developed from consultation with key stakeholders, best practice in assessment in Irish adult literacy services, and international research, particularly the *Equipped for the Future Assessment Framework* in the United States. *Mapping the Learning Journey* has four main cornerstones that complement the knowledge, skill, and competence structure of the Qualifications Framework.

Funding

The slowdown in Ireland's growth over the last 18 months has seen a decrease in public spending across all government departments. As a result, the adult literacy budget for 2004 fell short of projected requirements. This creates challenges to the adult literacy service to meet the demands, not just from learners seeking to join programs but also from employers and other vocational training providers.

The vast majority of the current funding for the adult literacy service in Ireland has come from the European Social Fund. However, with more countries joining the EU on May 1, 2004, there is increasingly less aid available to current EU countries. The Irish government will need to ensure that current levels of expenditure on adult literacy will be at least maintained, through state expenditure, in the future.

Research and Evaluation

As a result of the poor funding of adult literacy work in Ireland in the past, there is a dearth of research and evaluation publications in the area. Most of the published material has come through the DES and NALA, with a small but increasing contribution from some VECs. There has been no national evaluation of the adult literacy service, primarily due to the size and nature of the service. At the local provider level, there has always been great interest in evaluation, evidenced by demand for training in the area and related publications (Conlan, 1994). However, with increased expenditure in the area, and the need for greater accountability that comes with it, the DES will need to place a greater emphasis on research and evaluation in the future.

The NALA/WIT project is generating research through coursework and assignments at both certificate and diploma level. This will be added to as the program extends to develop degree and postgraduate qualifications. Furthermore, the project aims to engage in more research and build up an adult literacy academic discipline, separate and distinct from adult or community education.

Partnership and Integration

Increased funding for adult literacy has attracted new players who are keen to be involved in this growth area. Adult literacy practitioners are experiencing competition in terms of their services and clients, and are grappling with ownership issues. The prioritization of adult literacy has also meant that it is no longer the preserve of only those who work in literacy, but now also involves the full range of statutory and voluntary-sector staff that also deal with "our clients." On the positive side, this has led to a greater emphasis on working in partnership at the local level, whereas previously, practitioners often worked in isolation. More people have gotten involved in and joined the adult literacy service through a greater emphasis on networking by ALOs with groups such as local social welfare and

health authorities. However, it has also led to a rapidly increasing workload for ALOs beyond their original role, which now needs to be reviewed and amended as appropriate. It has also led to an increased workload for NALA, particularly in supporting the new people and organizations getting involved in this area.

NALA has convened a working group representing relevant stakeholders from the literacy service and government departments to develop an implementation plan for the literacy service with a focus on the development of a more structured and permanent adult literacy service. The group has drawn up a model for the adult literacy service, including a variety of other service providers within the VEC and outside, detailing how the adult literacy service should be integrated into the wider VEC and beyond. In addition, the group has developed staffing norms for adult literacy service, and although the VEC adult literacy service is a long way from putting these staffing structures in place due to lack of resources, having a blueprint available to those responsible for managing and funding the service should improve this situation and may be critical for future development.

CONCLUSION

Major developments have occurred in literacy in Ireland since the publication of the IALS, but that was 7 years ago and all concerned need to be focused on the next stage of development of the adult literacy sector. In the current economy in Ireland, the future is more uncertain and funding for education is under threat, as it is in all other public services. Although the adult literacy services have not yet felt the adverse affects, many adult literacy practitioners fear that after only a recent spell in the political lime-light, the position of adult literacy is set for the same fate as the economic boom, and the bubble may be about to burst. In looking at the future of the adult literacy sector, there will need to be greater collaboration between stakeholders. The ongoing government support of the adult literacy sector, particularly the DES, is critical to the future of adult literacy.

Accountability is an increasingly important part of funding debates. Literacy providers are faced with the inevitability of a transparent system that provides taxpayers with evidence of success and value for money. How to achieve this while ensuring that the quality of the service is not undermined is a growing concern among many involved in adult literacy work. To these people, the learner-centered ethos of adult literacy work in

Ireland is its most vital characteristic and, indeed, the key to its success to date. It must be retained as the adult literacy sector embraces the changes being brought about by the knowledge society.

We can no longer assist people with literacy difficulties with just one core service, nor can we look at this issue in a narrow and linear fashion, as this does not reflect the diversity of people in today's society. People with adult literacy needs often may have other, more important concerns, and therefore adult literacy will most successfully be addressed within those contexts, not by a referral to a dedicated adult literacy service. This, in short, is the theory behind an integrated approach. Any strategy for raising adult literacy levels will need to provide a range of options and opportunities. This will require research and innovation, both of which have been chronically underfunded. It will also require greater levels of partnership across the public, private, and voluntary sectors. It is hard to find an organization that would not be able to assist in this area; however, no single organization or sector has the definitive answer. The social partnership process in Ireland continues to be instrumental in continuing this kind of work. Working together may be the greatest challenge for us all, but the most effective in terms of individuals with literacy needs.

APPENDIX

Useful Contacts

Adult Education Organisers' Association (AEOA)	http://www.adulteducationorganisers.org
Adult Literacy Organisers' Association (AEOA)	http://www.literacyireland.org
AONTAS (National Association of Adult Education)	http://www.aontas.com
Department of Education and Science (DES)	http://www.education.ie
FÁS (national training and employment authority)	http://www.fas.ie
Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)	http://www.fetac.ie
Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA)	http://www.ivea.ie
National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)	http://www.nala.ie

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland <http://www.nqai.ie>
 NALA/WIT project <http://www.wit.ie/literacyproject>

Journals

The Adult Learner. Published by AONTAS. Available from AONTAS, 2nd Floor, 83–87 Main Street, Ranelagh, Dublin 6, Ireland.
NALA Newsletter and Journal. Published by NALA. Available free from NALA, 76 Lower Gardiner Street, Dublin 1, Ireland.

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