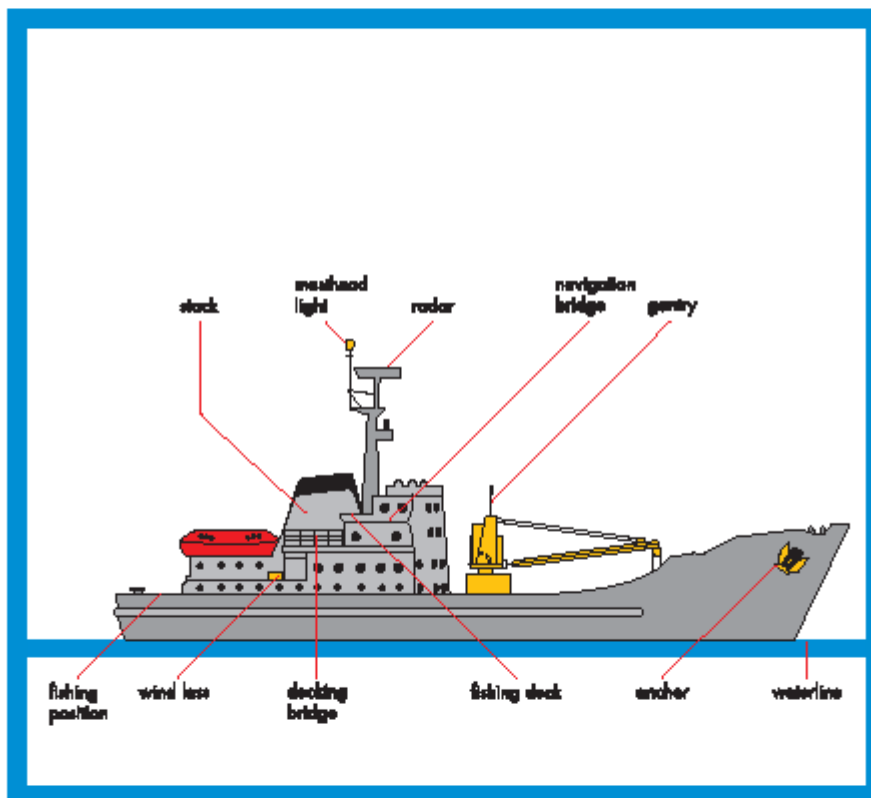


# AB-Sea

## Basic Skills for the Fishing Industry



AB-Sea

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Audrey Byrne & Teresa Gilligan

2010

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# Summary

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The research that we have conducted has concentrated on identifying the specific educational needs of the fishing community and to use this knowledge to develop a programme which will benefit the target group and initiate positive change in their lives. Ab-Sea is a themed literacy programme developed specifically for people who are employed in the fishing industry and whom have literacy and numeracy difficulties that such a programme could address.

The research was conducted in West Galway. The methodology used was the Participatory Learning and Action model which focuses on the development of a deeper level of understanding of a social community in order to identify the most authentic opportunities for change. Our main concern was to obtain multiple perspectives in the research process by designing a sample that included existing literacy students, key personnel involved in the fishing industry, and representatives from national organisations and providers of training for fishermen. The methodologies employed were semi-structured interviews, case studies and pilot programmes.

Our research has brought to light a number of issues:

- A need for themed literacy courses for people working in the fishing industry was established.
- The programme should include a comprehensive section on computer literacy and technology in the fishing industry, as these were areas identified by the research as beneficial both personally and professionally.
- Careful marketing of a programme aimed at fishermen is vital. Focussing on skills based learning rather than literacy problems would address the social stigma of attending literacy classes while increasing motivation to attend.
- We recommend that a partnership approach be adopted when implementing the AB-Sea programme. While it can be offered as a full course in itself, it also has the potential to be run as a support service to be run alongside general training courses offered by other training bodies such as BIM.

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# Introduction

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The Irish Fishing Industry is a valuable indigenous industry which employs over 11,000 people. The fisheries industry is predominately based along the western coastline and the main harbours in the east and south. As the industry is located in remote rural areas, it plays a vital role in the social and economic development of these rural communities. This is especially true for the Atlantic coast of West Galway, where fishing has traditionally provided a livelihood for generations of many families. Historically, fishing was a community venture, with entire families, including children of school going age, involved in the work in many different capacities. As a result, a high value was placed on practical skills, with less importance placed on formal education. It was common for education to end at primary level. While the majority of people involved in the fishing industry do not experience any literacy difficulties, experience shows that due to early school leaving, some reached adulthood without adequate literacy and numeracy skills for the increasingly high standard that is now required.

This research aims to investigate this premise, and to develop a programme entitled A B Sea addressing the basic educational needs of early school leavers involved in fishing. It is envisioned that this programme would not only provide basic literacy and numeracy training for the participants, but would also provide them with greater confidence, which would in turn benefit the community in general. It is hoped that A B-Sea would also

contribute to the development of a more positive attitude towards education and learning in the community.

For the purpose of this research the fishing community can be defined as those in paid employment in the commercial fishing industry. Our centres are located in small rural villages in West Galway. As a large proportion of the area covered by our Adult Learning scheme is along the Atlantic coast, the target group for AB-Sea are salt water commercial fishermen, but it is envisioned that the programme could also be adapted for freshwater fishermen and those who engage in fishing as a hobby.

## 2. Rationale

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The research was conducted in West Galway, encompassing the Connemara electoral region. This rural area stretches along the Atlantic coast, and therefore is the area most associated with salt water commercial fishing in the county. A thriving fishing industry is located here, mostly concentrated on cod, haddock, plaice, crab, shrimp and lobster. The County Galway Socioeconomic Profile 2008 which was compiled using data obtained by the 2006 Census of Population identifies this area as the most disadvantaged in County Galway. This area had the highest rate of unemployment, at 12.2% compared to the national rate of 8.5%. All the unemployment blackspots identified by the CSO were within the Connemara electoral region. This area also had the highest proportion of population in

the combined semi-skilled and unskilled social classes at 16.5% in the Galway area. The proportion of the population in Connemara aged 15 years and over whose full-time education had ceased and had completed education with no formal education or primary education only was 24.4% compared to the national figure of 18.9%. The number of people who left education at 15 years or younger was also over 3% higher than the national average.

Over the past number of years, attendance at literacy classes at one of our centres in Connemara has reflected a major gender imbalance, as approximately two thirds of participants were female. In an effort to address this imbalance, profiles of past male students were examined in order to identify their specific motivations for attendance. It emerged that 10% of past male students in coastal Connemara were involved in the fishing industry and were early school leavers. This identified a need for the development of a literacy programme aimed specifically at the fishing community. It was decided that a pilot programme would be delivered in North Connemara as it is home to an active fishing community. This area also has a well-established literacy service which has developed strong partnerships with BIM (The Sea Fisheries Board) and other local community groups. These partnerships proved to be very useful in recruiting students from the fishing industry for the pilot programme. The second location for a pilot programme was chosen in South Connemara because it is also a coastal area with a thriving fishing community, and is located within a Gaeltacht region. Gaeltacht areas use Irish as their first language, and education provision is offered through Irish at all levels.



While a number of fishing-related FETAC modules are currently available, these are set at a level that is too high for people with weak basic skills. Further examination of the fishing industry showed that a number of changes in the sector in recent years has created a need for workers to learn new skills. Those seeking employment in this area are required to complete courses to fulfill rules and standards set down by the International Maritime Organisation. All fishermen must have a Short Range Radio License and a 3 day Basic Safety Training Course and more comprehensive courses for fishermen with vessels over 50ft such as the Skipper's Course. This is obviously problematic for those early school leavers who do not have adequate literacy or numeracy skills to complete the courses. Increased regulation by the European Union has led to more paperwork in the form of log books, certificates and forms to be completed. Modern technology such as satellite navigation, mobile phones and the internet are now widely used, thus creating a need for fishermen to obtain skills in the area of information technology. Furthermore, as skippering a fishing vessel is a business venture in itself, numeracy skills are also essential.

The aim of this research, therefore, was to identify the specific literacy-based needs of the fishing community. Once these needs were established, two pilot programmes were delivered and evaluated and the information collected was used in the development of a fishing-related certificate in general learning programme to comply with FETAC Level 2. The programme was designed to develop the knowledge, skills and confidence of the participants to a level which will enable them to progress to the mainstream courses they are required to complete.

There is a dearth of relevant and current data available on literacy in fishing communities. The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), in its policy document on literacy and the fishing community (2006) recommends that more research be conducted in this area. It states:

*“Although both formal and informal literacies are important in fishing communities, in most cases not enough is known about their current prevalence and uses to be able to support them adequately.” (FAO, 2006)*

## 3. Methodology

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### **3.1 Research Methods.**

The aim of the research was to identify the educational needs of the fishing community and to use this knowledge to develop a programme which will benefit the target group and initiate positive change in the lives of the participants. In order to achieve this aim, Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) research methodology was employed. This form of action research focuses on both the development of a deeper level of understanding of a social community in order to identify the most appropriate opportunities for change. It draws on Kolb’s cycle of experiential learning whereby deeper learning is achieved through a cycle of experience, reflection on that experience, re-evaluating our actions and adjusting our actions accordingly.

PLA has been used with rural farming communities to provide a space for analysis of their social realities, expression of educational needs and development of plans for future action. PLA is particularly appropriate for our own study as it highlights the importance of multiple perspectives in the research process by including as many stakeholders as possible. To this aim we designed our sample of interviewees to include existing literacy students, key people involved in the fishing industry both locally and nationally and representatives from national organisations and providers of educational programmes for fishermen.

PLA involves predominantly qualitative methods and focuses on dialogue and the active participation of the respondents. The specific methods used in this research were, semi-structured interviews, case studies and pilot programmes. It reflects the ethos of NALA in that it highlights the value of experience and views the respondents as ‘informed sources of information’ (Dick,1993) who have vast experience and knowledge of their own community and who are best qualified to determine the needs of that community. The researcher is regarded as a facilitator in the process of gathering data, analysing needs and developing strategies for change. Therefore, in conducting our research, we aimed to develop a partnership with everyone involved, and to empower the respondents by encouraging active participation in the development of the AB-Sea programme.

Another important aspect of PLA research is the responsiveness of the researcher. Therefore, in starting out the research process we did not have a rigid plan for gathering data. At each stage of the research we responded to the information we gathered and used it to determine our next course of action. For example, we approached each semi-structured interview with a short list of general questions and the interviews took the form of a casual

conversation. As the conversation developed, we allowed the respondent to determine the direction of the interview, only returning to the list of questions if the interview began to veer off the subject. Furthermore, each person we interviewed provided us with the name of another contact within the community, thus steering us towards our next source of information.

After an initial period of research and planning, it was decided that a pilot programme would be developed and delivered in two locations within our target area. The action research nature of the pilot meant the pilot phase provide a space for analysis of the participants social realities, allowing us to establish the interests and educational needs of the participants. This in turn led to the development of a programme to address these needs. The responsiveness of the tutors who delivered the programmes was highly important. Once we had developed a basic outline for the programme, the input of the participants determined the content and direction of the pilot.

As a large proportion of West Galway is within the Gaeltacht area, it was also decided that one programme would be run through English and the other through Irish in order to provide an authentic representation of the linguistic realities of the fishing community in the area. Both pilot programmes were run over a pre-determined period of six weeks in the months of January and February. This time frame was decided upon after consultation with our contacts in the fishing industry. They recommended this time as it fell within the low fishing season when the fishermen would be available to attend courses as they would not be working. The target participants for the pilot programmes were early school leavers who

are working in the fishing industry and who wished to improve their basic skills. The programmes ran for 12 hours each, divided into 6 two-hour sessions.

The principle objective of the pilot programmes was to explore the effectiveness of a themed literacy programme for students who are working in the fishing industry and who had difficulties that such a literacy programme could address. They also aimed to contribute to the on-going development of a long-term programme by testing the authenticity, relevance and usefulness of the programme content.

In terms of course content, the specific learning outcomes for the pilot programme were:

- To raise participants' level of literacy and numeracy skills, while simultaneously promoting an awareness of the value of basic skills and technology within the fishing industry.
- To introduce the terminology needed and build a bridge between the jargon and their own everyday terms of reference.
- To provide an introduction to basic adult education through promoting a positive and supportive learning environment and identifying progression routes into further education and training.

### **3.2 Research Sample**

The participants were recruited through local fisheries training representatives and by the distribution of flyers into the community. Existing literacy students who were working in the fishing industry were also informed about the programme through their tutors. Six

participants started both courses, with four in each group staying until the end. All participants were male. Eleven of the participants were working in the fishing industry, mainly shellfish harvesting using currachs. One participant had previously worked on a trawler, but was now working in a different area, but had retained his interest in fishing as a hobby.

Two of the participants were within the 18-34 age bracket, six were in the 35-50 age bracket, and four were 51-65.

Both programmes were evaluated and the content was adjusted and further developed into a full programme ready for implementation, with a view to achieve accreditation at FETAC level 2. The evaluations were conducted using a two-pronged approach:

- Formative: oral reviews were conducted after each session in order to establish the relevance and effectiveness of the content, while providing a space in which any other issues or observations could be discussed and suggestions given for further sessions.
- Summative: informal discussions and individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to assess the effectiveness of the pilot programmes

This form of evaluation provided the information needed in order to reflect on the course content and subject matter. The information obtained led to the identification of authentic and relevant content for a FETAC programme. Some things worked, and others did not, and

it was this process that provided the opportunity for re-evaluation and reflection in order to ‘fine-tune’ our approach and our course content.

One of the main purposes of the AB-Sea programme is to develop the knowledge and skills of the participants to a level which will enable them to complete the specific skills-related FETAC courses required of them. It was therefore imperative to establish the level of literacy skills involved in these modules. Newbridge Youth Training and Development Centre (NYTDC) recently conducted research into the reading and writing skills required at the various FETAC levels. In presenting the findings, Liz McSkeane (2008) highlights the fact that it is difficult to pinpoint the distinct literacy demands required as every module is delivered differently by different tutors using different teaching methodologies. They suggest that:

*“Future research should be informed by consultation with practitioners from all the relevant settings, it should include practitioners both of literacy and of the subject and module areas being analyzed.”* (McSkeane, 2008: 55)

The benefits of this analysis would therefore be that it:

*“would help practitioners to strengthen the focus of the teaching and learning process, and also of assessment on contextualised literacy practices which are located in the real life of the students.”* (Ibid.:55)

With this in mind, information was gathered from semi-structured interviews with a diverse research sample which included, four education providers who are currently delivering the fishing-related FETAC modules, and one literacy tutor who has worked with members of

the fishing community. We were therefore able to establish the particular level of skills required by these FETAC modules. We then combined this information with the data obtained pertaining to the everyday literacy and numeracy skills of the fishing community which we gathered from our two case studies of fishermen who have attended mainstream literacy classes, participants on our two pilot programmes and our interviews with five key personnel from a training organization within the fishing industry. Interviews were conducted with six Adult Literacy Organisers along the western seaboard to establish their involvement with the fishing industry. The inclusion of viewpoints from a diverse range of stakeholders in this manner will enable us to proceed in our endeavour to develop a programme. This programme would be both useful and authentic in relation to the reality of the lives of the target group.

### **3.3 Research Challenges and Limitations**

Implementing the pilot programmes themselves offered a range of challenges. Firstly, the seasonal nature of the fishing industry, coupled with the fact that fishermen working on trawlers can be away for long periods of time, gave us a very limited timeframe to work to. Secondly, due to the fact that the pilot programmes were located in small rural fishing communities, the participants knew each other prior to attendance, resulting in a reluctance on behalf of many participants to share personal details and opinions. Over the course of the six weeks, this problem lessened slightly, as the participants realized that they all had a lot in common and were not being judged by each other. A sense of camaraderie developed, and informal peer support and mentoring began to take place in the last few sessions.



Another challenge faced by the pilot programme was the sensitive area of marketing the programme. It was decided that the word ‘literacy’ would not appear on any promotional material in order to avoid the social stigma often associated with literacy difficulties. Instead, it was named “Further Education for the Fishing Industry”, as recommended by Mary Corridan (2002):

*“The term ‘Further Education’ was strongly recommended because it ‘covers a multitude’ and because it suggests progression rather than a need to redress earlier failure.” (Corridan, 2002:41)*

However, this appears to have led to confusion, as two of the participants in each pilot programme left the programme after the first session because they thought that they were coming to a practical fishing skills course, leaving four participants in each programme.

An extensive review of available research and data was also conducted and it was discovered that very little information on literacy in fishing communities is currently available, with most research conducted in developing countries in Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, our desk research presented many challenges and limitations as we searched for reliable and relevant information.

# 4. Brief Review of the Field

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## **4.1 Focus of the Literature Review**

Our review of the field encompassed both Irish and International research and covered three separate areas:

- Research into literacy levels among those employed in the fishing industry. As this industry is predominantly male dominated, the review also encompassed existing research into male participation in basic adult education schemes in Ireland.
- Current policies of the national fishing regulatory bodies and literacy needs of those working in fisheries in order to comply with these policies
- The development of a functional literacy programme

## **4.2 Male Participation in Basic Adult Education in Ireland**

One of the main reasons for developing the AB-Sea programme was to offer a programme which would address the gender imbalance in Adult Basic Education schemes in Western coastal areas by encouraging greater male participation as fishing is largely a male dominated industry. This imbalance has been rapidly increasing in recent years, with only 37% male participation in literacy schemes in 2000, compared to 71% in 1980. (de Brún & Du Vivier (2008), quoted in NALA,(2009).) In their 2009 study of the attitudes and experiences of male students involved in adult literacy, NALA highlight the fact that a wide

range of factors, such as negative early experiences of learning and social embarrassment, act as barriers to male participation. (NALA 2009). In their examination of the motivation for men to return to education to improve their literacy skills, NALA (2009) found three particular motivating factors:

- Individual motives: they returned to learning because they felt that *“the opportunity to learn had been missed or lost the first time round”*
- Community-related motives: many believed that improving their skills would enable them to make a greater contribution to their communities.
- Family motives: some of the men involved in the study wished to upskill in order to support their children with homework, while others *“recognized that their own experiences of education shaped their desire to strive for a better quality education for their children”*, (NALA, 2009:10)

In presenting their recommendations following their research into men and literacy, NALA (2009) recommend that in order to increase male participation and improve the experience of established male participants, service providers need to integrate literacy into other areas:

*“By partnering with local agencies and organizations already engaging with disadvantaged men, service providers are developing literacy modules to be integrated into other forms of learning, for example horticulture, carpentry or IT. This blending of literacy services means men can access literacy supports within non-literacy related settings.”* (NALA, 2009:62)

In her study of male participation in Adult Literacy Education, Mary Corridan of the Dublin Adult Learning Centre (DALC) recommends the provision of a ‘men-only’ course as an effective method of ‘engaging and retaining marginalised men in literacy education’. It is advocated that such a course should:

*“extend beyond basic education to an exploration of a range of issues relevant to men’s lives”* (Corridan, 2002:19)

Corridan (2002) also highlights the importance of informal recruitment of male participants and the value of personal recommendations in marketing a literacy programme to potential students. This echoes NALA’s 2009 findings, which states that:

*“One of the most powerful promotional tools...is word of mouth, especially when put forward by a ‘champion, for the service, an advocate who has come through it and has had positive experiences”* (NALA, 2009:63)

While equality of opportunity is a fundamental principle of Adult Basic Education Provision, Section 24 of the Employment Equality Act 1998 allows for positive action to promote equal opportunities for all. (O’Connell,1999)

### **4.3 Literacy and Fishing Communities**

In its report ‘The Seafood Development Operational Programme 2007-2013’ it is noted that the fishing industry is concentrated in the more remote coastal regions which are typically characterised by low population densities, high dependency rates, below average levels of educational attainment and higher than average levels of deprivation. No statistics are

currently available on levels of literacy within the fishing community in Ireland, so it is necessary for us to examine reports from other countries. In his international study of literacy in fishing communities, Brian Maddox asks whether we can generalise about literacy in fishing communities in a variety of national and cultural contexts:

*“There are clearly some structural similarities between fishing communities that might increase social disadvantage, for example in relation to migratory lifestyles, tendency to social marginalisation, the significance of child labour, and common activities of post-catch processing and marketing”* (Maddox,2007:2)

Maddox cites young workers within fishing communities as the cause of educational aspirations. He says that a strong sense of identity and occupational pride within fishing communities can also detract from educational achievement. However, Maddox warns of the dangers of stereotyping fishing communities by focusing on the negatives. He reminds us that many fishing communities are *“economically and culturally vibrant”* and concludes that while low levels of literacy do exist in these groups, it important also to recognise and value the rich oral traditions of intergenerational informal apprenticeship within these communities.

The report ‘Seafood Development Operational Programme – 2007-2013’ cites the Government’s National Development Plan 2007-2013 which has as its overall objective the provision of balanced regional development and social inclusiveness. According to this plan, approximately 40% of Ireland’s population live in rural areas and these rural areas present different experiences, economically and socially to their urban counterparts. The

geographical location of the seafood industry contributes to the attainment of this objective by providing opportunities to sustain communities and livelihoods in the coastal areas.

In the BIM report ‘Steering a New Course – National Seafood Strategy’ 2007 -2013’ the necessity of increased investment in education and training for the fishing industry is highlighted and the following recommendation is made:

*“Increase investment in education and training for the seafood industry and others directly interacting with it and improve industry participation in commercially focused training programmes”.*

In achieving this aim, it is recommended that BIM access specialist expertise through the expansion of its strategic training alliances with other state agencies and educational institutions, to address the specific training needs of the industry. It is further recommended in this report that BIM should increase the focus on training and qualifications in the inshore and coastal sectors. It draws attention to the significantly higher rate of accidents and machinery failure on vessels affecting safety, profitability and crew retention. It recommends that unqualified skippers and mechanics on these vessels should hold formal Department of Transport Certificates of Proficiency or Competency as deemed appropriate. A report from the Joint Committee on Lifelong Learning acknowledges the problems posed for those in employment that experience literacy difficulties:

*“Literacy and numeracy problems present difficulties for most societal activities including those related to job-seeking or actual employment: for example, understanding health and safety manuals or interpreting pay statements, present both occupational and personal problems.”* (Joint Committee on Lifelong Learning, 1999: 3)

In this report the problem of career progression for those experiencing such difficulties is acknowledged and highlights that with the move towards a more knowledge-based economy, opportunities for those with literacy problems will diminish. The report recommends that:

*“The needs of those in employment who have literacy difficulties must be given greater priority in the targeting, design and delivery of adult literacy programmes.” (Ibid :03)*

Maddox highlights the importance of functional literacy when developing literacy programmes for the fishing industry, a point echoed by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations’ (FAO) policy on improving literacy in fishing communities. FAO defines functional literacy as:

*“...the reading, writing and numeracy a person requires and uses in everyday life. Functional literacy therefore has an applied, real life orientation.”*  
(FAO,2006:03)

Maddox maintains that course content should relate directly to the students’ day-to-day literacy needs and occupational aspirations and documents the specific needs of modern fishing communities. New digital technologies such as mobile phones are necessary for texting between land and shore. The internet is used for personal communication, reviewing weather forecasts and accessing market. Basic skills are also necessary for navigation, tax returns, reviewing fishing quotas and regulations and complying with health and safety

procedures. FAO highlight the challenges that this broad range of needs poses when developing a programme to address these needs:

*“Such tasks in fishing communities imply meeting conditions quite unlike that of most conventional literacy programmes in order to be task-oriented, flexible and responsive to the diversity of people’s expressed needs and aspirations.” (FAO, 2006:3)*

FAO also emphasize the fact that fish stocks are becoming increasingly over-exploited or highly regulated, thus creating a need for people working in the fishing industry to diversify into other areas such as aquaculture in order to sustain a living. This diversification requires learning new skills and gaining expertise in new areas, which would in turn require a higher level of literacy and numeracy skills.

The Second and Third Quarterly 2008 reports by FÁS point to a noticeable trend to self employment and part-time work and states that *‘it would seem that, when labour demand is weaker these forms of employment become more prominent’*. (FÁS). In the current economic climate, it will be imperative for fishermen to maintain their livelihood and sustain their rural communities.

#### **4.4 Functional Literacy**

In his paper *Literacy Principles: Design Your Own Functional Programme*, Phil Bartle suggests that literacy trainers tailor their teaching methods and course content in response to



the specific needs and interests of the local community in order to create a programme that is more meaningful and authentic for the students:

*“Every community is different, so your content should be different for each community”* (Bartle, 2009:1)

Bartle recognises the value of achieving a high level of literacy but highlights the fact that this should not be the aim of a functional literacy programme:

*“You are not teaching literacy for the sake of members becoming literate. You are helping a community to become more empowered by allowing its members to do practical things in and by reading and writing.”* (Bartle,2009:5)

In recognising the importance of relevance and authenticity in developing a functional literacy programme, it is also necessary to reflect the native language of the students. As many coastal fishing communities are located in Gaeltacht areas, the first language of many of the target students is Irish. This issue is addressed in *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* where it states that:

*“With regard to Gaeltacht communities, the Government is concerned to ensure that Gaeltacht residents have the same opportunities as are open to English speakers to pursue their education and training ambitions in their own language.”*  
(Government of Ireland, 2000:52)

Therefore in order for any fishing related basic skills programme to be fully authentic, functional and relevant to the realities of fishing communities, it is imperative that it would be offered in both Irish and English.

# 5. Report on Data Gathered

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## **5.1 Interviews with Adult Literacy Organisers on the West coast**

Short semi-structured interview were held with six Adult Literacy Organisers along the West Coast. None were found to have developed any programme specifically for fishermen and did not target this group specifically, while they all said that they had past and current students who were involved in fishing in some capacity, whether as a career or as a hobby. Two Organisers commented on the difficulty of recruiting fishermen onto mainstream basic education classes and felt that the AB-Sea programme would be an excellent method of reaching this target group. All Adult Literacy Organisers interviewed were of the opinion that the AB-Sea programme would be of benefit to literacy provision in their areas and expressed a strong interest in receiving a copy of the completed programme and resource book to either as a handbook for implementing a full programme or as a resource for use by existing tutors and students.

## **5.2 Interviews with representatives from a Sea Fisheries Training Organisation**

Five interviews were conducted with representatives from a sea fisheries training organization, all of whom work closely with the fishing community at grassroots level. One representative with responsibility for training pointed out that his organisation has already taken steps to address the problem as they have worked with NALA in developing a

Plain English First Aid Training Manual. Attempts were made with an education provider to deliver FETAC level 4 Communications and Information Technology modules to fishermen but were unsuccessful as the course content did not relate to the fishing industry.

This respondent believes that in order for a programme to attract and maintain interest it must relate directly to the specific needs of occupational fishing. The formation of a strategic partnership with adult education providers was recommended in order to address this issue within the fishing industry

One representative deals with licensing regulations for coastal commercial fishermen in the west of Ireland. This position includes ensuring that fishermen have submitted the appropriate paperwork in order to attain their licenses and regularly encounters instances of low literacy skills. According to this representative , approximately 10% of the fishermen in this area experience great difficulty with form filling. Forms are often completed for the fishermen and in other cases they are encouraged to take the form home to avoid ‘humiliating’ them. The problem is not acknowledged due to the sensitivity of the issue.

Large meetings are often held in order to provide information to the fishing community. Misunderstandings have occurred at these meetings as a result of fishermen not understanding the documentation they had received through the post. The representative also highlighted that essential information is disseminated through magazines, most notably “Irish Skipper” and “Marine Times”, so a good standard of literacy and numeracy is required by the fishing community in order to keep abreast of new developments in the industry.

Another representative recognized that there is a need for fishermen to up-skill but was concerned about stereotyping the fishing community and causing offence by targeting them specifically for a literacy programme. The difficulty in recruiting fishermen onto courses was highlighted and it was maintained that those with difficulties were supported by their colleagues. On the issue of delivery of courses through Irish, it was felt by this representative that although the choice should be available, the majority of fishing related literature is read in English as the written Irish from Government sources is often difficult to understand.

Another representative delivers basic safety training courses and also regularly encounters instances of low literacy levels. It was noted that this problem is not confined to the older generation but also affects the younger generation. However, this representative estimated the figure with serious difficulties to be five per cent. In Gaeltacht areas it is believed that the problem is often compounded by the fact that the fishermen can speak fluently in both languages but have difficulty with reading and writing in either language. On the question of delivery of courses to fishermen in Irish, the representative explained that the Short Range Radio License had to be delivered through English to comply with the rules and standards set down by International Maritime Organisation (IMO). It was emphasized that that fishermen are not excluded from participating in courses due to their literacy difficulties as they are facilitated by taking the course orally when the written work proves too difficult. This representative also stressed the increasing high level of literacy required in particular for those on bigger vessels, for example: applying for licenses and registration with the Department of the Marine.

One of the representatives interviewed provides the fishing community with regular training and development services. It was estimated that the number with literacy difficulties is in the region of 20% and again this group is facilitated by taking exams orally. This representative also believes that the difficulties are compounded in Gaeltacht areas due to the use of both languages.

This representative also stressed that literacy problems are not confined to the older generation, he has encountered a number of younger men who have literacy difficulties. These young men are generally early school leavers who come from families who would have no culture of education and who would put a greater value on paid employment, a fact usually borne out of economic necessity.

All representatives agreed that there is a definite need for the AB-Sea programme and are very interested in developing a partnership with the Adult Learning Centre in order to assist with recruiting the target group and further developing the programme and accompanying resource pack.

### **5.3 Interviews with Adult Education Providers**

The first interview conducted with an adult education provider was with an education coordinator who is based in a small rural coastal village in Connemara. In recent years the respondent's centre has specifically targeted the fishing community by offering the radio license course. Fifty students attended the course, motivated by the fact that they were

legally required to complete it. This provider delivered the course, and the students were recruited by their local fisheries board representative. All who attended were early school leavers who worked in the commercial sea fishing industry. It was estimated by this provider that approximately fifty per cent of the participants had literacy problems.

The centre has also delivered FETAC modules in Marine Engineering and Navigation at level 5, and the provider highlights the fact that a number of participants dropped out of the courses because of their limited literacy and numeracy skills. In the Marine Engineering module, 50% of the marks involved a practical assessment with which the students had no difficulties. However, a further 50% involved a written examination and it was here that a large proportion of the participants fell down. As a result, this adult education provider believes that the level 5 modules were at an inappropriate level for the needs of the local community and intends to provide FETAC modules at level 3 in future.

In this provider's experience, fishermen are not motivated by certification, but more by the relevance and usefulness of the content. Therefore, it is vital to adhere to 'functional' literacy. This provider recommended careful marketing of the programme as there is a social stigma attached to literacy difficulties. Overall it was felt that AB-Sea would be of great benefit to the fishing community.

The next education provider is based in a rural, coastal disadvantaged area, and works with students who are early school leavers aged between fifteen and twenty years old. The centre offers a large variety of courses, including the Leaving Cert Applied and FETAC modules. A large proportion of students in this centre have low literacy and numeracy skills and

come from a variety of backgrounds, many of whom are experiencing acute social problems such as alcoholism and poverty. According to the provider, difficult situations such as these often mean that education is not a priority for the families. It was explained that the female parent is often the main breadwinner in families in the area, because women tend to work in the tourist industry, in hotels and B+B's. Many of the local men supplement this income by engaging in part-time farming, fishing, farmer's dole, and seasonal harvesting of lobsters, crabs and other shellfish. Many of the participants in the scheme would have left school early in order to help their fathers with this work.

In the year 2000, the provider developed a Level 3 FETAC module in Aquaculture. The rationale for developing this course was the realisation that the majority of participants attending courses did not have the required level of literacy and numeracy to complete the level 5 modules that they had previously offered. They also aimed to get certification for the students in an area that was culturally relevant and economically viable for them.

This provider felt that the AB-Sea programme would be of benefit to the students in their local centre. The fact that many of the students already have a vast amount of practical skills in fishing which have been passed on from previous generations was highlighted. However, they do not have the literacy and numeracy skills that are becoming more and more necessary as the fishing industry modernises and becomes more regulated. The AB-Sea programme was thought to be an excellent opportunity to bridge this gap and provide a badly needed service in coastal area of social disadvantage.

Another adult education provider delivers a number of fishing-related FETAC modules at Level 5 in a scheme in a rural village on the Atlantic coast. Approximately one third of participants have literacy difficulties. While the courses offered are primarily skills-based, all of the programmes at this level involve some degree of written examination. Therefore, a scribe is often provided in order for the students to complete their assessment. It was felt that the AB-Sea programme would be of great use to the students in this scheme as it would provide them with the specialised vocabulary required to complete these fishing related courses, some of which the fishing community are legally required to attend.

An adult education provider involved in a summer programme which is delivered for young fishermen, who are still in full-time education, on the Atlantic coast, explained that this programme is run in partnership with VEC, BIM and Údaras na Gaeltachta. A range of FETAC modules are delivered on this programme at Level 3 and Level 5. It was pointed out that some learning support material is prepared in Irish for this group but the language of the modules is in English. It was acknowledged that some students experience difficulty with the level of the modules and that support materials from the AB-Sea Programme would be useful.

#### **5.4 Case Study 1**

John\* works as a fisherman on a commercial trawler and lives in a small village on the West coast of Connemara in Co. Galway. He left school at thirteen years of age, in order to help his father, who also worked as a fisherman. In his early 40's he approached his local adult learning scheme after hearing about the course on local radio. He was placed in a



mainstream literacy class and advanced to a stage where he was able to complete a radio licence course. John has subsequently progressed on to other fishing related courses. He feels that his first mainstream literacy class was vital to the further advancement of his education and career. Prior to attending, he was very reliant on family members to fill out forms, apply for licences and to read any correspondence from the fishing authorities. He feels that improving his skills has enhanced his general quality of life, but also has increased his confidence in order to attend other courses and address all aspects of his job. He felt that the AB-Sea programme would be of interest and value to his colleagues, and that there is a real need for such a course. While he found the mainstream course he attended to be very useful, he felt that he would have benefited more if it was more specific to his needs as a fisherman. He felt that it was very broad and catered to everyone's needs in the group. The AB-Sea programme, he felt, would be useful as it would deal specifically with fishing vocabulary and the everyday literacy challenges faced by the fishing community.

He also felt that because fish stocks are limited in our waters and strict quotas are being imposed, fishermen are now looking to diversify their work in order to sustain a living in the sector. He feels that areas such as aquaculture are the future for many in the fishing community. They will therefore need to up skill in these areas, through the FETAC system. John sees this as another motivation for fishermen to attend a fishing related basic skills course, in order to attain the skills required to proceed to FETAC modules at higher levels.

## **5.5 Case study 2**

Our second case study involved a student-tutor partnership within an Adult Basic Education scheme in West Galway. Liam\* is in his mid-forties and lives with his wife and four children in a small coastal village. He left school at eleven and went to work with his father who sustained a living by sea fishing, gathering shellfish and seaweed and operating a number of lobster pots. Although he possessed very limited reading and writing skills, Liam acquired a broad range of practical skills from his father and eventually went to work on a fishing trawler. After a number of years working in this area, the opportunity arose for Liam to skipper his own vessel, but regulations demanded that he complete a certified skipper's course in order to proceed in this line of employment.

He heard about the basic adult education scheme on local radio and attended on a one-to-one basis in order to attain the skills necessary to complete the skipper's course. Liam attended these classes for twelve months and has subsequently completed the skipper's course. He felt that the classes were invaluable to him particularly as they focused specifically on the vocabulary and numeracy skills that he needed for the Skipper's course. He continued to attend one-to-one classes while attending the skipper's course, which he believes provided him with the support and confidence to persevere with his studies. He is also applying his newly acquired skills in other areas in his life as he is helping his children with their homework and reading the local newspapers. He felt that a programme such as the AB-Sea programme would be very helpful to fishermen who need to up-skill.

According to Eileen\*, the voluntary tutor who worked with Liam, she used the first few sessions to establish both his motivation for learning and his specific needs as a student. As

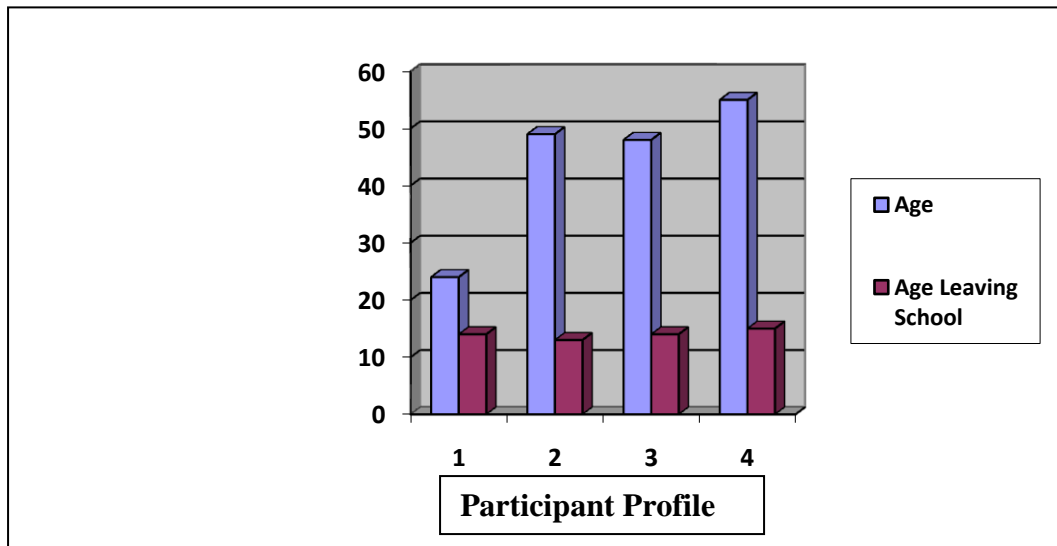
his primary motivation was to complete the skipper's course, they decided to use materials that dealt primarily with fishing terminology while simultaneously working on general vocabulary such as days of the week, months, etc. They used fishing magazines, BIM information leaflets and marine license application forms. Eileen maintains that Liam's high level of motivation and enthusiasm was maintained by focusing on functional vocabulary, which reflected the reality of his daily life. As a result of this, Liam progressed from a basic level to achieving his goal of attending a Skipper's course within a very short space of time. Eileen also highlights the fact that although they specialised in the area of fishing, his communication skills improved overall, thus transferring the learning to other aspects of his life. She believes that a specialised fishing related basic skills module would be of huge benefit to others in Liam's situation, and would be an excellent way of motivating fishermen to attend classes. It was obvious to her that her student's motivation and diligence was due to the fact that the course was tailored to suit his immediate goal of completing the Skippers course. For her, it was difficult to source information and materials for her sessions with Liam, so the prospect of the AB-Sea resource pack is of great interest to her and she feels that it would be of great benefit to tutors in all coastal areas.

\*Please note that names have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

## **5.6 Pilot Programme 1**

The first pilot programme was run in a non-Gaeltacht area of North Connemara, and was therefore delivered through English by an experienced adult literacy tutor. It was a twelve hour pilot, running over six weeks. Six participants attended the first session, all of whom were early school leavers who were involved in the fishing industry. Two participants did

not return after the first session, saying that they had initially thought that it was a fishing course. They felt that they did not need support with literacy and numeracy. The four remaining participants were of varying ages, from 25 to 55, and had varying levels of literacy.



There was a general feeling among the participants that they had been ‘let down’ by the formal education system. All of the participants had left school and started working in the fishing industry from an early age. While one of the participants said that their parents had wanted him to stay on at school, the others felt that they supported them leaving school as it provided an extra pair of hands at home. They felt that there was always work to be done at home, because their families were engaged in physical, laborious work such as harvesting seaweed and periwinkles, cutting turf, and in the case of one participant, his parents had a small farm. This participant felt that his parents did not place much value on education, as they saw his future to be in farmwork and fishing. It was much more important to them, therefore, that he learned the skills that would be relevant to this kind of work in order to

provide him with a future income. Another participant said that his parents welcomed the fact that he left school to work on a trawler:

*“they didn’t mind because they knew I was a joker at school and I wasn’t going far. My mother was glad I could pay my own way with the fishing.”*

All the participants expressed the view that their parents were very isolated from the school system, with little involvement in their education. One participant said that the only time his parents were involved in the school was when he was in trouble. He felt that his parents were very intimidated by the school staff and felt that they were being judged when they went to meet the teachers. They told him stories of their own negative experiences at school. Another participant remembers his teachers telling him that he will leave school early because his brothers had all left early to work in the fishing industry. He felt that he was never given a chance to learn:

*“they had me written off from day one, because I was one of the ..... family and none of my family done well in school.”*

The literacy levels of the participants varied, with the majority expressing difficulties with form-filling and reading. There was general consensus that the amount of official documents and forms to be filled out had greatly increased in the last few years. Each of the participants had developed coping mechanisms to deal with this problem, such as getting their local B.I.M. representative to fill them out, or getting family members to do it for them. In general discussion, all the participants acknowledged the embarrassment caused by having to ask others for help. This fact in particular seemed to act as a motivational factor for a number of participants attending the programme;

*“I hate asking my daughter to do it, It’d be great to just be able to fill them out myself and get rid of them..”*

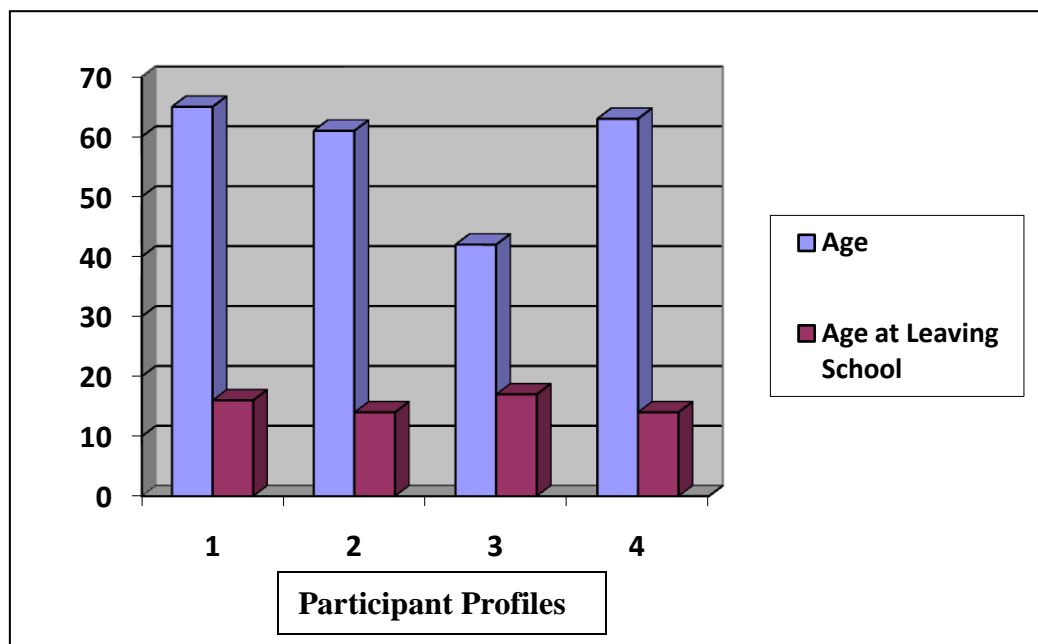
The participants were all consulted on what topics and materials should be covered by the programme. The most common requests were using computers and the Internet in order to source and sell equipment, filling out forms, general reading and writing. It was requested that we cover some aspect of computers in every session, an activity which developed into another motivational factor for attending.

When asked what they found most interesting on the course, all participants said computer skills. The work on form-filling was regarded as the least enjoyable aspect of the programme, but was also deemed the most useful. Other areas that were seen as useful were the health and safety aspects, such as reading medicine packets, fire equipment instructions, etc.

Overall, the majority of participants felt that they had benefitted greatly from the pilot programme. Of the four remaining participants who finished the programme, one has joined an adult literacy group who attend twice weekly, and two of the others have expressed an interest in attending a FETAC level 2 fishing-related general learning programme.

## 5.6 Pilot Programme 2

The second pilot programme was delivered in an Irish-speaking coastal area in South Connemara that is located within the Gaeltacht. It was delivered through Irish by an experienced tutor who lives locally and who is familiar with the fishing industry. Six participants attended the first session, but two of these left when they realized that it was not a fishing skills training course. The remaining participants were attended primary schools in Gaeltacht rural areas, progressing to attend one to two years at secondary school. One of the participants attained junior certification, the others left without completing any formal examination.



All four participants felt that they had not enjoyed their school experiences. They all expressed the opinion that teachers did not support when they were unable to complete the lessons, that they left them to their own devices. They all said that they had missed a lot of days during their school-going years because they were kept at home by their parents to

help out, often in harvesting shellfish and seaweed, or helping with farming work. One participant felt that he was always behind at school, and was given no support by the teacher as his absence from the class was frowned upon:

*“Teaching moved on, I couldn’t catch up, it was my own fault if I couldn’t do it.”*

The participants all agreed that they found schoolwork difficult. In hindsight they maintain their main difficulties arose from the fact that they missed so many days from school. The lessons which they missed were not covered again, resulting in a lot of gaps in their education. Further problems emerged with their homework and nobody at home was in a position to offer any help.

The same trend was evident in their parent’s attitude towards school and education. The participants said that their parents were unable to help them as they had very little basic education themselves. They had no involvement with the schools and did not understand the system. Also they were very busy, they had big families and were working on farm and bog land. They also picked periwinkles and harvested seaweed to supplement their earnings. They were tired and had very little spare time. Two of the participants said that work was waiting for them when they arrived home from school leaving them no time to complete homework and making them tired at school. It was noted that by the participants that fathers in those days were totally uninvolved in their children’s education. Whatever encouragement and support they received at home came from the mother.

They all agreed that they first started to notice having difficulty when they attended second level education. They noticed other students had progressed further than them. Also they



were introduced to tests and examinations for the first time which led to further confidence problems:

*“I realized how much I didn’t know when I failed all the tests”*

One participant said that his main thoughts at this time were on leaving school in a year or two. That’s all he knew, that’s what his parents, uncles aunts and most of the neighbours did before him, so it was a social norm for him.

There was very little communications between the participants and their teachers or between their parents and the teachers. They saw their teachers as being “ .....*way above us*”. They all expressed the view that the teachers made little effort to understand their situation and support was nonexistent. They also remembered receiving beatings from their teachers if they didn’t know something or had misbehaved. This contributed to their negative view of school.

One participant said that he planned to leave school at earliest opportunity and try to get a job. Not much thought was put into what type of work he wanted to do, as there was no choice, it depended on whatever work was available in the area. It was mostly factory and seasonal work. It emerged that there was no advice or guidance forthcoming from any quarters for the participants, the only option was to follow in the footsteps of those that went before them. Having literacy difficulties held them back, limiting their choice of work. In general discussion, the participants concluded that they wouldn’t apply for work that would involve reading and writing.

*“... it wasn't every job I could apply for, I had no confidence to push myself forward, I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to read and write everything that was required, the job mightn't be so complicated but you would be afraid it would”.*

The participants said that while Irish is the language which they use at home, socially and at work, their reading and writing skills are stronger in English, as the majority of form-filling and work-related writing they do is through English. While they felt that it was useful to have the course delivered through Irish, they also felt that the majority of the worksheets in relation to writing, form-filling, etc. would be more useful to them in English.

Their main aim and motivation for attending the pilot programme was to learn computers, which they felt was useful for their work and personally. Every opportunity was seized to use the computer to help them with literacy difficulties, reading and spelling. One participant has progressed to attend further studies in computers.

## 6. Discussion of Findings

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- Interviews with all the stakeholders involved in this research highlight the need for a programme to address the increasingly high literacy demands on fishermen. The pilot programmes highlighted the amount of bureaucracy imposed on the participants by regulatory bodies.

- The requirement by fishermen to complete courses which meet the standards set down by the International Maritime Organisation before they can legally engage in fishing can pose serious challenges for those with limited literacy and numeracy skills. Health and Safety is shown as an area which needs to be addressed as discussed in the BIM '*Steering a New Course – National Seafood Strategy 2007-2013*' which draws attention to the high rate of accidents and machinery failure on vessels. This issue is also discussed in the recommendations by the Joint Committee on Lifelong Learning 1999.
- There is a need for people working in the fishing industry to upskill in the area of information technology, indicating a cultural change in the industry which is now becoming more reliant on the internet for sourcing and selling equipment, marketing produce, predicting tides, etc.
- Extra challenges exist for some fishermen in the Gaeltacht areas, where Irish is their first language but may experience difficulty with reading and writing in either language. This inequality is highlighted in the White Paper on Adult Education discussed earlier, which focuses on the need to address this imbalance by presenting material in their mother tongue.
- Addressing gender inequality by positive discrimination is one of the main aims of the AB-Sea Programme, this correlates with Section 24(1) of the Employment Equality Act 1998 referred to earlier in this document.

- The necessity of providing a programme focused on functional literacy is evident throughout the interviews and case studies. It is clear that fishermen are more likely to attend training that relates directly to their fishing. This corresponds with the views of Maddox and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) discussed earlier, where the importance of focusing on functional literacy and designing programmes specific to the needs of the community is highlighted.
- The provision of a functional literacy programme such as AB-Sea would improve the lives of the participating fishermen and benefit the community as a whole. The case studies show clearly how focusing on a specific topic can sustain motivation and improve literacy skills which are transferable across all aspects of a person's life.
- The partnership approach to developing a specific programme such as AB-Sea is evidently the best method of producing a quality programme. The interest, enthusiasm and cooperation from fisheries training organisations and other education providers towards the development of AB-Sea Programme is clearly demonstrated in this research.

## 7. Conclusions

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- The demand for increasingly higher levels of literacy and numeracy skills in the fishing industry is evident; interview respondents reported on the courses and documentation that must be completed by fishermen to operate legally.
- Fishermen are more likely to attend programmes that are relevant and authentic to their needs as fishermen.
- Each programme should include a comprehensive section on computer literacy and IT, as this was an area identified as beneficial both personally and professionally. It was also identified as a motivational factor in recruiting individuals to attend a literacy programme.
- A high level of commitment to the development of the AB-Sea programme by all stakeholders is evident in this research.

- Equality issues are important considerations in the development of programmes, such as the right to learn through Irish in Gaeltacht areas and positive discrimination to encourage male participation in training courses.
- Careful marketing of programmes aimed at fishermen is vital. The stigma associated with literacy difficulties is highlighted and the research shows the importance of promoting programmes in terms of positive educational progression rather than a focus on literacy problems. Clarity of content is also important, it was found that a number of participants on the pilot programmes did not complete the course because they had misunderstood it to be a skills-based ‘fishing’ course and it did not meet their expectations.

## 8. Recommendations

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- It is recommended that the already well established partnership between the VEC and BIM be extended to include the AB-Sea Programme. While the programme can be offered as a full FETAC certificate at level 2, it also has the potential to be run as a support service alongside general training modules. This would enable the literacy practitioner to provide support and assistance to fishermen who are attending training services. This would eliminate the difficulties of seeking help by visiting a local adult literacy centre, as the AB-Sea programme would be

offered on-site in tandem with other training, such as Safety at Sea, VHF Radio License, etc. Offering the service in such a way also maximizes the potential for recruitment of students who would benefit most from the programme.

- Further research needs to be conducted in order to establish more comprehensive data on the educational needs of the fishing community nationally.
- Careful consideration is needed when promoting programmes to the Fishing Community. The title of the programme and awareness raising literature should not contain the term ‘literacy’. It should also be made clear that the course does not relate to practical fishing skills in order to avoid confusion.
- Given the genuine need identified for the AB-Sea programme, it is recommended that Resource staff in Adult Learning Schemes in coastal areas should dedicate specific time to continual research and development of materials for the fishing industry, to enable fishermen to keep up to-date with increasing skills demanded by the industry.
- It is recommended that a resource book based on the findings of this research be published and made available to adult practitioners nationally. These resources can be adapted to suit inland fisheries, and can be used by adult literacy students who engage in fishing as a hobby.

- To address inequality issues, translation of the final programme and resource book into Irish should be completed before the programme is rolled out.
- The programme should be delivered as an Intensive course, such as the Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education Programme (ITABE) which allows for six hours tuition per week. This will help to maintain motivation and enthusiasm as well as earlier progression to other fishing related courses.
- The success of the pilot programme in providing a deeper level of understanding of the educational needs and interests of the participants highlights the need for student input in determining authentic learning opportunities and course content. Participants expressed positive feedback in relation to being consulted about their own learning. The development of a student's forum would provide a space for their voices to be heard and would greatly enhance the provision of a positive, authentic and relevant adult literacy service within each unique community.



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