

Facts and figures about literacy

Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situations, explore new possibilities and initiate change.



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

NALA's definition of literacy:

Literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. But it includes more than the technical skills of communication: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions.

Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.

The facts:

How important are good literacy skills?

Literacy and numeracy skills are part of everyday life. Think of all the notices and signs around us, how we use money every day, use the internet and send text messages. Everywhere we go we are faced with text, numbers and technology.

Literacy has an important role for the individual, the worker, family member and the citizen. Most people have some literacy and numeracy skills, but they can vary in different situations. For example, a person might have high levels of literacy in completing a form but low levels of literacy when figuring out the instructions for using a DVD player.

Those with significant literacy difficulties are likely to have difficulty carrying out day-to-day tasks that involve literacy. These might include:

- ▶ writing a shopping list,
- ▶ reading a health and safety notice, or
- ▶ filling in a driving licence application form.

NALA's view is that while literacy is clearly linked to economic development and employment, it must not be limited to issues of economics. Literacy is deeply connected with the rights of individuals and communities: it is about

their right to have a voice in society; to continue and extend their education; to read and to be read.

What is the extent of the issue?

Adult literacy difficulties are a major issue for Irish society. In 1997, results from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), showed that 25% of the Irish adult population, or at least 500,000 people, scored at the lowest level, Level 1, of a five level scale.

IALS also showed that another 30% of Irish adults were at Level 2, meaning they could only cope with very simple material.

Who are the 25%?

- ▶ Most of those who scored at Level 1 were in the older age groups. There are a number of possible reasons why so many older people scored at Level 1 in IALS:
 - ▶ they may not have completed primary school;
 - ▶ may not have been able to take advantage of free second level education which was only introduced in 1967; or
 - ▶ they may only have developed the literacy skills required for society at that time.
- ▶ About one-fifth of people at Level 1 never read a book and three-fifths claimed never to have been to a public library.
- ▶ More than 60% of those who left school without completing the Junior Cycle scored at Level 1.
- ▶ Nearly a fifth of those aged 16 to 25 scored at Level 1. This is a poor result compared to the percentage of 16 to 25 year olds at Level 1 in Sweden (3%) and Germany (5%).
- ▶ An unemployed person is three times more likely to experience a lower level of literacy than someone who is employed.

What is Government doing?

Government policy and funding for adult literacy work

In *Learning for Life*, the 2000 White Paper on Adult Education, the Department of Education and Science placed adult literacy as its top priority and set out the National Adult Literacy Programme. This was a plan to improve literacy levels among the adult population in Ireland. It was the first such plan in Ireland and provided a guide for action in developing adult literacy up to 2006.

In 2007, there was a target set in the *National Action Plan on Social Inclusion* to reduce the proportion of the population with a significant literacy difficulty from 25% to between 20% and 15% and this has been followed up with the target in the current NAPS Incl 2007-2016 to reduce the proportion to between 15% and 10%. These targets have never been monitored or measured.

In terms of the qualifications and the workplace, the National Skills Strategy (*Tomorrows Skills*, Forfas, 2007) identifies that 539,500 people, some 30% of the workforce, have Level 3 (Junior Certificate) qualifications or less (with an estimated 10% having no qualifications). The strategy identifies the need to reduce this figure to 7% (180,000) workers by 2020 to maintain Ireland's competitiveness and progress towards a knowledge economy.

Financing literacy in Ireland

National Development Plans

The National Development Plan (NDP) 2000-2006, provided €93.7 million to the National Adult Literacy Programme in line with its commitment to provide full and diverse education and training opportunities, particularly for those who are socially disadvantaged.

The National Development Plan (NDP) 2007-2016 has committed €2.2 billion for the further education sub-programme with priorities on addressing low literacy levels in the adult population and the large number who have not completed upper secondary.

It also made a commitment to reduce the numbers of children with serious literacy difficulties in primary schools in disadvantaged areas by half, from 30% to 15%.

The Department of Education and Science

The Department of Education and Science funds the bulk of the further education sector through the 33 Vocational Education Committees throughout the country.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment funds workplace basic education programmes.

Information Documents available in this series

General

- ▶ What is NALA?
- ▶ History of NALA
- ▶ Strategic Plan overview
- ▶ Our corporate sponsors
- ▶ Frequently asked questions
- ▶ Current facts on literacy in Ireland

Promotional activity

- ▶ Our TV programmes
- ▶ Our campaign work
- ▶ Our websites

Areas of work

Information sheets are available on each of NALA's areas of work, explaining our policy position, what we are doing, the context and background of the area and detailing any relevant research

Join us . . .

- ▶ Membership benefits (includes membership form)
- ▶ Importance of students to our work
- ▶ How to become a tutor

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