**NALA
Research
Briefing
Paper**

Identifying and reducing barriers to participation in adult literacy and numeracy tuition.

NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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Introduction

Purpose of this paper

This briefing paper is designed to inform adult literacy practitioners, providers and policy makers about the barriers to participation in adult literacy tuition and how they might reduce them or their impact. It is the first of a series of briefing papers to summarise findings from recent NALA research.

Context

We have produced this paper under one of the objectives in our strategic plan: 'make it easier for more adults to develop their literacy and numeracy through education and training programmes. Under this objective, we commissioned three pieces of research[1] with 'hard-to-reach' groups – older learners, men and older people with literacy difficulties who do not use the adult literacy service – to identify and explore the barriers they experience to taking part in adult literacy tuition. This paper brings together the findings from these reports and combines them with other national and international research to put forward some guidelines for reducing barriers to participation.

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1. Each report is available on the NALA website www.nala.ie.

Background: literacy in Ireland

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) was the first systematic assessment of literacy in Ireland. When the results for Ireland were published in 1997, they showed that over a quarter of the Irish population had significant literacy difficulties. The IALS results led the Government to recognise the importance of improving literacy levels in Ireland and helped to create opportunities for a wider range of socio-economic groups to engage in lifelong learning.

More recently, figures from the Department of Education and Skills show that, in 2008, 49,962 learners used the adult literacy service. A profile of the learners shows that:

- 70% of all learners were under age 45,

- the overall learner population was 60% female and 40% male, and

- less than two-fifths (39%) of learners were in employment.[2]

Barriers identified by national and international research

Research suggests that appropriate lifelong learning, including literacy tuition, brings long-term benefits and has a positive impact on peoples' personal, family and social lives. It can increase a person's well-being and self-confidence and combat feelings of social isolation or exclusion. However, research also shows that older people, men and people from socio-economically disadvantaged areas are less likely to be involved in adult literacy and adult education as a whole (King, 2004; Mc Givney, 2004; Norman and Hyland, 2003; Bailey & Coleman, 1998).

These people face the following general types of barriers:

- contextual – for example a limited mix of programmes for certain groups (such as adult literacy learners) and inadequate government policies to tackle social exclusion, inequality and educational disadvantage;

- informational – including inadequate or poorly available information on education and training opportunities;

- institutional – covering accreditation processes, perceptions of classroom settings and limited range of literacy tuition options;

- situational – related to a person's circumstances, for example whether they have childcare, need to travel far to classes, face high transport costs or live in a small town or rural area (which may raise concerns about privacy and confidentiality); and

2. The figures show that learners are more likely to be unemployed than in recent years.

- dispositional – related to the person's outlook and attitude, for example the degree of their self-confidence, the value placed on learning, any negative attitudes towards education and any sense of embarrassment and stigma associated with literacy difficulties.

According to research, dispositional barriers are the most dominant obstacle to taking part in adult literacy tuition. This is borne out by the specific findings for older people and for men.

Particular barriers faced by older people and men

In national and international research, the specific barriers identified by older people as significant include their age, past experiences of school, lack of confidence, stigma and embarrassment (Whitnall & Thompson, 2007; Tuckett & McAuley, 2005; Katz, 2000). There is a good deal of overlap between these barriers and those most often faced by men including: past school experiences, embarrassment, fear of ridicule by peers, fear of failure and social stigma (De Brún & Du Vivier 2007; Bailey & Coleman, 1998; McGivney, 1990).

Findings from NALA research

Our research shows that, in line with the other research findings, dispositional barriers are the most commonly cited barriers to participation in adult literacy tuition. Our findings fall into two main categories:

- school experiences, and
- stigma.

School experiences

The participants in our research studies reported that their reluctance to take part in adult literacy programmes is largely based on their initial negative experiences of formal education. In general, the participants reported that school was difficult on a personal and academic level. The experience had instilled in them a sense of failure, disappointment and shame and had affected their attitude towards education throughout their lives to date.

"I'd say to myself: 'Sure look it, the age of ye now, you couldn't get it to sink in when you were a youngster'. Like children are for learning, if I couldn't get it into my head when I was a child, I said how in the name of God will it go into it now."
Female, age 64

The participants told us that they were 'delighted' when they were able to leave school. They were relieved that they could put the negative feelings that they associated with school behind them. They described themselves as happier that they no longer had to go to school.

> *"As soon as I was 14 I left ... there was no chance I was staying, no way, not with all the stuff I had to put up with, so I said 'I'm going' and I left."*
> Male, age 53

Stigma

Reluctance to return to education is based on more than experiences of formal schooling. Our research identified that the stigma attached to literacy difficulties is the single most important barrier to participation in literacy services. It can be compounded by a person's low self-esteem and lack of confidence when it comes to learning.

Our research participants were reluctant to take part in adult literacy tuition because of the fear of having to fill in forms or being asked to read aloud. They were also anxious about meeting work colleagues or neighbours in literacy tuition settings.

> *"Some people are very embarrassed, you know, to go into a class and say I have a problem. They're afraid of what people might say, they might say, 'Look at that stupid aul fella coming in here to us."*
> Male, 62 years

> *"It makes you feel sick ... because you get all tensed up in case you have to fill in forms ... You know you've got to get out without giving things away. You get embarrassed, it's an awful feeling."*
> Male, age 64

Most of the participants reported that they kept their literacy difficulties secret from family and friends. They felt that they had missed out on many aspects of family and social life because of this. However, any restrictions were secondary to their fear of 'being discovered'.

> *"I used to hate when someone would say, 'Will we go for something to eat?' I was afraid of the menu, you see, so when I had to go I would just order the same thing.."*
> Female, aged 74 years

"I used to dread when me nieces and nephews had birthdays because I never got them a card. I used to drop down to them and give them money cause I wouldn't be able to sign it. I used to drop down and give them money. The worst time was me ma and da's silver anniversary, I really wanted to get them a card, but I couldn't."
Male, aged 65 years

The findings from the NALA research suggest that adults with literacy difficulties can face many barriers to returning to education. In carrying out this research NALA has made a concerted effort to identify barriers to participating in adult literacy and numeracy so that adults wishing to develop their literacy and numeracy skills have the right to do so.

Reducing barriers nationally and locally

As educational, economic and social problems tend to be closely related, it is important that tackling literacy difficulties among adults remains high on the policy agenda. To contribute to this, NALA already works to raise awareness among the general public, employers and policy makers of the benefits of improving literacy skills to the individual, society and the economy.

There are still many challenges ahead, but, NALA has started by identifying a number of ways for providers to help reduce barriers locally. These guidelines are informed by our research with those experiencing barriers and by additional consultation with adult literacy providers.

Guidelines
for reducing barriers

1. **Work with current learners to spread the word and recruit others**
Work with learners and use their stories to promote the benefits of literacy. Ask if your local newspaper or radio station can interview them. Encourage them to recruit others by speaking at open days and sharing their stories with their family, friends and community.

2. **Be open to the local community**
Use the local media and have regular coffee mornings and information days for the community. Encourage learners to invite their family and friends. Link any open days to larger events such as National Adult Literacy Awareness Week and International Literacy Day.

3. **Train your staff in literacy awareness**
Arrange induction or refresher training for all staff. This will make them more aware of literacy issues in their day-to-day work and help them respond in the right ways.

4. **Use plain English**
Use plain English in course materials and any leaflets, letters, presentations, posters or forms. Keep your messages to the point in everyday language, especially for learners, and include plenty of images, headings and bullet points. Identify your service using images and symbols instead of just words.

5. **Use the word literacy carefully**
Be sensitive when using 'literacy' to promote and advertise your service. This will do a lot to reduce the stigma linked to literacy difficulties.

6. **Make your tuition flexible**
Literacy tuition needs to be flexible to meet the needs of potential learners. If they face barriers in using your service, reach out to them by offering literacy support through sheltered housing organisations, men's groups and groups working with older people and early school leavers.

7. **Use technology**
Consider introducing 'blended learning': a mix of face-to-face tuition and independent learning, usually online. By giving learners a chance to work on their own, you can reduce the stigma attached to attending a literacy service.

8. **Network!**
Link with local community, unemployment and health services and with local schools and staff, especially Home/School Liaison Teachers. Work with training organisations to integrate literacy tuition into their courses, for example on computers or horticulture.

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