It's never too late to learn:
A study of older literacy students in Dublin

NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) was established in 1980 and is an independent membership organisation, concerned with developing policy, advocacy, research and offering advisory services in adult literacy work in Ireland. NALA has campaigned for the recognition of, and response to, the adult literacy issue in Ireland.

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Foreword

By 2050, one in every five people worldwide will be over the age of 60. Older people constitute the largest group with literacy and numeracy difficulties in Ireland mainly because of the relatively late introduction of free second level education in 1967 and the predominance of large class sizes in the past. This is evidenced by the Irish results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (1997), despite the fact that it only tested people up to the age of 64. In addition, the amount of research information specifically about older people with literacy difficulties is very limited both here in Ireland and internationally. Many older people feel marginalised and discriminated in our society. From this position the importance of this small study can be seen, especially as it denotes the starting point for NALA to do further research in this area.

The cohort of older people in this study reminds us that older learners are neither a homogenous nor static group, but have specific needs and changing wants which should be taken into consideration when trying to recruit, design and deliver learning opportunities. From the information in this report there are many lessons for the work of NALA in terms of policy, lobbying and supports for older people with literacy difficulties as well as for the adult literacy service and other education and training providers.

In a society often dominated by the values of the economy, this report highlights the wider and significant benefits of literacy learning to older people. This includes personal development and confidence building that enables greater involvement in family and social contexts. These gains are amply illustrated in the various poignant accounts of learners in the report and should not be undervalued for their important contribution to people's quality of life and general health and well-being. They also echo the findings from the OECD report *Education at a Glance* (2008) which highlights the social rate of return in investment in learning by people over 40 in the areas of better health, increased social cohesion and more effective citizens.

From reading this report, organisations and Government departments working with older people will gain an insight into the coping mechanisms employed by older people with literacy difficulties as they have conducted their lives and dealt with the challenges they encountered when those coping mechanisms broke down. It is important that in working with older people with literacy difficulties every effort is made to support them fully to access services as well as take up opportunities to develop their literacy and numeracy skills should they so wish. As many older people in Ireland did not fully benefit from the limited state education system of the past, it is only fitting that every effort is made to ensure that those wishing to develop their literacy and numeracy can have their needs met and that organisations working with them strive to ensure their services are fully accessible to them. We all must learn from their experiences in order to achieve such goals.

I look forward in NALA to developing responses to the conclusions and recommendations contained in the report as well as discussing with members and wider stakeholders how best we can all improve delivery of learning and other services to older people with literacy difficulties. It is vital that the potential these older people have to offer is not lost to our society as it was in the past.

Inez Bailey,
Director, NALA.

Acknowledgements

We wish to express our sincere thanks to all of the older learners who gave so willingly of their time to participate in this study. We are aware that the effort required to discuss many of the issues raised during the group discussions was considerable. We greatly appreciate the time and energy that all of our participants invested in the research process.

This study would not have been possible without the co-operation of professionals working with older learners within a range of settings. We would like to thank all of the adult literacy service providers who facilitated our presence and assisted us in the recruitment process.

Thanks also to Age & Opportunity for supporting this research project. In particular we would like to thank Sue Russell and Kate Carbery who assisted and advised us at various stages throughout the study.

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Executive summary

Appropriate lifelong learning can play a positive role in promoting active citizenship among older learners. It can maintain mental and physical health, increase general well-being and self confidence, and help combat feelings of social isolation or exclusion (Withnall, 2007; Tucket & McAuley, 2005; Katz, 2000). However, a significant number of adults with low literacy and numeracy skills don't always see themselves as having a problem with reading, writing, numbers or all three. Indeed many older people have developed successful workarounds or strategies to disguise their difficulties with literacy or numeracy or both. These can include: a spouse who reads and writes on their behalf; honing memory skills; and avoiding situations where literacy or numeracy is required. These strategies can be extremely fragile and when they collapse or breakdown it can become an emotional crisis or challenge for the person involved.

The primary objective of this research was the systematic investigation of the coping strategies that older learners identify as most effective in disguising problems with literacy or numeracy or both. The research aimed to:

1. describe past experiences of education and educational attainment of the study's participants;

2. investigate the coping strategies that have been most successful in disguising problems with literacy, numeracy or both; and

3. examine what happens when these strategies collapse or breakdown.

Research methods

The research methodology adopted a qualitative approach. We used focus group discussions to help us elicit detailed information on the various coping strategies, behaviours, activities and learning choices of the participants. Quantitative baseline data were also gathered for each participant using a pre-coded questionnaire that was administered subsequent to the focus group discussions. Verbal and written consent was sought from the older learners who participated in this study. We used four adult literacy centres in Dublin as recruitment sites. The data were analysed qualitatively to seek in-depth answers to the three research aims outlined above. In addition, quantitative baseline data were stored and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) computer software programme.

Sample profile

A total of 24 older learners were recruited (16 women and eight men) between the ages of 51 and 80 years. All of the older learners completed formal education to primary level and two of them went on to enrol in secondary school, but left within a year. The average school-leaving age of the respondents was 14 years of age. The vast majority of the participants were retired from paid employment and were enrolled in adult literacy classes.

Summary of study findings

Data was analysed qualitatively and quantitatively to seek answers to the three research aims outlined above. A summary of the main findings and recommendations from the study are presented below.

Experience of formal education

Schooling: The respondents described strong negative views about their formal schooling experiences. The general consensus among the older learners was that school was difficult on both an academic and personal level.

Older learners: Our findings show how the experience had instilled in the older learners a sense of failure, disappointment and shame.

Attitude to education: Our data suggests that this negative experience of formal schooling has had an impact on their attitude towards formal learning throughout their lives to date.

School detrimental: Overall the participants felt that attending school had been a detrimental rather than beneficial experience for them.

Employment history

Influence of education: The respondents reported that their employment histories had consisted of engaging in what they described as manual, menial labour that involved working unsocial hours. They gave accounts of how they had gravitated towards this type of employment because of their lack of educational attainment and literacy difficulties.

Older learners missed out: Our findings suggest that due to literacy difficulties the older learners felt that they had missed out on opportunities for promotion, training and development in the workplace.

Relatively successful: Most of the respondents described their past employment as primarily a way of supporting their family, and as a "means to an end". However, our findings show that the general consensus among the participants was that they had led relatively successful working lives.

Engagement with adult literacy services

Positive experience: Our data revealed that the older learners' journeys back into education had been a positive one.

New opportunities: Our findings suggest that engagement with adult literacy services had provided the older learners with an opportunity to develop reading and writing skills to complete their education.

Socialising with peers: Our findings show that for a significant number of older learners, engagement with adult literacy services provided a much-valued opportunity to socialise in the company of their peers. The respondents also described an increase in confidence levels particularly in social situations, for example, ordering from a food menu.

Coping strategies

The data confirms that the older learners had developed a number of successful coping strategies that were adaptable to a number of settings.

Home environment

Within the home, the participants developed avoidance or referral strategies to avoid helping their children with homework.

Workplace

Our data suggests that within the workplace the participants showed innovation by honing their memory skills, i.e. memorising words and dates. In most cases this workaround was extremely effective and the participants had led relatively successful working lives.

Social situations

The findings suggest that for a significant number of the older learners some family occasions, for example, birthdays and anniversaries could be stressful events. Because of literacy difficulties some of the older learners had never bought a birthday card for family members, instead they gave gifts that did not require them to read or write, for example, gifts of money.

Breakdown of coping strategies

Loss of main support: The third aim of the research was to examine with the participants what happened when their coping strategies broke down or collapsed. In most cases the collapse or breakdown was precipitated by the death of a loved one, usually a husband. However, bereavement, and the loss of their main strategic support, was often the impetus behind their decisions to address their literacy difficulties.

Following retirement: The respondents gave accounts of how following retirement from paid employment, and after successfully raising a family, the older learners had more "me time" and decided to address their literacy issues.

Positive adjustment: Our findings show that engagement with adult literacy services was a positive adjustment in the lives of the older learners. In most cases it resulted in improved reading and writing skills, increased self-confidence and a welcome extension of often limited social networks.

Main recommendations

Arising from the findings of our study and based on the requirements of the participants, current policy provision, and our own observations we have identified the following broad recommendations in relation to older literacy learners.

Policy recommendations

Convene forum on literacy and older people: In the context of current Government policy, and its implementation in the area of adult literacy, we recommend that NALA convene a forum to examine its impact on older people. The forum will include older people, as well as representatives of statutory and non-statutory bodies concerned with older people. The forum will explore the extent to which their needs are being identified, addressed and catered for in the areas of adult education and training.

Expand age range: We recommend that in light of the forthcoming PIAAC[1] survey the Department of Education and Science include older people beyond retirement age. This expansion of the age range beyond the cut off age of 64 will be in line with best practice set out by the Canadian Government in their International Adult Literacy Survey.

Highlight benefits of literacy for older people: It is important that organisations working with and on behalf of older people are aware of, and highlight at policy level, the benefits of literacy learning for older people at the level of the individual, the family, the community and wider society.

Expand resources for older people: Our findings demonstrate the need for more intensive tuition across the adult literacy service. With this in mind we recommend that extra resources are made available to providers to enable them to expand the degree of services available to meet the needs of older learners. Based on the findings from this study we suggest that extended and enhanced provision would, to some degree: compensate for negative past educational experiences; facilitate literacy achievements in the present; and improve quality of life into the future.

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1 PIAAC is the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies. It will assess the level of distribution of adult skills across OECD countries, including Ireland. It will be administered for the first time in 2011.

Recommendations for providers

Targeted promotional drive: In light of the clear demonstration throughout this study of the positive impact that engagement with adult literacy services has had on the individuals involved, and based on data from the VEC returns to the Department of Education and Science, denoting participation rates in adult literacy services, we recommend a targeted promotional drive by agencies and literacy providers to recruit and encourage more older people to improve their literacy and numeracy.

Keep consulting older people: We recommend that providers continue to consult with older people in order to design programmes for them ensuring that the literacy needs of older people are understood in the context of their past educational experiences and employment histories.

Train the trainers: The training of people who work in the area of adult literacy and numeracy needs to be reviewed to ensure sufficient awareness regarding the needs of older literacy learners.

Strengthen links between groups: In line with international research this study has shown the positive role literacy learning has in promoting active citizenship, well-being and self-confidence and in maintaining mental and physical health. We therefore recommend that established links between literacy providers and organisations working with older people are strengthened in an effort to increase the number of older people availing of literacy and numeracy learning opportunities.

Recommendations for further research

This report attempted to provide a comprehensive overview of very complex issues surrounding older literacy learners including past educational experiences and attainment, work histories and coping strategies. In doing so, it raised a number of issues for further research consideration:

▶ firstly, we strongly advise that there is a lot to be gained from further in-depth studies with older literacy learners, not least of which is an understanding of the challenges they encounter in the immediacy of their everyday lives;

▶ secondly, we suggest that there is a need for further study of specific issues pertaining to the requirements of older learners including, among other things, gender and geographical locations; and

▶ thirdly, we recommend further research pertaining to older people who have not engaged with literacy services – a development that was beyond the scope of this research.

There is a great deal to be learnt from the accounts provided by the older literacy learners who participated in this study. It is our hope that this report contributes to a more holistic and grounded understanding of the needs of older learners in Ireland.

Chapter one

Setting the context

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Chapter one: **Setting the context**

This report presents the findings from a mixed-method research study of the coping strategies of older learners[2] with difficulties with literacy or numeracy or both, and the impact on their lives when these strategies breakdown. Research into the area of adult literacy in general and older learners in particular has been largely neglected in an Irish context. We currently know very little about the views older learners hold about returning to education, or about their educational needs and expectations. This research set out to explore with older learners a range of issues pertaining to their learning journeys. This included:

▶ their past and present educational experiences;

▶ the coping strategies they have used throughout their lives to disguise their difficulties with literacy or numeracy or both;

▶ the impact on their lives when these strategies breakdown;

▶ their pathways back into education; and

▶ the factors and mechanisms that facilitate or inhibit this process.

This introductory chapter sets out the social and policy contexts under which this study was undertaken.

Social context

This research was undertaken against a background of the emergence of 'ageing societies' across most countries worldwide. In nearly all parts of the Western world, the number of older people is growing rapidly while due to falling rates of birth the population of children and young adults is in decline. Like many other countries, Ireland has an ageing population. In 2006, the percentage of Irish people aged 65 years and over stood at 11.2% of the overall population. By 2050 this figure will have increased to 26.3% of the population (CSO, 2007a). The increases in Ireland's older population will, however, remain smaller and will occur less rapidly than the increases predicted for other OECD countries (OECD, 2007).

In monetary terms an ageing society means that there will be fewer adults in the workforce supporting a greater retired population. In societal terms, the increasing number and proportion of older people in Ireland can also have implications for the individual, their families and the wider community. Instead of being perceived as an invaluable resource that can contribute to all aspects of society in paid and voluntary capacities, often older people can be viewed by many as obsolete and an economic burden (Housden, 2007).

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2   There is no clear definition or understanding in an Irish context of what is meant by the term 'older learner'. It is therefore open to interpretation. For the purpose of this report we refer to all the study participants as 'older learners' they range in age from 51-80 years of age.

However, the World Health Organisation predicts that an 'ageing society' need not lead to problems as long as appropriate policies and programmes are enacted by governments, and other interested parties (WHO, 2001). Engagement in lifelong learning can be one way that older people can explore new directions for activities, employment opportunities or both, and can bring new challenges into the lives of older people. Lifelong learning has value for people of any age and every individual has their own reasons for taking part in further education after leaving the formal education system. Appropriate lifelong learning can play a positive role in promoting active citizenship among older people, it can maintain mental and physical health, increase general well-being and self-confidence and help combat feelings of social isolation and exclusion (Tuckett & McAuley, 2005).

Within this context it can be argued that lifelong learning has a role to play in assisting individuals and communities to cope with the different dimensions of the ageing society (Tuckett & McAuley, 2005). Research has suggested that improving and broadening the range of educational opportunities, including adult literacy services, available to older people can impact significantly towards a more active lifestyle and can encourage the promotion of health in later life (Whitnall, 2007; Katz, 2000). To date Ireland has shown how investment in education can play a strategic role in the country's development, producing positive outcomes for the individual learner, their families and communities as well as society as a whole (OECD, 2007). However, there is little systematic Irish-based research into the multiple contexts in which learners, including adult learners, acquire knowledge and skills.

In 2006 The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) was launched and will be the most ambitious study of its kind ever undertaken in Ireland. A cross-institutional, multidisciplinary team of experts from the Dundalk Institute of Technology, the ERSI (Economic and Social Research Institute), NUI Galway, the Royal College of Surgeons, Trinity College Dublin, University College Cork and University College Dublin is undertaking the study. Funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies and Irish Life plc the study will provide comprehensive information on the health, social and economic circumstances of up to 100,000 Irish adults aged 50 years and over and how these circumstances change over a 10-year period. The Irish situation is particularly challenging as Ireland has the lowest life expectancy in Europe. According to the Life Expectancy Survey 2001, Ireland was ranked 22nd out of a total of 23 countries surveyed (WHO, 2001).

It is expected that TILDA will help address the acute shortage of data we have in Ireland of the economic, social health and educational needs of older people and will provide policy makers with an informed knowledge base going forward. Although the elderly population in Ireland is small relative to other Western countries (Leahy and Wiley, 1998) there are aspects of elderly demography which pose challenges to educational policies that need to be addressed in a more sustained way than have been found to date. This is essential to enable forward planning and to ensure a 'quality' life span for older people in Ireland.

Policy context

In Ireland, and indeed internationally it is recognised that we must aim to understand adult learners' perspectives on their social positioning if we want to bring their views into public policy debates and their experiences of living with literacy difficulties and its impact on their lives. It is widely acknowledged that without an informed awareness of the economic and social pressures that adult learners experience in the immediacy of their everyday lives, policies directed towards the alleviation of adult literacy problems run the risk of failing to respond adequately to those needs (Maunsell et al, 2008; Lynch, 2007; Bailey 2006).

The past two decades in Ireland have seen a growing political awareness of the need to develop adult literacy policies and initiatives. Within this context there has been official recognition of the impact of adult literacy on the individual and their families and children. This led to a number of critical policy developments, for instance the White Paper on Adult Education *Learning for Life 2000* and successive National Development Plans and Towards 2016 (Government Publications, 2006).

In this section, within the context of older learners, we provide a brief summary of the Irish education system, policy developments in the area of adult literacy, a brief overview of International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) 1997 and an examination of current policy developments.

Summary of Irish education system

In order to understand the educational experiences of older adults, we need to also consider the past policy context of the Irish education system. In the 1960s a series of changes in the Irish education system were initiated by the Government of the day. The most notable change during that period was the introduction of free post-primary education in 1967. The impetus for this change came from the publication in 1965 of the report funded by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and Irish Government, *Investment in Education.* Two issues raised by the report were particularly important in accounting for subsequent policy developments. Firstly, the finding that large social and regional disparities existed in educational participation rates; and secondly, there were concerns that the level of trained manpower, given the rate of Irish economic growth, would be insufficient to meet the needs in the 1970s without reform of the education system (Breen et al, 1990).

By the 1980s and 1990s state policy began to focus more on tackling educational disadvantage and the main beneficiaries of Government investment were initiatives such as the Early Start Programme[3] and Breaking the Cycle[4]. These initiatives were introduced to reduce the scale of educational underachievement among pupils in disadvantaged areas. The Government policy initiative in 1995 to abolish third-level fees was also introduced and has seen a substantial increase in the number of adult students in higher education in recent years. However, the primary target population for this initiative – socially and economically disadvantaged students – have not gained significantly from this educational expansion initiative (Lynch, 2007).

With the introduction of policy developments in the educational system at primary secondary and third level, it was inevitable that some attention would be focused on adult education, and more specifically, those who had terminated their formal education at an early age (Curry, 1998). The Adult Education in Ireland Report (1973) estimated that 10% of the adult population participated in adult education annually. The report also stated that the existing expenditure on adult education was inadequate to meet existing need and recommended that separate budgetary provision be made in the Department of Education for adult education.

In 1981, the Commission on Adult Education was established. The commission had wide terms of reference to prepare a national development plan for adult and continuing education. The commission defined adult education as:

> …all systematic learning by adults which contribute to their development as individuals and as members of the community and of society…it may be formal education, which takes places in institutions, e.g. training centres, schools, colleges, institutes and universities; or non-formal education, which is any other systematic form of learning, including self-directed learning.
> (*Lifelong Learning: Report of the Commission on Adult Education*; p:9).

The commission carried out a survey of attitudes towards, and participation in, adult education as part of its work. The survey data indicated that the group least likely to participate in any form of further education included disproportionately high numbers of older, working-class people and rural dwellers (Curry, 1998).

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3   The Early Start Programme was introduced in 1994 and is a one-year preventative intervention scheme offered in selected schools in designated disadvantaged areas in Ireland. It currently caters for approximately 1,700 pupils in 40 schools throughout the country.
4   Breaking the Cycle was introduced in 1996 and was the first scheme within the Department of Education and Science that focused on positive discrimination in favour of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Adult literacy in Ireland

Inequalities in the education system as highlighted in the Report of the Commission on Adult Education were not a revelation to many social commentators. Indeed, many have argued that before the 1970s there was no commitment to equality of opportunity, no critical evaluation of the effectiveness of the Irish educational system, and most significantly, no official recognition that Ireland had an adult literacy problem (Lynch, 2007; Bailey, 2006; Drudy & Lynch, 1993).

Subsequently, by the mid-1970s AONTAS[5] set up a subcommittee on adult literacy that recommended the establishment of a body to focus solely on the area of adult literacy. The National Adult Literacy Agency, NALA, was formed in 1980 and was set up as a membership-based organisation for all those involved in the area of adult literacy. NALA acted as a co-ordinating body, harnessing all those involved in adult literacy, raising awareness, and lobbying the Government for funding and recognition of the issue of adult literacy. In 1985, NALA published the policy document *Guidelines for Good Literacy Work.* The document sought to raise awareness, understanding and appropriate responses to the adult literacy problem in Ireland, and to develop good quality teaching and organisation. The guidelines established key principles and good practice for the development of adult literacy work in Ireland. These guidelines were revised in 1991 and more recently in 2005.

From the 1980s through to the 1990s provision of adult literacy services in Ireland grew incrementally. By the late 1990s there were approximately 5,000 adults participating in the adult literacy service (Bailey & Coleman, 1998). However, it was not until the publication of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) 1997 that Ireland was provided with its first profile of literacy skills of Irish adults aged 16-64 years. The IALS was a large-scale co-operative effort by governments, national statistics agencies, research institutions and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Nine countries including Ireland fielded the world's first large-scale, comparative assessment of adult literacy.

The IALS findings showed that more than 55% of those aged 16-64 years performed at the lowest end of literacy and numeracy knowledge and skills. Of that population only 25% had scored at level 1[6] and 30% at level 2[7]. The IALS authors concluded that one reason for this discrepancy was the late introduction of free second-level education in Ireland.

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5   AONTAS, established in 1969 is the National Adult Learning Organisation. It exists to promote the development of a learning society by providing a system of adult learning and education.

6   Being at or below the IALS level 1 indicates that a person has profound literacy difficulties. At this level a person may, for example, have difficulty identifying the correct amount of medicine to take from the information found on the package.

7   Being at IALS level 2 indicates the person can deal with material that is simple, clearly laid out and in which the tasks involved are not too complex.

However, while the IALS survey data suggested a direct correlation between age and literacy skills at level 1, other results showed that literacy difficulties were widespread among all the age groups surveyed. For example, in prose literacy[8], approximately 30% of adults of working age were found to perform at level 2. While the tasks at level 2 are more complex than at level 1 this finding still identifies significant literacy difficulties experienced by the 30% of the adult population that are below the minimum expected for everyday life and work in a modern society.

The IALS data showed that those people with the most profound literacy difficulties were the least likely to be involved in any education or training. This finding echoed those of the 1981 Commission on Adult Education, which also suggested that older people were among those least likely to participate in any form of further education.

It is interesting to note that the Irish IALS participants ranged in age from 16-64 and excluded those beyond working age. While in Canada, for example, a decision was taken by the Government to include people aged 65+ years in the study. Consequently, an interesting finding from the Canadian IALS is that 80% of all seniors (over 65 years) were working with the lowest levels of literacy. Based on the data from the Canadian IALS, 60% of seniors never completed second-level education and only 8% had a university degree. Overall, the data from the Canadian IALS suggested that older people with literacy difficulties were a particularly vulnerable group in society. Unfortunately, we do not have comparable data from the Irish IALS study to inform any current or future interventions or strategies regarding older literacy learners.

Adult literacy returns 2002-2007

In Ireland, the annual Department of Education and Science adult literacy returns are the chief mechanism through which the Vocational Education Committees, the providers of the Adult Literacy Service, report on activities and provide statistics on such issues as participation, services and accreditation, as well as assessments of level. The Adult Literacy Returns (2008) from the Department of Education and Science showed that from 2002–2007 there was a significant increase in the numbers of adult learners entering the adult literacy service. Over the past five years the number rose from 28,363 to 45,813, an increase of almost 80%.

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8   Prose literacy is the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts such as reports, brochures and instructions.

Chart 1: Age of participants in adult literacy services 2002-2007 (%).
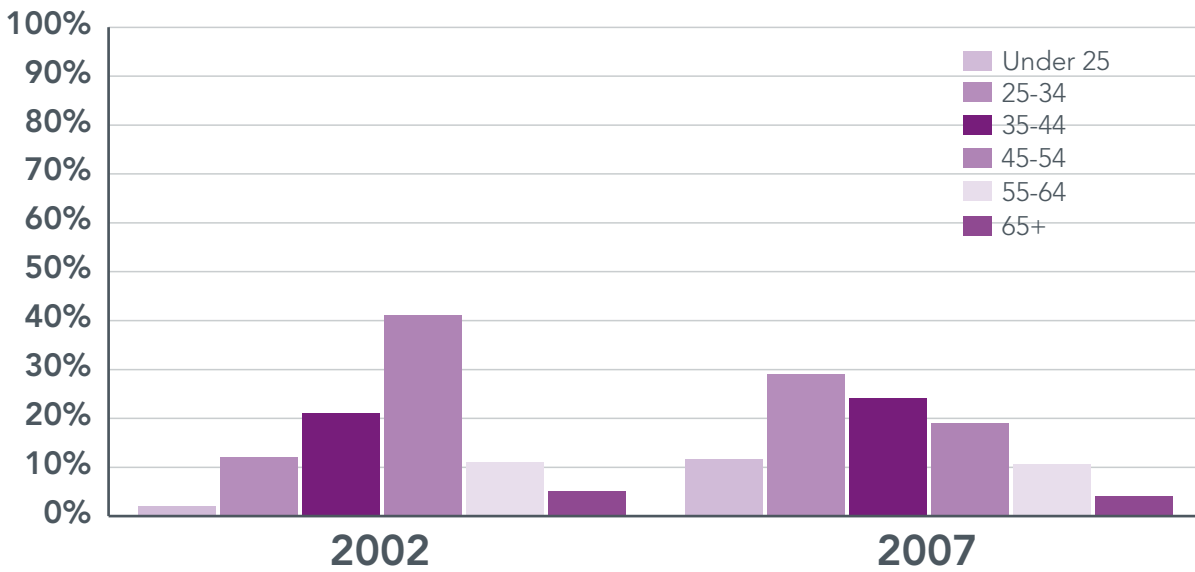
Chart 1 above shows that in 2002 most adult learners in the services were aged 45-54 years and that they made up 42% of the overall adult literacy learner population. Over the five-years to 2007 this number fell to 19%, a significant decline of 23 percentage points for this age cohort. However, Chart 1 also demonstrates how participation rates in other age categories have increased. The main cluster of the increase can be found around participants aged 25-54 with a relatively even distribution across the three different age categories. These three categories now account for 72% of the adult literacy population. The effect of these changes is that overall, during this five-year period the average age of participants in VEC adult literacy services fell from 46.6 years in 2002 to 39.9 years in 2007.

Chart 2: Percentage of older literacy learners 55-65+ years 2002-2007

Chart 2 above highlights that the number of older learners aged 65+ years remains relatively small compared to increases in other age categories as outlined in Chart 1. This is despite an increase in the number of older people aged 65+ from 865 in 2002 to 1,197 in 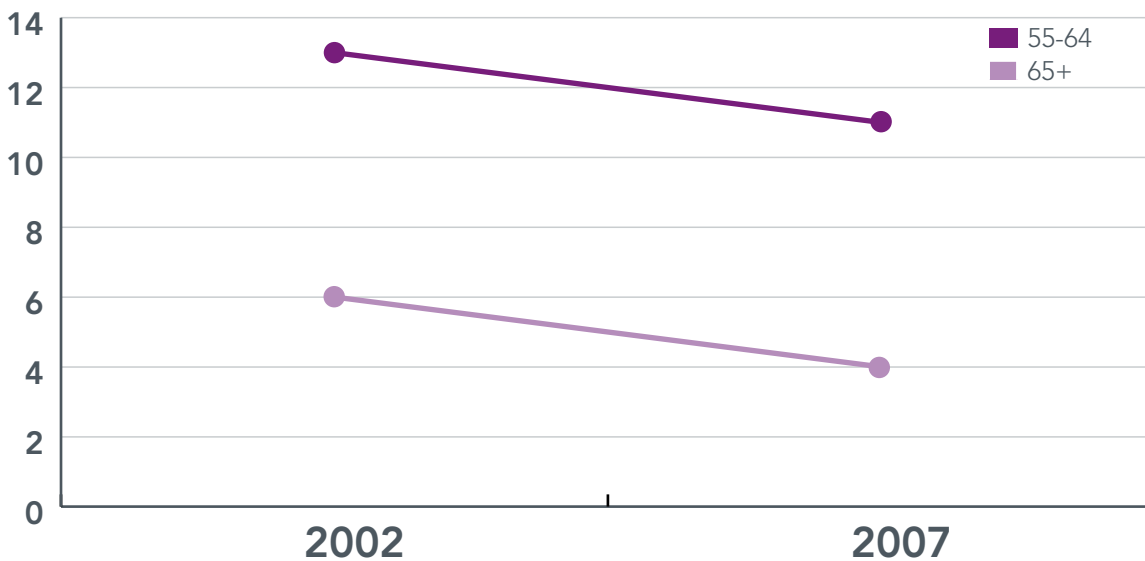2007 using the adult literacy service. However, due to the significant increase in the other age categories this increase in older people is not reflected in the percentage of older learners 65+ years, which fell from 6% in 2002 to 4% in 2007. Likewise, over the same period the percentage of 55-64-year-old learners has also fallen by 2% from 13% in 2002 to 11% in 2007. Consequently, two thirds of all adult literacy students in the 2007 VEC returns are under 45 years of age (DES, 2008).

These figures are of particular significance in light of the IALS (1997) data that showed that there were higher levels of literacy difficulties among the older population than those of a younger age. Yet more than 10 years on from the IALS (1997), older learners are still significantly under-represented in the adult literacy service. To date, we do not have sufficient data to determine the factors behind this under-representation. However, it can be argued that these figures have implications for policy and provision with regard to targeting and recruiting older people for inclusion in adult literacy services.

Tomorrow's skills: towards a National Skills Strategy 2007

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs set out a vision of Ireland in 2020 in which a well-educated and highly skilled population contributed to a knowledge-based, innovative-driven, competitive, inclusive and participative economy. In order to achieve this aim, the expert group has identified a set of objectives that will assist Government to develop a National Skills Strategy. These objectives include achieving a significantly improved educational profile for the labour market. According to the expert group there are proven positive returns to the State, to enterprise and individuals from investment in education and training. However, the reluctance of many individuals to take part in education and training may be due to their lack of awareness of the benefits, or to financial constraints. The barriers are even more pronounced for those with lower level skills. The expert group proposed that by 2020:

- 48% of the labour force[9] should have qualifications at NFQ levels 6-10;

- 45% should have qualifications at NFQ levels 4 and 5; and

- 7% will have qualifications at NFQ levels 1-3, but should aspire to achieve skills at higher levels.

Among the existing labour force, particularly in the older age cohorts, a significant proportion is educated only to lower secondary level or below. It is argued that without intervention, this is self-perpetuating: low educational attainment levels are linked to low literacy levels, and low literacy levels inhibit participation in education and training. The expert group suggests that in order to meet the needs of the Irish economy, as set out in the National Skills Strategy 2007, a coherent policy approach spanning several Government departments is required. In particular, an integrated policy approach between the Department of Education and Science (DES) and the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment (DETE). In addition to the DES and DETE efforts to tackle educational disadvantage, it will require policy responses from the Department of Finance and the Department of Social and Family Affairs

Policy changes 1997-2008

In recent years, efforts to address adult literacy have improved. In 1997 the Government appointed the first Minister for State at the Department of Education and Science, with responsibility for Adult Education. During this time, in-depth discussions with key stakeholders were held and the end result, a Green Paper on Adult Education (1998) was published. The Green Paper (1998) outlined the need for the development of the adult literacy service as a whole.

Following further consultation on the Green Paper (1998) the White Paper *Learning for Life* (2000) was published. *Learning for Life* (2000) set out a holistic approach to the development of a national programme of adult education. Three core principles underpinned this framework for adult education:

- lifelong learning as a systematic approach;

- equality; and

- inter-culturalism.

Learning for Life (2000) also established the National Adult Literacy Programme. This was the first strategy of its kind in Ireland and it was a blueprint for adult literacy development up to 2006. The overall aim of the plan was to increase the number of adult learners into the adult literacy service, prioritise those with the lowest literacy levels and implement a quality framework to monitor the effectiveness of the service.

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9   The labour force is defined as the total number of people who are in employment or seeking employment, and who are aged 15-64 years.

Over the years the need to address adult literacy in Ireland started to come to the fore and this was reflected by the inclusion of adult literacy issues in successive National Development Plans and Social Partnership Agreements. These plans and agreements have identified what is required to tackle the low levels of adult literacy in Ireland. The Social Partnership Agreement *Towards 2016* calls for the development of support structures for adult literacy and provides a strategic platform to provide an effective response under the National Development Plan (NDP) 2007-2013.

Towards 2016

Towards 2016 commits the Government and social partners to share a vision of Ireland which:

> Provides the supports, where necessary, to enable older people to maintain their health and well-being, as well as to live active and full lives, in an independent way in their own homes and communities for as long as possible.
> (*Towards 2016*, Section 32:60).

To achieve this vision the parties will work together for the duration of the national agreement towards following long-term goals and priority actions as outlined in *Towards 2016*. The priority actions contained in the agreement fall under a number of headings:

1. Pensions/income supports;

2. Long-term care services for older people;

3. Housing and accommodation;

4. Ensuring mobility for older people;

5. Ensuring quality health services for older people; and

6. Promoting education and employment opportunities for older people.

Under action 6 of *Toward 2016* the Government and social partners will, in the context of changing demographic patterns, maximise the opportunities for older people to participate in education, employment and other aspects of economic and social life. In terms of targeting, supporting and encouraging older people to participate in lifelong learning opportunities and continued participation in the labour market this key objective will include:

▶ targeting adult and community educational opportunities as set in the context of proposals of lifelong learning and access to further and higher education set out under Section 30 of *Towards 2016*;

- encouraging and supporting older people to involve themselves in areas such as family literacy;

- facilitating the continued participation of older people in the labour market to meet the challenge of an ageing society; and

- providing training and advisory services, including those provided by FÁS, to assist older people back into the workplace.

The National Development Plan 2007-2013

The National Development Plan 2007-2013 (NDP) sets out the Government's roadmap to Ireland's economic and social future for the next seven years. The NDP reiterates commitments set out in *Toward 2016* that one of the top priorities in Ireland's social and economic development will be to address the low literacy levels of the Irish adult population, and the large numbers of Irish adults who have not completed upper second-level education. In particular the NDP sets specific targets to ensure that over 90% of the population aged 20-24 years will complete upper second-level education or the equivalent by 2013.

The NDP sets out Government commitments to provide educational and training opportunities to those in low skilled jobs and those who are furthest from the labour market. It recognises the need for Government intervention in providing training in:

> … cases of market failure, such as for the low and unskilled and those working in the Small Medium Enterprise (SME) sector
> (NDP, 2007:192).

The NDP contains the Government policy to facilitate those who wish to extend their working lives. The NDP identifies the need to meet the challenge of an ageing society by encouraging older workers to remain in employment where appropriate. In the past 10 years the employment rate for those aged 55-64 years has increased by 10%.

The average exit age from the workplace has also been increasing, with Eurostat data for 2004 indicating that the exit age in Ireland is 62.8 years, somewhat higher than the EU average of 60.7 years. With regard to considering the needs of older workers, a range of issues may be considered including:

- providing for flexibility in retirement;

- creating incentives for workers who want to remain in or return to the labour market after the age of 65;

- facilitating a gradual move into retirement through changed working arrangements;

- tightening the conditions for early retirement; and

▶ increasing the contributions required for full pensions (NDP, 2007:195).

Achievement of NDP targets in relation to education and training will be heavily influenced by the development of a National Skills Strategy. A National Skills Strategy based on the findings of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs report (EGFSN) has articulated a vision where by 2020:

▶ 48% of the labour force would have qualifications at National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ) levels 6-10, post Leaving Certificate to PhD levels;

▶ 45% of the labour force would have qualifications at levels 4-5, Leaving Certificate level; and

▶ the remaining 7% would have qualifications at levels 1-3, Junior Certificate level.

The report also sets out a number of generic skills, with literacy as fundamental, for individuals to operate successfully within society and the economy.

Limitations of current policy

While the latest policy developments are to be welcomed it would seem that the current political focus sees employment as the main route out of poverty and focuses on education primarily as a means of entering and remaining in the labour market. This emphasis on training adults of working age effectively ignores the needs of those individuals who are retirement age and beyond. There are clear commitments to adult literacy with community, further and work-based education, however, the primary focus on training and education within the NDP is children, first- and second-level education, and on developing a greatly enhanced research and development capacity at fourth level (NALA, 2008). However, it can be argued that failure at policy level to address literacy difficulties among the adult population has the potential to damage the economy, increase unemployment and poverty rates and exclude many marginalised groups, including older people, from participating fully in society.

Increasingly, there is some recognition at policy level that not everyone has benefited from the significant economic growth of recent years. The high economic growth rates of the Irish economy in the last decade have been accompanied by growing relative poverty, inequality and occupational stratification and by a diminished welfare effort (Kirby, 2002). Because of the strong relationship between education and labour market outcomes, those who did not and do not achieve formal educational qualifications are disproportionately likely to experience labour market marginalisation in terms of unemployment, insecure jobs or low pay or both (Smyth & Hannan, 2000). For example, the latest *School Leavers' Survey Report* (2006) found that socio-economic differences in second-level completion and performance remained wide. The survey reported that second-level completion continued to stay at levels found in the early 1990s, despite

much policy focus and considerable resources allocated towards combating early school leaving and education underachievement. This is an issue that needs to be addressed in the context of lifelong learning, due to the high probability that today's early school leavers may become tomorrow's adult literacy learners.

This situation is not exclusive to Ireland; it has also been identified as an issue in OECD countries generally (Gallagher et al., 1993; OECD, 1987). However, numerous reports and studies have been published which highlight the "pervasive character of social class inequality in education in Ireland" (Lynch, pg 11, 2007). This finding has implications for the life chances of large groups in society, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, in terms of accessing adult literacy services, enrolling in further education and training opportunities and labour market and social outcomes (McCoy et al, 2007). This particular cohort of the population will in all likelihood be most in need of adult literacy services.

The results of the first ever national adult literacy survey, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) 1997, have arguably gone some way to opening up the opportunities to engage in lifelong learning to a wider range of socio-economic groups. Its publication led to Government recognition of the importance in improving adult literacy levels in Ireland. Subsequent changes in educational policy over the past two decades have seen a significant increase in Government funding into all areas of education including adult literacy. However, it is interesting to note that the IALS participants ranged in age from 16-64 and excluded those beyond working age.

The recognition of the need to address specific needs of older people in Ireland has been identified and included in a number of current policy documents including *Toward 2016* and *NDP 2007-2013*. This in all likelihood will go some way to informing current practices among organisations and services who work with and advocate on behalf of older people, including adult literacy providers. Likewise, it is anticipated that the inclusion of the needs of older people in key policy documents will to some extent raise the profile and contribution of older workers among employers. These developments are to be welcomed.

However, Government policy still has some questions to answer about the place it accords our older citizens and how that place is determined. Although the Irish Government is investing more in education than in previous decades, a lot more still needs to be done if the Government is to seriously tackle the ongoing implications and negative impact of low adult literacy levels for the older individual, society and the economy.

Chapter Two

Literature review

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Chapter Two: **Literature review**

Advocates of both critical and functional approaches to adult literacy view literacy education as a means of empowerment, however, they define this term in very different ways (Prins, 2008). The more dominant functionalist approach has argued that there is a linear causal relationship between literacy, and societal and economic indicators such as productivity, health and fertility rates (King & Hill, 1993). By contrast, in seeking to explore the ways in which education maintains inequalities in society, critical writers such as Freire (1973) and Marutona and Cervero (2004) suggest that education can help marginalised groups identify the causes of inequality and enable them to create more just and equal communities and societies.

Within this context it can be argued that the arena of lifelong learning and adult literacy has been most heavily influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (1973) who argues that institutionalised education was based on the idea of knowledge banking, of filling empty vessels with deposits of perceived wisdom. Freire's theory is based upon the assertion that people produce history and culture rather than being its mere reflex. His pedagogy was based on the idea that a practical grasp of history enabled people to first understand their situation and then to transform it through the development of a critical consciousness. This pedagogy rests on the premise that learning is lifelong and not confined to formal school settings. Therefore, learning takes place around everyday settings in the home, on the street and in the community (Hernandez, 1997).

New literacy studies authors (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, Gee, 1991; Street 1984) in a series of writings on practice and research, treat adult literacy as social practices rather than a set of technical skills to be learned in a formal school setting. This requires literacy to be studied as it occurs in social life taking account of the contexts and meanings for different groups in society (Crowther et al, 2006). New literacy studies literature views literacy as a social practice that is embedded in power relations and sustained by institutions and social structures. They emphasise that literacy does not have a uniform effect on individuals, communities or societies (Betts 2003; Robinson-Pant 2004; Street 2001). Instead, they argue for changing and adapting literacy programmes to the existing and required literacy needs of the participants (Rogers, 2001). This new literature argues that individuals can use literacy programmes to enhance their lives in tangible ways. However, whether or not literacy will empower the disadvantaged and marginalised in society will depend on two important factors firstly, on literacy content and pedagogy and secondly, on the social context in which literacy is learned and practised (Patel, 2005).

In this chapter we review Irish and selected international research on older literacy learners and their engagement with lifelong learning. We highlight gaps in the research on literacy and older people in an Irish context. We also draw attention to the value of adult literacy research by talking directly to adult literacy learners and taking their perspectives and experiences on board.

International studies on older learners

While there is a growing body of evidence that suggests that adults who participate in lifelong learning activities benefit both the individual and society in general, little is yet known about older learner's experiences of education and lifelong learning. In a mixed-method study with 100 people aged 79-80 years in England, Whitnall and Thompson (2007) discovered that a range of collective and individual influences interacted to impact on older people's propensity to learning at different times during their lives. Using a small number of older people as interviewers, the research was conducted with 'participants' and 'non-participants' in lifelong learning activities. According to the authors the findings from their data showed that older people understood learning in a variety of ways.

However, a self-chosen learning activity undertaken in later life is viewed as qualitatively different from compulsory education undertaken in various contexts in earlier life. The research participants identified that between three and 10 years after retirement appeared to be the optimum time for people to engage in lifelong learning activities. The study found that overall, older people were interested in a very wide variety of topics and subjects and that they continued to learn in a range of diverse ways. Interestingly, the data also revealed that for their participants, overall formal educational attainment was higher among participants in learning activities than in non-participants. The study concluded that although older people were now receiving more consideration in relation to the development of lifelong learning policies, there still needed to be more understanding of the historical and social contexts of learners' lives and how these impacted on later life-learning decisions.

In a study in England, *Learning in Later Life*, Dench and Regan (2000) found that 80% of learners reported a positive impact of learning on at least one of the following areas:

▶ their enjoyment of life;

▶ their self-confidence;

▶ how they felt about themselves;

▶ satisfaction with other area of their lives; and

▶ their ability to cope.

The qualitative study with 336 people aged 50-71 years was a follow-on study to the National Adult Learning Survey (1997). The data from the follow-on study illustrated how learning had an impact on an individual's well-being and to a lesser extent on their wider involvement in life. The study also identified that adult learners who were disabled or in poor health cited this as a barrier to participation in lifelong learning activities.

The most common reasons cited by the research participants for not engaging in lifelong learning were a lack of time and a lack of interest in learning. A quarter of those interviewed reported that they had done enough learning in their lives and were now "too old" to learn. Family responsibilities were also cited as a barrier to returning to education with 22% of those interviewed likely to be spending time with, or looking after grandchildren. The data from the study also revealed that compared to other groups, higher proportions of those who were retired or aged 60+ reported a positive impact of learning on their wider social and community involvement. The authors found that women were more likely to report positive benefits from learning. Female participants also reported having few opportunities to learn in their adult lives and that their partners or parents or both viewed learning for women as secondary to family and caring responsibilities. The authors concluded that lifelong learning was an important part of Government policy and that participation in lifelong learning had benefits for the individual and society as a whole.

Research commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council into Lifelong Learning, the *Arts and Older People* found that many arts projects in the United Kingdom attracted women, those already involved in the arts and those who had a good social network. The study was conducted to inform the Scottish Arts Council on current policy and practice in relation to arts and older people and to provide information as a basis of decision making on disbursement of the lifelong learning fund. The mixed-method approach research project involved distributing questionnaires to 52 arts organisations, mini focus groups and phone and face-to-face interviews. The older learners included in the research were more than 50 years of age. The research suggested that the positive benefits of engaging with the arts were a growth in self-confidence and health benefits for those who suffered with dementia or stroke. It also suggested that while many arts project were small in scale they appeared to work for the individuals who engaged with them.

Older learners and the labour market

Learning matters in later life. It enables older learners to sustain their productiveness in the workplace and adapt their experience and skills to changing contexts. In a study of older learners, Aldridge and Tuckett (2007) examined the subjects they studied, what motivated them to learn and the benefits they perceived from the ways they learnt. The data presented were taken from a NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) survey that showed that not quite one in five of the population over 65 years saw themselves as learners. The survey interviewed a weighted sample of 5,053 adults aged 17 years and over in the United Kingdom in 2005. The data showed that more people in the later stages of working life were actively pursuing studies related to their working lives than would have been true 10 years ago. According to the authors the workforce was expanding rapidly, and for some, at least, continuing to work stimulated learning.

While the study focused in particular on those adults aged 45–55 years and over, the research primarily sought to explore the changing patterns of learning in mid- and later life and their relationship to patterns of work and retirement. The findings showed that the most popular subject for all age cohorts was computer skills, with more than half the learners over the age of 65 years taking computer skills as their main subject of study. However, interest waned among the over 75 years, as for them the impact of the technological revolution had arrived already, or they felt it was not for them. Perhaps not surprisingly the importance of work as a motivator and focus for learning among younger adults aged 17-44 years and most of these learners are studying programmes of study leading to a qualification. The authors concluded that learning made a qualitative difference to the lives of older people. They further suggested that useful policy goals should include strengthening the range of opportunities for older people to enrich their lives through learning. They offered the research findings as a stimulus for further debate about where and how to encourage older people to keep learning.

International research suggests that adult learning has taken on a much higher profile in the last two decades as OECD economies and ageing societies are increasingly knowledge based. In an increasingly skills-driven international economy a key issue is the extent to which the growing numbers of older workers are able to refresh, expand and redeploy their job skills. Research indicates that educated workers are:

▶ more likely to participate in the labour market;

▶ less likely to be unemployed; and

▶ on average earn more. (Lynch, 2002)

As educational attainment is the demographic characteristic with the greatest correlation to literacy this has implications for the employment chances and choices of older people.

Research from the United States suggests that older workers who received between one and two years community college training showed an increase in earnings of 6-7%. The authors suggested that these results showed that simply writing off older workers as "too old to learn" may misjudge the potential benefits of substantial investment in "displaced" older workers (Leigh, 1995). This finding is very much in line with OECD research that suggests that an older workforce is not necessarily an obsolete workforce (OECD, 1999). This information may prove vital, as due to the slow down in economic growth older people may yet become a "target group" for employers as the reality of demographic trends begin to have a negative economic impact.

Irish studies

It is suggested that older people who are involved in lifelong learning benefit in terms of their health and well-being, that they lead a more active life and become more involved in community and social activities. However, to date in Ireland there is a dearth of empirical or statistical data to sufficiently substantiate these arguments. While a number of studies have been conducted with older Irish people they focused on older people and health issues. In Ireland, we rely on a relatively small number of studies for information and insight into the area of lifelong learning and adult literacy and any attempt to assess trends emerging from individual studies is hampered by the absence of routinely gathered statistics. Methodological differences in the sampling strategies and research instruments further hinders direct comparisons between the available studies.

Although a lack of data on access, participation and progression of adult learners engaged with adult literacy services at national level precludes a complete picture of Irish adult learners, available regional and area-specific studies do nonetheless help to provide some indication and insight into the experiences of adult learners in Ireland including learners who can be identified as 'older' learners.

Bailey and Coleman (1998) reported on a study of access and participation in adult literacy schemes in 16 adult literacy schemes in Ireland. In this causal and comparative research 159 students took part in a national survey and qualitative interviews were conducted with 146 students. In line with other research, the study found that young people were leaving school early due to a number of factors including poverty, inadequate support for specia-needs' students, alienation from the curriculum and ill-health.

Based on the findings from the study the authors categorised the main barriers to participation in adult education as being about:

▶ **dispositional** – negative attitude towards education, learning can be seen as irrelevant;

▶ **informational –** materials were too difficult to read or understand, lack of appropriate information;

▶ **institutional** – difficulties using appropriate forms, dislike or distrust of traditional classroom settings; and

▶ **situational** – not enough time, lack of childcare.

Findings from this research study suggest that participants who were in employment were frustrated with their current employment and that their education levels had severely limited their lifestyle options. In relation to adults not in literacy programmes, the study found certain groups were under represented including the unemployed, women over the age of 30, men over the age of 50, and older people in general. The report concluded that other barriers to participation were complex and varied.

According to the authors there was a general consensus among the participants that non-engagement with services lay with the service providers as well as those adults who were defined as non-participants. There was a general view among the study participants that people did not present for engagement with adult literacy services due to embarrassment and the fear of the unknown. Other barriers identified by the respondents were lack of finance, lack of time, lack of transport and lack of crèche facilities. Previous educational experiences had also left many of the participants with a sense of alienation towards education and they expected their experience of adult education to mirror their experiences of formal schooling. The report made a number of recommendations for national and European policy.

With regard to national policy the authors recommended that policies should be formulated which outlined clearly the:

▶ Government objectives;

▶ national quality service to be provided;

▶ resources necessary;

▶ strategy to be employed; and

▶ body responsible for the service.

With respect to European policy the authors recommended that European Union policy became more proactive in guiding national policy. The authors further suggested that there was a need for more research into literacy provision in different countries.

In 2006, the Dublin Adult Learning Centre undertook a piece of research with six adult literacy students to further the understanding of progression within the context of one-to-one tuition within the centre. A case study methodology was used which allowed the central themes to be investigated within a real life context. The research showed that significant non-accredited literacy progression took place for students through one-to-one tuition. The value attributed by the students to the learning experience was in their ability to apply their new literacy skills in everyday situations. The research highlighted the significant number of students coming to literacy services for whom one-to-one tuition was the only option. According to the author this may be for a number of reasons including negative school experience, poor literacy skills or specific needs that could not be addressed in group tuition. The report made a number of recommendations including the need to develop measures, supports and resources to support students and tutors in one-to-one tuition.

Summary

To summarise, international research suggests that older learners may experience health difficulties associated with the ageing process, visual impairment, hearing loss and social isolation. Research also indicates that older people have varied motivations for going back to education and these can vary from the acquisition of knowledge to up-skilling in an attempt to return to the labour market, and to socialise.

In Ireland to date there is a dearth of research into the area of adult literacy in general and older learners and their involvement in lifelong learning in particular. Indeed, Irish studies conducted with older people tend to focus on health matters rather than educational issues. The small number of studies available pertaining to adult literacy learners indicate that there are a number of barriers to participating in adult education. These include poverty, unemployment, bad housing conditions, financial circumstances, home and family circumstances, inaccessibility, unsuitable learning environment, narrow curriculum range, and too much emphasis on accredited or vocational learning.

This study, by providing up-to-date data on older learners, and by providing the views expressed by older learners themselves, has much to contribute to the small but significant body of research available in Ireland. The findings from this study can inform the planning of adult literacy interventions and policies by presenting the reality of older learners' experiences of adult literacy and engagement in lifelong learning. Arising from this we aim to make recommendations on these issues that centre on the realities of older learners and their needs as they express them.

Chapter Three

Methodology

NALA

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Chapter Three: **Methodology**

The core objective of this research was the systematic investigation of the coping strategies and mechanisms that older learners identify as most effective in disguising problems with literacy or numeracy or both. The research also sought to examine the impact on their lives when these strategies and mechanisms collapsed or broke down. The study specifically targeted older learners[10], that is, learners aged 60 years of age and over. However, adult learners who fall under this age range, but who expressed an interest in taking part in the study were also included. Specifically the research aimed to:

1. describe past experiences of education and the educational attainment of the study's participants;

2. investigate the coping strategies that have been most successful in disguising problems with literacy or numeracy or both; and

3. examine what happens when these strategies collapse or breakdown.

The study sought to explore these and other key issues by qualitative means in order to gain a greater understanding of the coping factors that underlie the coping strategies of older learners when disguising problems with literacy or numeracy or both. A key objective of this study was to enhance and deepen our knowledge and understanding of the specific needs of older learners. This in turn will inform the educational policies that underpin adult literacy work.

Research strategy

Our choice of data collection techniques was influenced directly by the core objective of this study, which was to access detailed information on the coping strategies and mechanisms that older learners identify as most effective in disguising literacy problems with literacy or numeracy or both. It is of course possible to ask older learners detailed questions about these issues using a questionnaire format. However, we wanted accounts in which older learners spoke about their experiences and we were also extremely mindful of the literacy levels of the older learners themselves. We therefore selected a qualitative methodology to allow older learners talk about their views and experiences regarding their literacy difficulties. To this end, we used focus-group discussions to help us elicit detailed information on the various coping strategies, behaviours, activities and learning choices of the study's participants.

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10 Although the initial target group for this study was adult literacy learners aged 60+ years, we also interviewed a number of learners outside of this age range. These learners expressed their wish to participate in the study and have their "stories" heard.

Sampling strategy and recruitment procedures

Our initial task in terms of establishing contact with older learners who might be willing to participate in the study was to establish links with four Dublin-based adult literacy centres that provided individual and group tuition in reading, writing and spelling for adults with literacy difficulties. The four centres we contacted received a detailed description of the study's aims, a written summary of the research strategy and a specially designed information leaflet to be distributed amongst their older learners. We received a very positive response from the adult literacy centres we contacted, which may be an indication of the importance attributed to literacy programmes and initiatives that target older learners.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit 24 older learners across the selected Dublin-based sites. When using a purposive sampling strategy respondents are chosen because they have particular features or characteristics which will enable the detailed exploration of the research objectives (Mason, 1996). Our sampling strategy aimed to ensure coverage and diversity across the key variables of age and gender. In relation to age, we targeted learners who were more than 60 years of age to try to capture a variety of views, experiences and needs that were specific to this age group. With regard to gender, where possible, we aimed to include female and male older learners in order to gain a thorough understanding and representation of the literacy difficulties and needs of older men and women. All of the adult learners were recruited with the help of an adult gatekeeper, usually an adult literacy organiser. In total we recruited 24 older learners from Dublin into the study.

Data collection methods

As discussed earlier, our research adopted a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate when the research is concerned with how the social world is interpreted and experienced (Bryman, 2004). Qualitative research is defined by inclusiveness and openness and aims to capture the lived experiences of the participants and the meaning they attach to those experiences, without the level of constraint that is often used in quantitative approaches (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Focus-group discussions were used to elicit the views and experiences of the participants and to assist the data management process. We also collected socio-demographic details for each participant using a brief pre-coded questionnaire.

From a methodological viewpoint, one of the advantages of focus groups is that they expose respondents to the views of other participants, thereby creating an environment that encourages group dialogue and interaction (Morgan, 1997). The focus groups we conducted were mini-group discussions – a maximum of six older learners participated in each of our group discussions. The focus group discussion guide was devised in accordance with the following broad areas:

- ▶ initial engagement with the adult literacy service;

- ▶ coping strategies;

- ▶ barriers to returning to education; and

- ▶ future plans.

The focus groups were scheduled for a time and day that best suited the participants and were conducted at the site where contact was made with the adult learners i.e. the Adult Learning Centre.

We also collected baseline data pertaining to age, gender, educational history, employment history and reasons for returning to education. This information was gathered using a brief pre-coded questionnaire that was administered subsequent to the focus group discussion.

Ethical considerations

Ethics in social research is concerned with an effort to form principles and codes of moral behaviour (May, 2001). Therefore, ethical guidelines should be a system of moral principles to prevent harm or wrongdoing to others and should emphasise the duties and responsibilities of the researcher. Confidentiality and anonymity of data are key issues in social research especially when dealing with sensitive issues (Renzetti & Lee, 1993) such as adult literacy and numeracy. The principle of informed consent was applied and no interview was conducted without the written consent of the adult learner. An information leaflet was given to each participant informing them of the purpose and rationale of the study and inviting them to contact the researcher about any concerns or questions they might have had about taking part. Time was spent at the beginning of each focus group ensuring that the older learners were fully aware of the nature of the research and the confidentiality of the focus group.

The respondents were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and therefore they could refuse to take part. They were also informed that if at any time during the focus group they wanted to withdraw or discontinue they were free to do so. We were acutely aware that some of the participants might have been struggling with difficult past or present educational or personal experiences. Consequently, we aimed to be sensitive and alert to any difficulties older learners might experience when discussing topics of a personal nature. If any upset occurred the discussions were stopped to allow the participants time to compose themselves. In general after a short period the participants involved were satisfied to keep taking part in the focus group. All information provided by the older learners was kept confidential and they received assurances that their names or any other identifiers would not be mentioned in any written distribution of the research findings.

Data analysis

Data analysis was guided by grounded theory methodology in which data collection and analysis occur close in time (Strauss & Corbin; 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Before commencement of the fieldwork, a consultative focus group was conducted with a group of older learners for the purpose of piloting the appropriateness and effectiveness of the research tools. In addition, the research team discussed each focus group discussion and where necessary modified interview questions or language. Most of the data were qualitative with some quantitative data collected through the use of a pre-coded questionnaire. Verbatim transcripts of all focus group discussions were prepared and the quantitative data were stored and analysed using SPSS. The initial stage of the analysis process involved a thorough reading and re-reading of the focus group data. Open coding was used in the case of all the transcripts to group concepts under category labels. In keeping with grounded theory methodology the participants' stories formed the core building blocks of the analyses. Representations of the older learners' views and experiences were supported by displays of focus group excerpts or individual quotes or both throughout the study's findings. At the end of each excerpt or quote we identify the speaker or speakers by:

Gender (Female/Male)

Age (Exact Age)

Focus Group (FG)

Site (Sites 1-4, where FG was conducted)

To ensure the anonymity of the participants all identifiers have been removed as a further measure to preserve confidentiality and anonymity.

Study limitations

This research does not make claims about the frequency or commonness of particular educational experiences among adult learners in general or older learners in particular. We sought to elicit the views and experiences relevant to this particular group of older learners. As with any qualitative study, care should be taken in generalising the results of this research to all Irish older learners. The study sample size is relatively small and there may be a systematic bias in the type of older learner who was willing to participate in the research. Other possible areas of bias include interviewer style, attributes and location (all sites were Dublin-based). However, designing an interview schedule that was relatively flexible to issues raised by older learners themselves was one attempt to reduce possible bias.

Finally, this study is a starting point. As documented in earlier chapters, there is a dearth of research into the area of adult literacy in an Irish context. As with most exploratory research, this study raised further research challenges and questions. We argue that there is clearly a need for further study in this area.

Chapter Four

The study's older learners

Chapter Four: **The study's older learners**

This chapter presents a brief profile of the older learners who participated in the study. We note their age, gender and living situations. In this chapter we also report on aspects of the older learners' formal educational attainment and work-related experiences and engagement with adult literacy services. These data are important since the area of adult education and lifelong learning is part of an extraordinarily complex larger picture within which educational disadvantage plays an influential role in determining the life chances and choices for sections of the Irish adult population in general and older learners in particular.

Sample profile

A total of 24 older learners were interviewed in focus groups for the purpose of the study. The sample included 16 women and 8 men. Table 1 provides the breakdown of the sample by criteria including age, gender and living situation.

Table 1: Breakdown of study participants by age, gender and living situation (N=24)

Age (years)	51-59 years N=5	60-80 years N=19
Gender	Female N=16	Male N=8
Living situation	With spouse N=13	With family member N=2
	Alone N=9	Other N=0

Study participants were aged between 51 and 80 years, with five of the participants aged between 51 and 59 years and 19 of the older learners aged between 60 and 80 years. Some 16 of our respondents were female with nine male participants. The age composition of the study's sample is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2:   Breakdown of study participants by age (N=24)

Years	No.	%
51	1	4.2
53	1	4.2
56	1	4.2
58	1	4.2
59	1	4.2
60	1	4.2
61	2	8.3
62	1	4.2
63	1	4.2
66	2	8.3
67	2	8.3
70	2	8.3
71	1	4.2
72	1	4.2
73	1	4.2
74	3	12.5
79	1	4.2
80	1	4.2
Total	24	100

Table 3:   Formal educational attainment of study participants (N=24)

	Yes	No
Enrolled in primary school	N=24	N=0
Completed primary school	N=17	N=7
Enrolled in secondary school	N=2	N=22
Completed secondary school	N=1	N=23

All 24 of the study participants enrolled in primary school with 17 completing primary school and a further seven participants leaving formal education without completing the Primary Certificate. Only two respondents went on to enrol in secondary school with one completing second-level schooling. The average school-leaving age for most of our respondents was 14 years (N=14) with smaller numbers of the older learners leaving primary education aged 12 years (N=2), aged 13 years (N=4) and aged 15 years (N=4).

School experiences

The role formal education plays in the reproduction of inequalities in society has been the subject of much research and debate in education since the 1960s. Research also suggests that educational failure is disproportionately concentrated among students from unemployed, unskilled and semi-skilled backgrounds (Lynch, 2007; Smyth & Hannan, 2000; Drudy & Lynch, 1993). As all of our participants were from what can be described as working-class backgrounds, during interview we discussed with them their school history and school experiences in some detail. We also asked them to express their feelings and attitudes towards school and to explain the circumstances surrounding their departure from formal schooling. Many recalled that attending school was something they "never liked" or "hated" having to do and they reported that their primary focus during that time was to complete formal education.

> As soon as I was 14 I left…there was no chance I was staying, no way, with all the stuff I had to put up with, so I says 'I'm going' and I left. Two weeks later they were knocking on me door [school principal] pleading with me mother to make me go back, but I said 'look' I said 'I'm 14, it's not up to me ma to make me go back,' so I didn't.
> **– Male, FG, site 1, age 53.**

Most of the study participants described their formal school experiences as difficult on both a personal and academic level. Keeping up with the pace of learning in the classroom posed difficulties for many of the respondents and several stated that they felt 'thick' or 'stupid' or both because they found it difficult to cope with the academic demands of school. This negative perception they had of themselves was in the main reinforced by the attitude of classroom teachers and many of the older learners described problematic relationships with school staff. The respondents also gave accounts of discriminatory practices by classroom teachers towards pupils from 'poor' backgrounds and reports of physical violence were widespread.

> [Can you tell me a little bit about school and what it was like for you?]

R1: Well I think school was very bad, the nuns, because you see it was very poor in them days and there were boarders in our school and the boarders were all solicitors' daughters…we were poor so we were put in the back seats and never got a chance to read, you were put at the back all the time, we got nowhere

R2: I found that they were very cruel, we didn't have nuns, we had teachers. They used to smash you across the hands with a ruler or they'd give you the cane across the legs. I'd be going into school and me stomach would be in knots I hated it that much. I hated it.

R3: I remember when I made my First Communion and we were to wear our dresses in to have photographs taken. I didn't have me dress it was in the pawn and when I told her [the nun] she actually beat me to a pulp and I ran out of the school…I remember me father went down to the school after that **Females and male, FG, site 4, age 60-74.**

These disturbing accounts of violent episodes in the classroom were a general trend among the vast majority of the study participants. A significant number reported that systematic physical abuse was routine rather than exceptional. A considerable number of the older learners were "delighted" when they reached school-leaving age; indeed, they expressed a profound sense of relief that they no longer had to endure the negative feelings that school evoked. Many described themselves as "happier" that they no longer "had to go to school" and looked forward to "getting out and getting a job".

Employment history

Success in school has profound implications for people's life opportunities and for their prospects in the labour market (Drudy & Lynch, 1993) and in this regard our participants were no exception. Most of the older learners had vague plans for the future once they completed formal education, for example, "getting a job", and immediately set about seeking employment. For a considerable number of participants the period after leaving school involved an immediate transition from the world of school into the workplace. Many gave accounts of how they were "expected" to get a job on leaving school and cited "helping out at home" as the primary reason for seeking immediate employment. The following excerpt is a good example of the immediacy of the change from pupil to employee.

> [Did you have any idea what you would do when you left school?]

R1: …when you were 14 you went out and earned your living and you gave your mother three quarters of what you earned and you kept the rest…that was life… that was just it.

R2: I left school when I was 12, I didn't like it at all. I went to work like I have to earn my living and I've had to earn my living all my life.

R3: I left school when I was 14 and I went to work in a sewing factory, because like everything else then you had to help your mother out with the few bob and everything else

Females, FG, site 2, age 67-74.

In line with national and international research our data show that the lack of success in school and a general lack of educational qualifications had a direct impact on the employment choices and opportunities of the participants. Many cited their "lack of education" as the main reason that they "did menial jobs" directly after leaving school. For some of the participants this was a source of frustration and dissatisfaction. They recalled that on some level they were aware of the limitations confronting them in the absence of formal educational qualifications, and this was a source of regret for many.

> I was always doing menial jobs, mediocre jobs, badly paid jobs or very unsociable jobs. It wasn't what I wanted to be doing, but I had a family to support and I had to earn a living."
> **– Male, FG, site 3, age 61.**

The account provided by this participant was not unique to him. Most of those taking part cited literacy difficulties as the main reason they did not seek promotion or advancement in their work environment. However, while recognising that their literacy difficulties limited their choice of occupation and progression and promotion in the workplace, the vast majority of the participants felt that they had forged effective working lives for themselves.

Engagement with adult literacy services

Adult learners are not a homogenous group as they vary by age, gender, educational attainment and family and social backgrounds. Likewise, their pathways back into education often take a different trajectory. During interview we explored with the older learners their decision to return to education. In general they gave accounts of how taking the decision to return to education was only the beginning of what they described as a long and often emotional and stressful process.

R1: I made the decision to go back to school you know and I knew this place was here … oh but it took me ages to summon up the courage to come here.

R2: I know how you feel; I used to walk by this place but I was to afraid to come in. I used to go up to the church and pray to Saint Anthony to help me.

R3: It took me two years, two years…I remember I stood outside of here for four hours one day and I just couldn't do it, you know. Then one day I was standing outside and I saw a woman going in and I said 'right I'm going to follow her' and I did, and here I am

Male and female, FG, site 1, age 51-73.

Once they had taken the first step and enrolled in an adult literacy class the older learners reported that they had "never looked back". Most of the participants attend services in their local area. They had heard about the service in a variety of ways such as word of mouth, flyers through the letterbox, or they had been referred to the service by a family member or friend.

In the following section we provide a detailed overview of the older learners' engagement with adult literacy services. We identify their reasons for returning to education and explore their experiences of participating in adult literacy courses.

Reasons for returning to adult education

Using a pre-coded questionnaire, our participants were asked to identify, from a list of 13 items their top three most important reasons for returning to education. The reasons they returned to education were:

▶ most said the primary reason for returning to education was to improve their skills in reading, writing and numbers (N=16);

▶ the second most important reason was to increase their self-confidence (N=8); and

▶ the third most important reason was split equally between to complete their education (N=5) and to learn new things in general (N=5).

During interview we discussed in greater detail with the participants the reasons behind their decision to return to education and their first steps along that particular pathway. As indicated above for most of our participants the primary reason for returning to education was to improve their reading and writing skills.

R1: It always held me back, not being able to read and write and I knew it, so for me now is the time to do something about it.

R2: I could always read better than I could write and me spellings well you can forget about it, but things like that hold you back an awful lot and it stops you doing other things as well.

R1: The way I look at it is, is that now it's my time, it's my time

Females, FG, site 4, age 60-74.

These accounts help to illustrate the differing levels of difficulty among the participants. For some, spelling was identified as their primary difficulty while for others it was reading or writing or both. Many of the older learners viewed their attendance as an opportunity to address their literacy difficulties and to complete their education. For most of the respondents attending adult literacy classes was a chance to acquire the literacy skills and knowledge that they hoped would enhance their quality of life going into the future.

For two of our participants Government schemes i.e. Community Employment and Jobs Initiative,[11] provided them with an opportunity to return to education that otherwise may not have presented itself.

> I heard about here before I came here and I was always thinking 'God I'd love to go in and join' but then I was thinking 'God what if they ask me to spell something, they'll think I'm thick…then I got the CE [Community Employment] and me supervisor said 'why don't you just give it a try' and I did, and I tell ya I've never looked back
> **– Female, site 3, age 61.**

> I started doing Jobs Initiative and I had to write down stock and stuff and I had to ask people 'how do you spell that?' so obviously they found out and a woman up

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11 Community Employment is an employment and training programme that helps long-term unemployed people re-enter the active workshop. The programme assists them to enhance their technical and personal skills. Job Initiative is a programme that provides full-time employment for people aged 35+ years who receive Social Welfare payments. The main purpose of the programme is to assist the long-term unemployed to prepare for work opportunities.

there gave me a leaflet and a bit of encouragement. So, I came down here [adult literacy service] and got an interview and I started that September

FG, site 1, male, age 58.

For many others the first step back into education meant acknowledging to themselves and others that they did in fact have a literacy difficulty. This was, for them, a daunting prospect as it involved shedding light on a "problem" that had been kept in the dark and "secret" for most of their adult lives.

… me and me friend, the two of us retired together, we were in the one job, and she got a flyer through her door and she showed it to me. Now I never knew she had a problem and she never knew I had a problem, but we came down here and I don't regret one minute of it.
– Female, FG, site 3, aged 70.

The sense of stigma and secrecy surrounding their literacy difficulties was an issue that was discussed by a significant number of older learners. They reported how they kept, and in the case of some of the participants still keep, the extent of their literacy difficulties secret from their immediate family members.

R1: My husband now, he didn't know, he never knew, you see cause I could read a bit and I'd pretend to read the paper.

R2: My children still don't know, they think I'm coming here to do a computer class. I never told them I was coming here and they were ringing the house looking for me and I was never there, so me son rang me daughter and he said to her 'me ma is never in, she's always out, do you think she has a fella [laughs]?
– Females, FG, site 2, age 74-80.

These accounts reveal to some extent the fear of being stigmatised among a significant proportion of our older learners and reveals to a large extent the level of cover-up they engage in to disguise their lack of literacy skills. Many of the participants talked about how they live "in fear" of being "found out" and the negative impact this had on their relationships with family members. Consequently, returning to education is a major turning point in their lives and the value and importance of participating in adult education was apparent throughout their narratives.

One of the other main themes to emerge from the older learners' narratives was in relation to their literacy experience, and centred on the contrast between their formal schooling and their experience of adult literacy education.

R1: I'm learning more than I did in school, life is education, you know what I mean…the difference here is that people don't make a distinction with you, they're here to help you.

R2: People are treating me lovely here, no one is saying 'ah she's a thick, she can't spell', we're all in the same boat and people are so nice, they're lovely.

R3: I'm improving in me spellings and reading and everything since I came in here and I'm mixing with people. I used to think I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, I'd no one to turn to.

R4: I only learned to email last week and it's terrific, like not bragging or boasting but it's a great boost for me, even my family are saying 'look what me ma done' and 'fair play to you ma' and it's great cause you're feeling like somebody, do you know what I mean?
– Females and males, FG, site 3, age 67-74.

Within this theme adult education was valued as an opportunity to learn reading, writing and numeracy skills and as an opportunity to socialise with other adult learners. It is widely acknowledged that as people grow older the dangers of social marginalisation and socialisation increase. For those of the participants who live alone taking adult literacy classes gave them the chance to socialise with their peers and others in similar situations.

I think it's great here, it's the interaction with everybody…it's lovely."

And to know that you're not isolated because you can think that it's just you.

I'm glad being here. It's nice to be able to come in and have a cup of tea and make friends, that does a lot for you when you're living on your own
– Females, FG, site 3, age 67.

The older learners also gave accounts of how being able to read a book or a newspaper opened up a new world to them and helped them escape feelings of loneliness and discover the value and pleasure of engaging in an activity that previously had left them feeling anxious and terrified.

R1: And it's such a pleasure reading, when you sit down and have a book, you'd never be lonely, you'd never be lonely.

R2: I know it's wonderful, I'm buying the newspaper for the first time now…I think it's great, I think I'm great.

R3: Yeah I'm buying the newspaper now everyday too, before I wouldn't have, it would have bothered me, but now I'm reading everything.

R4: Oh the enjoyment of it, I can't believe it now that I'm able to do it…I was so afraid to read before I came here, I was afraid of my life I'd say to myself 'I'm brutal, I'm no good' but now I know that's not true and I think that's great
– Females and male FG, site 4, age, 60-74.

All of the older learners in the study outlined the social benefits of taking part in adult education courses. Many of the participants reported how attendance at adult literacy courses, even once a week, had helped alleviate feelings of loneliness and social isolation. The social benefits of attendance were therefore a welcome bonus to their overall experiences.

R1: It's great coming here for me cause otherwise I'd just be sitting at home by meself doing nothing.

R2: It's good because you know it's not just you, and it's a great chance to meet new people.

R3: It gets lonely sometimes. I mean all of my children are grown up and I was really alone when my husband died…so having here to come to is really good
– Females and males, FG, site 4, age 60-74.

Across the sample the older learners described the multifaceted benefits of attending adult literacy courses. Their reasons for returning to education were widespread and varied, yet their main emphasis was on improving their literacy and numeracy skills. They spoke in great detail about the educational and social opportunities that engagement with adult literacy services offered. When asked what they would like to be doing a year from now, all of the participants stated that they wanted to build on what they had already learned and to continue further education for both educational and socialisation purposes. The general consensus among the participants was that they hoped to continue building on their literacy skills, have the capacity to be able to write a letter, gain accreditation or go on to complete the Junior or Leaving Certificate.

[What do you hope to be doing this time next year?]

R1: I want to continue on you know, I'd still like to be here…you know just for the company. I don't want any certs as long as I can spell…and if I can pronounce me words.

R2: Well mine would be to just take out my pen, if someone is after sending me a letter and just sit down and just write back a letter and I'd be quite happy.

R3: I would love to…I'm going to be perfectly honest with you, my oldest sons, they have their certificates for everything they went in for, and my ambition is to get one cert and say to my sons 'look what Mom did'…you know…that's all
– Females, FG, site 2, age 74-80.

One of our male participants reported how he valued his experience so much that at some stage he would like to became an adult literacy tutor in the future and "pass on" what he had learned to other adult students.

I just want to be able to help people like me. I think it's great to be able to give something back because there's people coming behind us you see and I'd like to be able to give them a hand. That's where I'm coming from, that's what I'd like to be able to do
– Male, FG, site 1, age 62.

Summary

In summary, the study participants expressed extremely negative attitudes towards formal schooling and many expressed a loathing of all that it represented in their lives: failure, rejection and disappointment. Many of the participants recalled how they had been victims of physical abuse at the hands of school staff and the experience was back then, and still is now, a source of distress for those who were victims.

Overall, the vast majority of our participants reported that low literacy levels hampered them in their work lives in terms of progression and promotion. Their preoccupation with leaving school out-weighed any consideration regarding their future employment choices. The older learners reported work histories of engaging in menial and manual labour. However, despite the many constraints imposed on them by a lack of literacy, there was a general consensus among our respondents that they had dealt with this setback and had had relatively successful working lives.

Engaging with adult literacy services and participating in adult literacy courses was a major decision for the older learners. Many described how they were hesitant at first to return to education due to their experience of formal schooling. Enrolment in adult literacy classes was an acknowledgment to themselves, family and friends that they did indeed have a literacy difficulty. However, once the decision was taken to return to education all of our participants revelled in the experience.

One of the most striking aspects of the older learners' accounts was the contrast between the experience of formal and adult education. For the older learners participation in adult education courses afforded them an opportunity to gain literacy skills and complete their education. Attending adult literacy courses was a major factor in helping alleviate feelings of loneliness and social isolation and provided the participants with a much-valued opportunity to socialise in the company of their peers.

Chapter Five

Coping strategies

NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

Chapter Five: **Coping strategies**

In the previous chapter we provided a profile of the study participants. We outlined their school experiences, work histories and engagement with, and participation in adult literacy courses. In this chapter we present the findings on the coping strategies the older learners have used throughout their lives to disguise their literacy difficulties. In analysing older learners' coping strategies we intend to separate them into the following categories:

▶ home environment strategies;

▶ workplace strategies; and

▶ social-world strategies.

We aim to provide insights into how these coping strategies have worked in the past and the consequences for the participants when these strategies collapse or break down.

Strategies in the home environment

During interview the participants gave accounts of how the long-term implications of low educational attainment or literacy difficulties or both had impacted most acutely in the home environment. Moreover, they reported how they felt that negative school experiences coupled with literacy difficulties had severely curtailed their level of engagement with and involvement in their children's formal schooling, particularly when it came to assisting with schoolwork. The participants also described a general sense of inferiority and embarrassment when attending school-organised events such as parent-teacher meetings and sports days. They reported that as a consequence attendance at school events were kept to a minimum.

The general consensus among the older learners was that literacy difficulties had the most severe impact at home. It was in this private sphere that the implications of having literacy difficulties were felt at their most personal level. It is a given in terms of research and societal norms that home and caring duties are in the main the realm of the mother. Consequently the impact of literacy difficulties in the home environment impacted in a more significant way on our female respondents.

Adults with literacy difficulties face the complex task of having to come to terms with them and they struggle with how to relate them to immediate and extended family who are unaware of the situation. During interview we asked the older learners to describe the impact of literacy difficulties in the context of their everyday lives and we tried to elicit accounts of how their events unfolded. The participants reported that they used a variety of coping strategies to avoid exposing their lack of literacy levels to family members, especially their children. The preferred and most successful strategy the respondents used to avoid potential embarrassment and exposure was to employ what they referred to as "delaying tactics". These tactics involved the participants "pretending" they were busy doing other chores for example "cooking the dinner" or

referring them to the other parent. They recalled that this was done in an effort to avoid assisting their children with their homework.

[So can you tell me a little bit about what it is you would do to avoid helping your children with their homework?]

R1: I never got involved in the children's homework. I used to say to them 'I can't help ya I'm too busy wait 'til your father comes in'.

R2: There was somethings I could help them with, but I was always afraid that they'd ask me something I didn't know, so I'd just try to avoid it and brush them off.

R3: I know, I know, it was the same with the school, you know when they needed notes for school…my children never knew, ya see…my husband used to write out the notes and then I'd copy them, so they never really knew
– Females, FG, site 2, age 74-80.

The participants described how they experienced considerable anxiety and pressure on a daily basis from these on-going familial situations. They also reported a sense of frustration that they were unable to engage fully in their children's formal schooling. They also expressed how they felt "guilty" about their lack of involvement in their children's education. It was their belief that this lack of involvement and engagement was due to their literacy difficulties. The respondents spoke of how they felt they had "missed out" on many aspects of parenting because they were unable to assist their children with their homework or indeed "normal stuff" such as reading them a bedtime story. These activities, out of necessity, became the domain of the other parent. A clear etiquette was established in the home whereby when it came to educational matters the participants deferred to their spouses. Moreover, over time the children involved accepted these procedures without question.

R1: The kids just stopped asking after a while and started going straight to their da.

R2: I was out at work all day so my children would just ask their mother …thank God [laughs].
– Female and males, FG, site 4, age 51-73.

However, despite the many setbacks associated with literacy difficulties, when it came to their children's education the participants were determined from the outset that their children would not "follow in my footsteps". Their primary focus became fixed on "a good education" for their children. In marked contrast to the shame and disappointment regarding their own educational attainments and work histories the respondents spoke with great pride about the achievements of their children.

Across the sample the respondents with children gave broadly similar accounts and constantly emphasised the importance that they attached to academic qualifications, particularly at third level, in determining their children's position in society. The participants reported that although they had missed out on securing a career of choice due to literacy difficulties, they had determined that the same fate would not await their children as the following excerpts illustrate.

R1: I have to say regardless of what happened with me, my three daughters did very well, they really did…and two of them went on to college, they have great jobs, now, real jobs, and they all drive and own their own houses.

R2: I have three children, I've one that has a Master's degree, I have a picture of her in her cap and gown in my house. I'm very proud of her, in spite of her mother not knowing how to read and write…it didn't hold them back.
– Females, FG, site 3, age 67-74.

The participants also reported that to date their literacy difficulties were still having an impact in their everyday lives, for example, they described how when it came to interacting with their grandchildren, they still felt limited in their choice of activities. Once again they shied away from activities that involved them having to read or write and they avoided situations where they might be called on to help their grandchildren with schoolwork.

R1: Like my grandkids would say 'Nanny how do you spell that?' or 'Nanny will you help me with me sums?' and I would always pass the buck and say 'ask your Granda'.

R2: Yeah I know, one day one of my granddaughters said to me, now she wasn't being impertinent or anything she said 'Granny how come when I ask you something you never answer me' and that's when I said 'Well to tell you the truth I don't know the answer, I didn't get much schooling' but I felt very ashamed when I had to say it
– Females , FG, site 4, age 60-74.

This account highlights how for many of the participants the sense of stigma and shame associated with literacy difficulties still prevails. Even though they were currently engaged in adult literacy courses, during the focus group discussions it became apparent that many still carried residual shame, embarrassment and regret regarding what they perceived to be their lack of achievement in formal education.

Our data also suggests that the repercussions of literacy difficulties on home life extended beyond assisting immediate family members with schoolwork and spilled over into other areas of life involving interacting and socialising with extended family members. According to many of the respondents family occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries proved to be stressful events. The participants reported how their literacy difficulties had on many occasions coloured their experiences of participation in family events. For a significant number of the respondents these family encounters re-enforced their sense of inadequacy and inferiority. The following account by a male participant conveys the feelings of fear, dread and sadness he experienced when attending joyful family occasions:

R1: I used to dread when me nieces or nephews had birthdays because I never got them a card. I never did…I wouldn't have been able to write it out. I used to just drop down to them and give them money. The worst time was when it was me Ma and Da's Silver Wedding Anniversary and I really wanted to be able to get them a card, but I couldn't.
– Male, FG, site 1, age 51.

As he recounted his story this male participant reported that when he found himself in these situations his primary emotion was one of "fear", as attendance at family events carried the risk of exposure and in his view possible rejection by immediate and extended family members.

Strategies in the workplace

As discussed earlier in the report the acquisition of the relevant academic qualifications has implications for the individual with regard to labour market opportunities and prospects. As outlined in chapter four of this report, during focus group discussions we explored with the participants their employment histories and their methods of disguising literacy difficulties from employers and work colleagues. As discussed earlier many of the participants described how they gravitated towards what they described as menial or manual labour. This was done in a conscious effort to avoid workplaces that required a high level of literacy and or numeracy proficiencies.

Where literacy was required the general consensus among the older learners was that they usually devised successful and innovative workarounds as a solution to their literacy difficulties. During interview the participants recounted how they had developed these successful workarounds and strategies in work-related situations.

R1: I was a checker in a laundry taking in stuff and when someone had a name I couldn't spell instead of standing there like a dope I'd say 'what did you say, could you spell that for me I can't really hear you with all the noise' and that's how I got by, using your wits and using your skills.

R2: I was working in this place and I used to look after the tea money…I used to write down the name of biscuits and stuff in a notebook and I learned a few words that way, you know, so I managed, I always kinda managed, I've always worked.

R3: When I'd have to do an order I'd go down to the local shop and I'd see all the stuff that I needed and I'd write them down. I used to be grand on the phone, 'oh give me such and such', you know, and you learn, you learn the tricks, you learn to cope.

R4: I used to have to write out the menu and if they wanted lasagne and I didn't know how to spell it I'd get the young one [daughter] to get me one out of the freezer and I'd learn how to spell it that night. Then when it came to holidays I learned how to spell the months, January, February, you know and I learned to spell the days of the week.

[So you taught yourself on the job?]

R4: Amazing isn't it … my job proved very beneficial to me that way cause you see I didn't give in
– Females and males, FG, site 4, age 60-74.

Upon leaving formal education our participants reported from the outset that in terms of work opportunities they were aware of the limitations placed on them by having literacy difficulties. The participants gave accounts of how over time when it came to looking for a job, they adopted a pragmatic approach to their limited career choice and prospects, as the following excerpts illustrates.

R1: If you didn't work, you didn't eat, that was it, simple as that.

R2: Ah you know yourself you just get on with it. I did what I had to do to get by.

R3: After a while you just got used to it, you never really thought about it much.

R4: I had me little ways you know, me own little ways of doing things, but in all honestly I think most of us that worked there would have been the same.
– Females and male, FG, site 3, age 67-74.

Another female participant told of how she worked as a "kitchen hand" in a hotel, however, her ambition was to be a waitress. Unfortunately, her literacy difficulties determined that this particular ambition was beyond her reach.

> I worked in the kitchen doing the washing up. It wasn't the best job in the world, but it was a job. I used to see the waitresses coming into the kitchen in their lovely uniforms and I always remember thinking 'Jayney I'd love to be one of them' but I knew I couldn't take down the orders so that was the end of that, so that held me back in that way and the money was better, you know, I worked harder and got paid less…it's funny what you remember.
> **– Female, FG, site 2, age 80.**

While the participants employed successful strategies to cope with their literacy difficulties in carrying out their day-to-day duties, they reported that they were reluctant to pursue training, promotion, or advancement in the workplace. They reported how often they turned down the possibility of advancement in the workplace when it was presented to them. The decision not to pursue advancement, promotion or training was not taken lightly and according to a significant number of the respondents came at a cost that was personal as well as professional. This issue of lack of promotion, even in retrospect, was for many of the respondents a highly emotive issue as the following excerpt from a focus group illuminates.

R1: My job was lovely, it was in a sewing factory that made high-class fashion and I was about two years there and I was called into the office…I thought I did something wrong, but the boss said 'no, no, no,' he said 'would you like to be promoted? I'll train you as a manageress'…well me legs went to jelly and I said 'no thanks I'm happy where I am' but I wasn't. I cried me eyes out when I went home.
– Female, FG, site 1, age 73.

These quotes convey to a large extent the general sense of missed opportunities, and unfilled potential, largely attributed to literacy difficulties, that was experienced by many of our participants throughout their working lives. However, not all of our participants shied away from or indeed turned down promotion when it came their way. Many of them had in place highly developed and successful strategies to enable them to cope with the literacy demands of their employment. One of our female participants told us how she successfully "hid" her literacy difficulties throughout her working life by enlisting the help of her husband when she ran into difficulty.

R1: I used to phone my husband in work and I'd say to him 'listen,' I'd say 'spell this,' and actually he was the one who brought me on as far. Like people would be waiting in the office for stuff and I'd say 'look I'm busy I'll give them to you shortly'…then I'd phone my husband…I phoned him for everything…that's how I did it…I bluffed my way through everything you know [laughs].
– Female, FG, site 3, age 74.

The above quote to some extent, serves to highlights the resourcefulness and ingenuity displayed by the participants in their various workplaces. During interview they reported that over their working lives they had developed efficient and effective ways of functioning successfully in various work settings. They recounted how they viewed their employment in what they described as "menial and manual jobs" as a means to an end and despite the frustrations they experienced they were always resilient and resolute in their determination to "earn a living" to support both themselves and their families.

Strategies in social world

As outlined in earlier sections of this report, little is known about the coping strategies of older learners in home, work and social contexts. In this section we set out to explore the issue of coping strategies employed in the social world. One of the most striking themes to emerge from the data was the extent to which literacy difficulties impacted on the participants' abilities to take part in social activities, activities that in the main most people in society take for granted. They recalled how they had experienced the impact of literacy difficulties from an early age as the following excerpt clearly demonstrates.

R1: I used to love life, I used to love going to dances and all, but even when a boy would ask me out I'd say no in case he'd give me a book to read you know, or ask me to write my name and address, no I couldn't do it.
– Female, FG, site 2, age 74.

During interview the older learners began identifying and discussing the various strategies that they had developed over their lives that enabled them to participate in a meaningful way in the context of their social lives. There were a range of strategies the participants used to disguise their literacy difficulties. However, once again fear of discovery was generally the universal response across the sample, especially when placed in a social situation where a relatively high level of literacy was required.

A considerable number of the participants reported that they had felt like they had missed out on many aspects of social life because of their literacy difficulties. Many of the respondents recalled and described times when it was "highly unlikely" that they would take up or indeed extend an invitation to socialise with family and friends and that in fact they constantly invented a variety of reasons for not doing so.

R1: I never ate out, but I go out now, I was afraid someone would say will we go in for a cup of tea, but I'd go in now…and another thing I'd never use the lift or anything.

R2: 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 just used to order the same thing all the time.

R3: I used to say I'd pains in my stomach so that I wouldn't have to go out and I hadn't any pain at all, you know?
– Females, FG, site 4, age 60-74.

On the face of it at least, it would seem that the participants were successful in their strategy to avoid discovery. However, as a consequence their ability to participate in social events, for example eating out with family and friends were severely limited or non-existent. The many "excuses" put forward by the participants were varied to say the least and ranged from non-availability to the extreme of feigning illness. However, these behaviours became more modified over time. According to the participants, it was when they returned to education and they noticed an improvement in their literacy skills that they began to feel more confident in these social situations.

R1: "I have to say now I did get more confident, like it's amazing how confident you can get.

R2: And I wouldn't mind, but it's only when you look back that you realise how much you missed out on, you know what I mean?
– Female and male, FG, site 1, age 51-73.

Our data suggests that literacy difficulties also had an impact on how well the participants integrated into their local community and how they engaged with neighbours. Some of the participants described how they were reluctant to join in community events and activities or to join local development committees or tenants' associations. In some extreme cases they would also avoid engagement with their neighbours.

R1: The people around where I live always thought I was stuck up. I never used to come out. I'd never talk at the door or stop to talk to anyone in case I'd make a mistake or say something stupid, a stupid kind of mistake, you know.
– Female, FG, site 4, age 60.

For the most part employing coping strategies became an integral part of how the participants lived their lives. They reported how the restrictions and limitations imposed on them by literacy difficulties became secondary to the fear of being discovered. They recalled how over the years their coping strategies became more sophisticated and practical in nature. During interview it emerged that the phrase "I forgot my glasses" was the primary, preferred and the most commonly cited strategy they used. The following excerpts from a focus group is a primary example of how and when this strategy was used at its most effective.

R1: When I had to go into the Post Office to collect me pension if I had to fill out anything I used to say to the girl 'can you help me with this I forgot me glasses'.

R2: I was the same anywhere I had to go, I'd say that all the time, all the time, you had to be cunning to get around things.

R3: 'I've no glasses' I don't know about anyone else but I found that was the best one, if you had to fill out a form or something that you couldn't read, I'd say 'I forgot me glasses'.
– Females, FG, site 3, age 67-74.

Of considerable significance is the use of this strategy by older learners who at the time did not wear glasses. One of our participants told of the elaborate plan she had in place to "prove" that she had in fact forgot to bring her reading glasses with her:

R1: It's funny that whole thing you know, 'I forgot me glasses' you see I never wore glasses, I only started wearing them recently, but I used to carry around my husband's empty glass case, and I'd show it to people just to prove that I'd left them behind.
– Female, FG, site 3, age 67.

Our data revealed how societal changes also had an effect on the participants' capacity to travel and as a consequence on their quality of life. Gradual changes in public transport, such as one-person operated public buses posed hitherto unknown complications and challenges for the respondents. During interview the older learners provided accounts of how changes in public transport curtailed their use of public transport and generated their increased dependence on family members. A daytrip to a friend or relative that involved travel outside of established routes was filled with the "fear" of the unknown and increased their anxiety around the possibility of getting lost in unfamiliar surroundings. Many described how they were reluctant to take a trip outside of their immediate social environment unless accompanied by a family member or trusted friend.

R1: It's the same if you want to go anywhere, you know if you had to use the railway or go on the buses, and it's harder on the buses now cause there's no conductor but I wouldn't go anywhere unless someone was going with me.

R2: If I need to go anywhere one of my daughters usually takes me in the car. I never go anywhere on my own.
– Females, FG, site 2, age 74-80.

This reliance on others in order to be able to travel freely was a source of frustration and inspired a general feeling of missed opportunities in relation to travel at home and abroad. Many of the participants reported that they had never been on holiday abroad or were always extremely reluctant to travel on "foreign holidays". However, over time a small but significant number of our participants had come to the conclusion that they would no longer be bound by their literacy difficulties and made a conscious decision to start to travel before it became "too late".

R1: I was always afraid to go away, you know, what'd happen if you got lost, cause half of them don't speak English.

R2: I was like that for years, but it got to the stage where I decided it wasn't going to stop me anymore. So, me and my husband, he was better at the reading than me, booked our first ever holiday and we went everywhere and just figured it out. It was the best thing I've ever done.

R3: I go away every year now, especially since I retired. I wouldn't miss out on me holidays for the world.
– Females and males, FG, site 1, age 51-73.

What happens when strategies break down?

During focus group discussions we endeavoured to generate discussion about the impact on the participants when the coping strategies they had used throughout their lives began to collapse or breakdown. We explored with them the impetus behind the collapse of their strategies and what implications, if any, it had on their daily lives. During interview a great deal of conversation centred on the topic of bereavement and talk about the "death" of a loved one featured strongly in their accounts.

R1: You see I'm not being sad or anything like that, it's just since my husband died, I miss him terrible and I miss the fact that we did everything together, and I'd never advise anyone to do it, we were together everywhere…and now that he's gone it's like my friend is gone…and I think that's totally wrong, now I think that women should have friends of their own and men should have friends of their own.

R2: When my husband died I was like that too. He used to always say to me 'why don't you join clubs and mix with other women' and I said 'sure I have you here' he said 'but you won't always have me' and he was right…he's 14 years' dead now
– Females, FG, site 4, age 74-80.

All of the study's older learners who had experienced bereavement were women and during interview they described how they spent a lot of time thinking and talking about their deceased husbands. The women expressed a profound sense of loss and deep feelings of sadness. For participants who were more recently bereaved they expressed how the loss of a loved one was still keenly felt and was still "raw". What is significant from the data is the huge impact of bereavement across all areas of the women's lives. They had lost their husband, their best friend and their main supporter, especially when it came to helping them cope with and disguise their literacy difficulties. The women recalled that when it came to their literacy difficulties they had developed an almost total dependency on their husbands. As a consequence the loss was keenly felt and they were left feeling bereft in this regard.

R1: It's more the little things, you know like when I need to renew my medical card and he wasn't there to help me fill out the form, I just thought who's going to help me now

R2: My husband did everything, everything, he used to write the notes for the kids going to school, he looked after the money and paid the bills…I didn't know what to do when he was gone.
– Females, FG, site 4, age 60-74.

As the quotes above demonstrate, more often than not, it was the husband who had provided the support that the women needed to help them cope with their literacy difficulties. However, one unmarried male participant described how it was his sister who was his main support and explained his feelings of powerlessness when she became ill and had to be submitted to hospital.

R3: I'm a bit different I didn't lose a husband now or anything like that…you see it was my sister that used to help me…then she got cancer and shortly after that she died. I remember when I used to have to go to the hospital and I'd be praying that one of my nieces would be there so that I wouldn't have to fill out any forms or anything like that
– Male, FG, site 1, age 57.

At times during the interview the participants found it difficult to articulate their feelings of loss. However, they reported that they found it "easy" to talk to their peers about these sensitive issues and how they felt secure and supported in this setting. According to the older learners this support was an "unexpected bonus" of attending adult literacy classes.

Further information gleaned from the focus group revealed that amongst the participants other factors also had an impact on coping strategies. Moreover, they reported that their strategies had not necessarily collapsed or broken down. Rather, they felt that they had served their purpose, could now be abandoned, and a different approach to dealing with their literacy difficulties was put in place.

R1: Well I had time on me hands and the one thing I wanted to be able to do was to learn to read, so I decided I would do that. I was going to do something for me, that I wanted to do for me.

R2: I knew I had this thing inside me and I thought if I don't do something it will never come out. So now I do this reading and writing for me, for nobody else but me.

R3: I had a bit of fear in the beginning, but I came to be here. All my family knew that once I retired I was going to do something about learning to read and write and spell properly and all that sort of thing, so that's it really it, for no other reason, but for me now, no other reason, but for me.
– Females and males, FG, site 1, age 51-73.

This excerpt demonstrates the capacity of the older learners to recognise not only their literacy difficulties, but also the fact that their major support in coping with their difficulties was no longer available to them and clearly demonstrates their ability to take the necessary steps in order to confront these issues. It shows a clear determination on the part of the respondents to redefine and reassess their situations and to positively address their literacy difficulties in a positive and pro-active way.

Summary

In this chapter we documented how the study's older learners had implemented successful coping strategies to assist them in coping with their literacy difficulties. We reported how literacy difficulties impacted across all arenas including the home environment, the workplace and on their social lives. However, the impact of literacy difficulties was experienced on a more personal and emotional level in the home environment. The reluctance of some of the participants to attend school-organised events is of major significance as research shows that the educational attainment of parents, especially mothers, and parental interest in the school lives of their children, is related to whether or not children remain in education beyond the minimum age. (Boldt, 1994).

In this chapter we also documented the effect on the older learners when their coping strategies began to collapse and were no longer effective. In most cases coping strategies began to breakdown following the bereavement of a spouse or family member who had been their primary support. Their coping strategies varied in accordance with the various contexts and setting including abandoning strategies when they were no longer effective or efficient. Overall, the participants felt that throughout their adult lives they had successfully managed to disguise their literacy difficulties from family friends and work colleagues, however, this usually came at a personal cost especially in the home environment.

Chapter Six

Discussion and recommendations

National Adult Literacy Agency

Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

Chapter Six: **Discussion and recommendations**

In the preceding chapters of this report we presented the design, methodology and findings of a study of the coping strategies of older learners in Dublin. National and international research on the experiences of older learners in adult education was also reviewed. As outlined earlier there is a paucity of research concerning older learners and this is reflected in the brevity of the literature review.

In total 24 older learners were interviewed through four focus group discussions. These focus group discussions yielded qualitative and quantitative data that were analysed and presented as findings in previous chapters. In this chapter the findings are discussed and broad recommendations are made.

This overview of the study's findings concentrates on the following areas:

▶ a profile of the older learners including their experiences of formal education;

▶ employment histories;

▶ engagement with adult literacy services; and

▶ the respondents coping strategies in the home, workplace and social world and what happens when these strategies breakdown.

Participant profile

A total of 24 learners were interviewed for the purpose of this study, including 16 women and eight men. They ranged in age from 51 to 80 years. All of the participants had enrolled in primary school with 17 going on to complete the Primary Certificate. Out of these, two of the older learners went on to enrol in secondary school, but left without completing second level.

Experiences of formal education

The first aim of the study was to describe the past educational experiences and attainment of the older learners. This was accomplished by asking the older learners a series of questions designed to reveal their retrospective views and attitudes towards their formal education. In general, participants described strong negative views about their experiences of formal schooling. Our data demonstrates that for the vast majority their experiences of formal education were difficult on both a personal and academic level. All of the older learners completed formal education to primary level and two of them went on to enrol in secondary school, but left within a year. The average school leaving age of the respondents was 14 years of age. This finding is significant as the data from the 2006 census of population shows that only 10.7% of people aged 65 and over achieved an upper secondary level of qualification. This is compared to 19.8% of the 25-64-year-old population.

Irrespective of age or gender, the participants' accounts concentrated on the negative aspects of formal schooling. Of particular importance were their accounts of the sense of stigma and shame that formal education had instilled in them from an early age. Our findings indicate that a significant number of the older learners attributed this sense of inferiority to the attitude and behaviours of classroom teachers who they felt discriminated against them. The findings underscore the sense of failure, disappointment and loathing experienced by the older learners and demonstrate to a large extent the residual sense of shame, stigma and anger they still attach to that period in their lives.

Our data shows that there were also widespread harrowing accounts of the physical abuse that most of the participants suffered at the hands of school staff, many of which were too graphic and disturbing to include in this report. This finding while shocking is not particularly surprising in light of revelations regarding the past treatment of a significant number of Irish children in state run schools. Overall, our findings show that the older learners gave little credence to their formal schooling and indeed in many instances dismissed it completely as having no major significance or benefit in their adult lives.

Employment histories

The older learners we interviewed reported that their employment history had consisted of what they described as "menial and manual labour" that usually involved working unsociable hours. The general consensus among the older learners was that they gravitated towards low-paid, low-skilled jobs primarily due to their literacy difficulties. Our findings revealed that due to literacy difficulties the older learners were reluctant to pursue promotion in the workplace and in some cases actively turned down the offer of training and promotion. This was a constant source of disappointment and frustration for the participants and conveyed a sense of lost opportunity and unfilled potential. However, our data also shows that the older learners had developed a pragmatic approach to the limitations set upon them by their literacy difficulties and many went on to establish relatively successful working lives.

Engagement with adult literacy services

Appropriate lifelong learning can:

▶ play a positive role in promoting active citizenship among older learners;

▶ maintain mental and physical health;

▶ increase general well-being and self confidence; and

▶ help combat feelings of social isolation or exclusion.

Our data suggests that individual pathways back into education varied among the participants engaged with adult literacy services. However, our data shows for most participants, engagement with adult literacy services usually happened when they had retired from employment, had finished raising a family, or when it was the "right time". The older learners attended literacy classes that were provided by the VEC and were located in their communities. Attendance varied from two-hour sessions that were provided once a week, or daily sessions. However, all were agreed that there was a need for more tuition hours as two hours once a week was not intensive enough to meet their needs.

Our findings also revealed that the initial step back into education meant that the participants had to acknowledge to themselves and their families that they had a literacy difficulty. Our data suggests that this was not an easy process for the participants as they had spent a significant portion of their lives disguising their literacy difficulties from others. Consequently, the return to education was a major decision for the older learners that had ramifications for them beyond acknowledging their literacy difficulties.

Of particular significance is the finding that engagement with adult literacy services was a major factor in helping to alleviate the feelings of social isolation and loneliness that some of the older learners experienced. This is significant as data from the 2006 Census of Population shows that 26.7% of people aged 65 and over in Ireland live alone. The National Council on Ageing and Older People has projected that in future greater percentages of older people will live alone.

Attendance at adult literacy courses also afforded the participants a valuable opportunity to meet up with and socialise with other adult literacy learners. This opportunity to socialise in the company of other older learners illuminated the fact that they were not alone in their situation and that others had similar literacy difficulties as themselves. Our data suggests that the socialisation aspect of engagement with adult literacy services was a source of comfort and reassurance for the older learners. It also helped to reassure them that there were other adults with similar difficulties and that they were not alone in terms of their literacy difficulties.

Coping strategies

The second aim of the study was to investigate with participants the coping strategies they identified as most successful in disguising difficulties with literacy or numeracy or both. This report has documented the coping strategies used by the participants and has provided an important insight into the deployment of these strategies in various settings. Throughout the analysis, we have attempted to uncover different aspects, impacts and implications of the successful use of coping strategies emanating from the older learners' stories. The process of developing and implementing coping strategies has been ongoing throughout their adult lives and has seen shifts and changes when these strategies collapse or are no longer effective. The excerpts from the focus groups have provided glimpses of how using certain strategies has played out in various arenas.

Home environment strategies

As the study's older learners moved through their lives they described how their coping strategies became increasingly central to their home, work and social worlds. Our data revealed that within the context of these three worlds, the impact of the literacy difficulties of the older learners was felt most keenly in the home environments. The findings show that the participants on a daily basis, experienced high levels of anxiety in the home especially when it came to assisting their children with their schoolwork. Our data strongly suggests that in dealing with this problematic situation, the strategies the participants found to be most useful were ones of avoidance and referral. The older learners were acutely aware of their literacy difficulties and they reported that when it came to schoolwork they referred their children onto the other parent, in most cases the father. Their accounts revealed that in retrospect the older learners perceived their low literacy skills to be a significant factor in their lack of engagement in their children's formal education. This situation was a cause of stress for our participants and they went on to describe how they carried a residual sense of shame and embarrassment in this regard.

Our data demonstrates that familial social occasions were stressful events for the older learners. Across the sample, our respondents reported that they were fearful of being found out at these events. Our findings indicate that a significant number of the older learners seldom if ever bought birthday cards for family members. They were fearful that amongst other things their spelling and quality of their handwriting would reveal their literacy difficulties to others. As a consequence, they usually gave gifts of money in place of a card. This was a source of frustration for the older learners who felt they had missed out on the intimacy attached to giving a card that had a personal hand written message inside.

Further analysis of the data highlighted the level of emotional distress the older learners experienced in the process of disguising their literacy difficulties. Many feared that immediate and extended family members would "think less" of them when the extent of their literacy difficulties were revealed. However, in all cases this fear proved unfounded and the older learners now enjoyed the support of family members in their pursuit of completing their education.

Workplace strategies

Our data shows that the specific factors of literacy difficulties and lack of educational qualifications impinged upon the older learners' choices of work. Analysis of the data shows that the older learners worked at "manual or menial jobs" throughout their working lives. In the course of the interviews the respondents told us how they developed a pragmatic view of this situation. Work was seen as a means to an end, a way of earning a living so that they could support their family. Our findings revealed the many and varied strategies the older learners used to disguise their literacy difficulties from employers and work colleagues. The most effective of these was honing memory skills and memorising new words, months of the year and other dates. In the main these strategies worked well for the participants.

However, our findings also reveal that a significant number of the older learners were reluctant to pursue promotion or training due to their literacy difficulties. This had consequences in terms of advancement and progression within the workplace. Indeed our findings show that because of what they described as their problems with reading and writing some of the participants turned down the chance of promotion when it was offered to them. This reluctance or outright refusal to accept the chance of promotion fostered a sense of missed opportunities regarding career advancement. However, our data also shows that overall the participants reported that they felt they had led effective and efficient work lives and deemed their working lives a success.

Social world strategies

Based on analysis of the data our findings indicate that literacy difficulties impacted on and at times severely curtailed the social life of most of our participants. Our data suggests that across the sample there was a general reluctance to socialise in settings that required a relatively high level of literacy. For example "eating out" with family and friends was a social activity that many of the older learners were anxious to avoid. This curtailment in social activities underscored the sense of isolation and marginalisation experienced by many of the study respondents. It also demonstrates the social constraints that literacy difficulties placed on the older learners.

Our data reveals that some of the older learners were also reluctant to engage in community activities or to associate with their nearby neighbours. This situation proved less than ideal considering the social isolation already experienced by many of the older learners. In many ways the social constraints imposed by literacy difficulties served to further isolate this vulnerable group of people from engagement in activities in their immediate surroundings. However, our findings show that an engagement in adult literacy courses and the inherent improvement in their literacy levels inspired a new sense of self-confidence in the older learners. Consequently, as their confidence grew, socialising was no longer one of the major stressors in their lives.

Break down of strategies

The third aim of the research was to examine with the participants what happened when their coping strategies broke down or collapsed. In most cases the collapse or breakdown was precipitated by the death of a loved one, usually a husband. Our data revealed understandably high levels of sadness and loneliness experienced by the participants following the death of a spouse. However, often bereavement and the loss of their main strategic support was the impetus behind their decisions to address their literacy difficulties.

Within this theme our findings also revealed that for some older learners the coping strategies that had worked in the past were no longer effective and were therefore abandoned. The respondents also gave accounts of how following retirement from paid employment, and after successfully raising a family, the older learners had more "me time" and decided to address their literacy issues. Our findings show that this was a positive adjustment in the lives of the older learners and in all cases involved engagement with adult literacy services.

Recommendations

Arising from the findings of our study, we have identified the following broad recommendations in relation to older literacy learners. Although adult learners are now receiving more prominence and consideration in relation to the ongoing development of lifelong learning, our findings show that in terms of older learners there are still advances to be made. With regard to the specific needs of older people wanting to develop their literacy we make our recommendations below.

Policy recommendations

Convene forum on literacy and older people: In the context of current Government policy, and its implementation in the area of adult literacy, we recommend that NALA convene a forum to examine its impact on older people. The forum will include older people, as well as representatives of statutory and non-statutory bodies concerned with older people. The forum will explore the extent to which their needs are being identified, addressed and catered for in the areas of adult education and training.

Expand age range in PIAAC survey: We recommend that in light of the forthcoming PIAAC survey the Department of Education and Science include older people beyond retirement age. This expansion of the age range beyond the cut off age of 64 will be in line with best practice set out by the Canadian Government in their International Adult Literacy Survey.

Highlight benefits of literacy for older people: It is important that organisations working with and on behalf of older people are aware of and highlight, at policy level, the benefits of literacy learning for older people at the level of the individual, the family, the community and wider society.

Expand resources for older people: Our findings demonstrate the need for more intensive tuition across the adult literacy service. With this in mind we recommend that extra resources are made available to providers to enable them to expand the degree of services available to meet the needs of older learners. Based on the findings from this study we suggest that extended and enhanced provision would, to some degree, compensate for negative past educational experiences, facilitate literacy achievements in the present, and improve quality of life into the future.

Recommendations for providers

Create targeted promotional drive: In light of the clear demonstration throughout this study of the positive impact that engagement with adult literacy services has had on the individuals involved, and based on data from the VEC returns to the Department of Education and Science, we recommend a targeted promotional drive by agencies and literacy providers to recruit and encourage more older people to improve their literacy and numeracy.

Keep consulting older people: We recommend that providers continue to consult with older people in order to design programmes for them ensuring that the literacy needs of older people are understood in the context of their past educational experiences and employment histories.

Keep training the trainers: The training of people who work in the area of adult literacy and numeracy needs to be reviewed to ensure sufficient awareness regarding the needs of older literacy learners.

Strengthen links between groups: In line with international research this study has shown the positive role literacy learning has in promoting active citizenship, well-being and self-confidence and in maintaining mental and physical health. We therefore recommend that established links between literacy providers and organisations working with older people are strengthened in an effort to increase the number of older people availing of literacy and numeracy learning opportunities.

Recommendations for further research

This report attempted to provide a comprehensive overview of very complex issues surrounding older literacy learners including past educational experiences and attainment, work histories and coping strategies. In doing so it raised a number of issues for further research consideration:

▶ firstly, we strongly advise that there is a lot to be gained from further in-depth studies with older learners, not least of which is an understanding of the challenges they encounter in the immediacy of their everyday lives;

▶ secondly, we suggest that there is a need for further study of specific issues pertaining to the requirements of older learners including among other things gender and geographical locations; and

▶ thirdly, we recommend further research pertaining to older people who have not engaged with literacy services – a development that was beyond the scope of this research.

Final comments

In conclusion, the findings from this study have demonstrated the positive impact that engaging in literacy learning has had on this group of older learners. They reported that taking part in adult literacy classes had played a significant role in improving their personal, family and social lives and had brought long-term and sustainable benefits. Their stories and the learning within this study show the potential that adult literacy supports have to transform individual lives and communities.

The older learners described how their literacy difficulties had impacted on many areas of their lives. They recalled how they had forged happy and successful lives despite the level of their literacy difficulties. However, the participants also recounted that to a large extent their literacy difficulties had had a negative impact on their life choices and chances. Consequently, underlying their stories was the sense that they had never realised their potential in some areas of their lives, most notably the workplace.

Improving literacy skills and knowledge has played a significant role in reducing the social isolation experienced by some of the older learners. It had introduced them to a peer group in a safe environment and had helped reduced the sense of stigma and shame they had experienced due to their literacy difficulties. In particular the older learners described how it helped to take the "fear" out of attending family occasions and allowed them to be active in their grandchildren's education, something that, due to their literacy difficulties, they felt they were unable do with their own children. In effect, adult literacy support has had a positive impact on all aspects of their lives.

If the aim of Government policy is to encourage more adults to return to education, and to be active citizens, there needs to be a greater awareness of the barriers that exist among different groups in society including older people. There is a lot to be learnt from the accounts provided by the older learners who participated in this study. It is our hope that this report contributes to a more holistic and grounded understanding of the needs of older learners in Ireland. With this in mind it seems appropriate to leave the final word to one of the study's older learners.

> Oh the enjoyment of it...everything...I can't believe it. I used to think I was stupid you see. When I first came here I was afraid of me life, I said 'I'm brutal, I'm going to be no good, they won't want me'. You see I thought it was the end for me when my husband died and I felt I'd nowhere to go, nowhere to turn to and I felt down, down. Now, I can't believe it, I'm reading and writing and I'm learning poetry, and I just think God, this is great, great, I wish I was able to do it years ago.
> **– Female, site 1, aged 73.**

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Glossary of terms

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Baseline data

Basic information gathered at the beginning of the research. It provides useful information on the research participants, for example, their age, gender, nationality or where people live.

Case study

A detailed study of the development of a particular person, group or situation over a period of time.

Causal comparative research

A type of research that describes conditions that already exist and tries to find out why they do exist.

Cohorts

A group of people in a research study who share similar characteristics, such as age, job or where they are from.

Comparative assessment

Compares two or more subjects to better understand them and find out what students know, understand and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences.

Coping strategies

Ways of dealing with difficult situations by working around a problem and coming up with a different way to approach it.

Critical consciousness

A popular education and social idea developed by Paulo Freire that addresses a state of understanding about the world as a result of freedom from oppression.

Data analysis

A way of measuring research information with the goal of highlighting useful information and suggesting conclusions and recommendations.

Empirical data

Research information based on observation and experiences of the people who take part in a research study.

Focus group discussion

Discussion between a group of people who are brought together by the researcher to talk about a particular topic.

Formal labour market

Workers in paid employment and the jobs that are available to them.

Longitudinal study

Research study concerned with the development of people or groups of people over time.

Mixed-method research study

Using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches in a research study.

Non-accredited literacy progression

Improving literacy skills without getting a qualification for it.

Pedagogy

The art of being a teacher. It refers to ways of educating or a style of educating.

Purposive sampling strategy

A way of choosing people to include in a research study. They are chosen because they have particular features or characteristics in common that fit the research aims.

Qualitative approach

A way of doing research that examines the life experiences of people and the meaning they attach to those experiences. For example, asking people how well they learned rather than the mark they got in an exam.

Quantitative approach

A way of doing research that usually involves filling out a questionnaire. For example, it measures numbers and statistics rather than people's experiences.

Statistical analysis

A way of looking at numbers or statistics to work out patterns and how they apply to people.

What is NALA?

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is an independent membership organisation, concerned with developing policy, advocacy, research and offering advisory services in adult literacy work in Ireland. NALA was established in 1980 and has campaigned since then for the recognition of, and response to, the adult literacy issue in Ireland.

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Useful websites

NALA www.nala.ie
Literacy learning and tuition www.literacy.ie

NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

www.literacy.ie