

Learning Through Life:

**A Study of Older People
with Literacy Difficulties in
Ireland**



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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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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Table of contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
Introduction	5
Main objectives of the research.....	5
Research methods.....	6
Summary of study findings.....	7
Main recommendations.....	9
Final comments.....	13
CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY	14
Introduction	14
Aims and objectives	14
Methodology.....	15
Format of report.....	22
CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW.....	23
Introduction	23
Profile of older people in Ireland	23
Policy Context.....	24
International literature on literacy and older people	26
Irish Literature on older people with literacy difficulties.....	33
Gaps in the Literature.....	35
Barriers to participation in adult education and literacy services	35
Conclusions	38
CHAPTER THREE - RESEARCH FINDINGS & ANALYSIS	39
Introduction	39
Participant’s histories.....	40
Experiences, attitudes & views of literacy	51
Coping strategies.....	64
Returning to education	71
Other issues arising	79
CHAPTER FOUR - DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS	83
Discussion.....	83
Recommendations	87
Final comments.....	92
BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES	94
GLOSSARY OF TERMS	98
APPENDICES.....	100
Appendix 1 – Interview schedule	100

Executive Summary

Introduction

There has been limited research conducted with older people with literacy difficulties in the past. Hence, there is little known about the factors that could affect older people's decisions about learning in later life, about what and how they choose to learn, and about what role learning plays in their life as they grow older.

NALA sought to address this gap in the literature when it undertook a study in 2008 entitled '*It's never too late to learn*'. The primary objective of the research was the systematic investigation of the coping strategies that older literacy learners identify as most effective in disguising literacy and/or numeracy problems.

Even less is known both nationally and internationally about older people with literacy difficulties who have never engaged with literacy services. Arising from this, NALA commissioned this research to build on the findings from its 2008 study and to examine the coping strategies adopted by older people who are not literacy learners.

Main objectives of the research

A core objective of the research is the systematic investigation of attitudes, experiences and views of the older people in relation to their literacy difficulties. The research examines the rationale and the processes which the older people use when dealing with literacy difficulties in their daily lives; the impact of these difficulties on their lives; the coping strategies that they have used to deal with their literacy difficulties; and any barriers to returning to education that they identify.

The purpose of the research has been to:

- Examine the attitudes, experiences and views of older people to their literacy difficulties.
- Investigate the older people's practices in coping with literacy difficulties and examine the concepts and ideas behind these practices.

- Identify the education and service needs of this group of older people, and any significant barriers that impede their return to education.

Research methods

A 'snowballing' sampling methodology was engaged to recruit interviewees, given that the research target group is 'hard to reach'. The research team made contact with over 320 organisations working with older people in 24 counties in order to reach potential research participants.

The research process involved qualitative research methods comprising semi-structured interviews with 50 individuals (male and female research participants in rural and urban areas). Quantitative baseline data was also gathered for each participant using a pre-coded questionnaire that was administered subsequent to the interviews. Verbal and written consent was sought from the older people who participated in this study.

The data were analysed qualitatively to seek in-depth answers to the three research aims outlined above.

Sample profile

Of the 50 research participants recruited, 43 met the research criteria. 31 of these were female and 12 were male. This equates just over 70% female participation and just under 30% participation by men.

These older people are between the ages of 60 and 80 plus years. Most of the older people, with the exception of older Travellers, completed formal education to primary level and a small minority went on to enrol in secondary school but left within a year or two. The average school leaving age of the respondents was 14 years of age. The vast majority of the participants are retired from paid employment or unable to work due to sickness or injury. None of these older people have ever engaged with literacy services.

Summary of study findings

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

Experience of formal education

- The respondents described strong negative views about their formal schooling experiences. The general consensus among the older people was that school was often extremely difficult due to the physical and psychological abuse suffered at the hands of those who taught them.
- Our findings show how the experience had instilled in the older learners a sense of anger, bitterness, failure, disappointment and shame.
- 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.
- Overall the participants felt that attending school had been a detrimental rather than beneficial experience for them.

Experiences, attitudes and views of literacy

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL LIVES

- The older people reported negative experiences, on a personal and social level, as a direct result of their literacy difficulties. Confidence and self-esteem were negatively impacted by literacy problems for some, but not all, of the older people interviewed.
- The older people's attitudes towards their difficulties were pragmatic. Interviewees accepted that in order to participate in some social and community activities, they had to rely on family and friends for support with literacy tasks, while also recognising the merits of their own contribution to such activities.
- Membership of established networks, either informal or formal, such as those which exist in sheltered housing schemes may facilitate greater involvement in social activities among older people with literacy difficulties.

FAMILY LIFE

- Of those interviewees who married, their spouses supported them to complete literacy tasks or took charge of the tasks for them.
- For the majority of interviewees with children, their own literacy difficulties were a major motivating factor in encouraging their children's academic achievements. These parents were staunchly committed to ensuring that their children receive a better education than they received.
- Despite admissions that their literacy difficulties have impacted on their self-confidence, it was common for interviewees to offer examples where they had advocated on behalf of their children with fierce determination, for better treatment and a better education than they themselves had received.

Coping strategies

Coping mechanisms devised by the interviewees can be grouped into practical and personal strategies.

- Practical strategies include excuses and pretence regarding the level of literacy difficulty, and most particularly a reliance on others such as spouses, family members, work colleagues or service providers to assist with literacy related tasks.
- Personal strategies include using humour and bravado to deflect unwanted attention as a result of their literacy difficulties, and avoidance of situations where literacy skills might be required or tested.

While most of the older people interviewed regretted the difficulties which their literacy problems caused, they also reported a sense of accomplishment and pride at having devised such effective and innovative coping strategies to compensate for these problems.

Returning to education

A wide range of physical, psychological, and social barriers are encountered by older people, all of which can prevent them from accessing learning – both on basic skills and other lifelong learning programmes.

Physical barriers such as poor health, lack of transportation, and inconvenience of the location are reported as well as psychological barriers including fear and embarrassment, poor past experiences of formal education and lack of self-esteem.

Social barriers also exist and cover ageist attitudes, and the feeling that the voice of the older person is often unheard or given little weight or consideration. Furthermore, there can be reluctance to participate in mixed-generational classes.

Despite these barriers many of the older people interviewed in this study recognised the benefits of returning to learning. The focus was largely on achieving practical literacy related goals such as writing a letter, filling out a form or simply reading a book.

Main recommendations

Arising from the findings of this study and based on the requirements of the participants, the current policy context, and lessons learned from this process we have identified the following broad recommendations in relation to older people with literacy difficulties who have never engaged with literacy services. Recommendations are directed at NALA, service providers/practitioners and for further research. They relate to themes such as how and where to reach older adults with literacy difficulties; practical means of promoting literacy interventions and developing models through action research.

NALA

1. NALA should continue to partner with agencies, for example, the Equality Authority and Age and Opportunity, particularly for events during Positive Ageing Week; with AONTAS during the Adult Learners Festival; and with organisers of Cork Adult Learners Festival. It should also continue networking activities with other agencies to identify existing best practice and generate innovative approaches promoting literacy learning amongst older people.
2. NALA should continue to explore opportunities to further develop tools to help workers to discuss the issue of literacy difficulties amongst their client group. For example, increasing the provision of Literacy Awareness Training (LAT) to housing

support workers and community development workers to discuss with clients an issue which they view as very relevant but also very sensitive.

3. Consideration could be given to promoting literacy awareness training to organisations who provide particular supports to older people and who engaged in the research. These include family resource centres, community development projects, housing support and homeless organisations and others.
4. Many of the organisations who engage with older people are members of networks¹ and could be provided with options for undertaking literacy sensitivity training on a group basis.
5. NALA should increase the distribution of literacy resource materials, including the NALA series of literacy workbooks, which contain sections dedicated to assisting literacy students with form filling. In addition, NALA could further develop literacy software to allow older people to undertake literacy learning using new technologies. This would have the advantage of enabling an individual to initially access supports without having to disclose their literacy difficulties. This was a concern for a number of interviewees. While literacy software is already in existence, additional software specifically developed with older people in mind and suitable for individuals who have had limited exposure to IT tools would be useful. Finally, NALA should continue to raise awareness of www.writeon.ie.²
6. NALA has already developed literacy awareness training (LAT) which interested organisations may avail of. In order to ensure maximum take up of such training NALA might consider the following:
 - Develop a promotional campaign targeting the sectors mentioned above.
 - Develop additional tools and materials in collaboration with other advocacy groups, working on behalf of older people, in consultation with regulatory and membership bodies, such as the Financial Regulator, Irish Banking Federation and others.

¹ For example, voluntary housing bodies may be members of the Irish Council for Social Housing.

² The interactive website to help people improve their reading, writing and numbers skills.

Service providers and practitioners

7. Service providers should continue to develop and promote adult and community education models for learning which do not evoke memories of the formal education system for older people. This can be achieved by continuing to adopt an integrated approach, by incorporating literacy modules and interventions with settings and activities where older people are engaging, for example in day care centres, sheltered housing complexes and bingo halls.
8. Service providers should continue to partner with those organisations already delivering non-formal and flexible learning opportunities (e.g. working with local groups using an outreach approach to integrate literacy modules into local informal and non-formal learning activities already in existence, e.g. art classes in the local day care centre).
9. Consideration should be given by service providers to developing literacy materials and literacy learning sites which are culturally appropriate for minority ethnic older people including members of the Traveller community.
10. There is an opportunity to engage with organisations who work with older people, to establish needs and supports and to collaborate with them in developing and delivering literacy interventions as a form of outreach work in settings where older people are likely to gather and spend significant periods of time on a regular basis.
11. Formal links should be developed with relevant organisations, such as sheltered housing providers to explore opportunities for working in partnership (for example through outreach programmes) in order to encourage participation by older people with literacy difficulties in community settings, or literacy supports to be delivered as part of other non-formal learning opportunities (for example, art classes and personal development classes).
12. Literacy interventions may need to be packaged differently, for example, a programme on 'keeping in touch' to aid with letter writing could be explored by service providers.

13. Some of the women interviewed expressed a preference for reading magazines and Catherine Cookson novels, while men expressed a preference for the sports section of the daily newspapers and books about sport. Literacy modules could be developed which incorporate these interests.
14. Similarly, a number of interviewees were already enrolled in learning activities at the time of the study, including art classes, personal development and computers classes. Service providers may consider building on these existing interests by:
 - Exploring whether or not the educational opportunities pursued by older people may be amenable to building in literacy development.
 - Developing literacy courses which incorporate subjects of interest to older people which also have relevance to their lives.
15. While the majority of interviewees had a preference for one-to-one tuition if they choose to return to learning, some interviewees expressed an interest in attending classes. In order to increase the numbers of older people attending literacy classes for the first time, service providers and practitioners should continue to:
 - Establish dedicated classes for older people as well as mixed age groups.
 - Train older people as literacy tutors and mentors for other older adults accessing services for the first time.
 - Provide clear guidelines on the literacy levels of class participants.

Further research

16. Research (commissioned by NALA) could be undertaken to carry out a systematic review of the experiences of organisations that work with older people to establish:
 - The extent of literacy issues amongst their client group, and how it manifests itself.
 - The needs of their client group in relation to literacy support.
 - The training and resources that organisations need to address and support their client's literacy needs.

- Whether these organisations would be interested in hosting outreach measures.

17. A participatory action research project (commissioned by NALA) should be conducted. This may occur in two sites across the country (one rural and urban), with some of the organisations that participated in this research to date. It could also include some of the participants who took part in this research or other older people that these organisations work with.

Final comments

By sharing their experiences of literacy difficulties so openly and honestly, the older people participating in this study have provided invaluable information on the needs of other older people, who, like them have literacy difficulties and have never engaged with literacy services. Building on the previous 2008 research by NALA, it is hoped that this report will address some of the gaps in the knowledge on this subject and will contribute to an increased understanding of the needs of older people with literacy difficulties in Ireland.

Chapter One - Introduction and methodology

Introduction

To date there is a dearth of empirical research into older people's experience of learning and education over the course of their lives. There is little known about the factors that could affect whether they choose to learn in later life, about what and how they choose to learn, and about the role learning plays in their life as they grow older. In 2008, in a study supported by Age & Opportunity, the NALA research team carried out an exploratory piece of research with older literacy learners in Dublin. The study, 'It's never too late to learn' provided a range of data on the older learners' previous experiences of education, the impact that literacy difficulties had on their family and working lives, and the coping strategies they used to disguise their literacy difficulties. The research also made a number of recommendations pertaining to policy and practice in the area of adult literacy.

In building on the findings and recommendations of this piece of research, NALA identified the need for further research with older people who have not engaged with adult literacy services. This is the main focus of this research report. The study includes people aged 60 years and older, living in both urban and rural settings and where possible, sought to include equal numbers of men and women.

Aims and objectives

The study specifically targets older people, that is, those aged 60 years and above, with literacy difficulties, and who have not engaged with adult literacy services. A core objective of the research is the systematic investigation of attitudes, experiences and views of the older people to their literacy difficulties. The research examines the rationale and the processes which the older people use when dealing with literacy difficulties in their daily lives, the impact of these difficulties on their lives, the coping strategies that they have used and any barriers they identify to returning to education.

The purpose of the research has been to:

- Examine the attitudes, experiences and views of older people to their literacy difficulties.
- Investigate the older people's practices in coping with literacy difficulties and examine the concepts and ideas behind these practices.
- Identify the education and service needs of this group of older people and any significant barriers that impede their return to education.

Methodology

The research process sought to undertake semi-structured interviews with between 50 – 75 individuals (male and female and in rural and urban areas).

A snowballing sampling methodology was engaged, given that the group was 'hard to reach'.³

The term 'hard to reach' can refer to minority and marginalised groups, hidden populations, including those who do not want to be identified (Jones and Newton, 2001). It can also refer to those for whom there are no services (under-served), and those who do not wish to access services ('service-resistant') (Earthman et al 1999; Barlow et al, 2005; Burhansstipanov and Krebs, 2005; Doherty et al, 2004 cited in Brackertz, 2007).

Research involving hard-to-reach groups can be problematic because the target population for the research may be hard to define, which may make it hard to establish whether the research sample is representative of the target population (Savin Williams 1994, cited in Penrod et al, 2003). Furthermore, there can be strong privacy concerns, for example, because of issues to do with stigma, and this can lead to individuals' refusal to engage in research or give unreliable answers to protect their privacy (Heckathorn 1997).

In addition to this, in the case of older people with literacy difficulties, research indicates that they may overestimate their literacy abilities, and therefore individuals may not perceive themselves as having literacy difficulties (Brown et al, 1996 cited in FGS, 2009).

³ 'Snowball' sampling is the most commonly used to method for engaging hard to reach groups. It is a technique for finding research subjects. For example, one subject might give the researcher the name of another subject, who in turn provides the name of a third, etc. It is regarded as a type of 'chain referral' method of recruitment. See Vogt (1999) for a more detailed discussion.

Ethical considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the research, a series of actions were undertaken to ensure that all research and fieldwork activities would be consistent with ethical best practice.

These included the following:

- Researchers were provided with a full briefing session by NALA on literacy approaches and practice in the organisation.
- NALA ethical guidelines and protocols were used by the researchers and NALA provided a briefing session to the researchers on ethical procedures and principles.
- A brief information leaflet for research participants was devised by NALA which outlined the purpose of the study and details on participation in the study. The information included in this leaflet was read out to participants prior to each interview.
- A consent form was devised, for signing by both research participant and researcher. At the outset of interviews, the researcher and research participant signed a consent form and both were given a copy. The consent form specified how the information in the interview would be used, and gave assurances to the interviewee around:
 - Confidentiality
 - Right not to answer questions, if desired
 - Right to withdraw from the process at any stage, if desired.
- The researchers committed to re-engaging with organisations that facilitated contact with the participants with regard to the findings and outcomes of the research process.
- Finally, all materials used were subject to 'plain English' proofing within NALA to ensure that they would be as accessible as possible.

Selecting the sample

At the outset of the research, it was envisaged to undertake the research in selected geographic urban and rural areas. Areas that were originally identified were Dublin, Galway, Waterford, Wexford and Limerick.

However, the research was not restricted to these areas because it was anticipated from the outset that the nature of the research would require a flexible approach to be taken as regards location of interviewees and research participants.

Materials developed

The following materials for information were developed throughout the research process:

- Research support letter from NALA introducing the research process.
- A4 colour poster outlining the research developed by the research team.
- Information leaflet for potential research participants devised by NALA
- General research introduction letter and email developed by the researchers.

Notices outlining the research were also placed in publications and newsletters.

Contact with organisations and role of gatekeepers

Gaining access to an organisation or a research setting is often dependent on 'gatekeepers'. When we use the term 'gatekeepers', we are referring to the organisations, individuals and services that are contacted and enable accessing the research target group. Gatekeepers are important as they have local influence and power to add credibility to a project by their acceptance of it (Seidman, 1998). In this research, recruitment of participants was entirely dependent on gatekeepers.

Organisations were selected on the basis of the prior knowledge of the researchers as well as on the basis of the sector that they were part of and work they undertook. Approximately 320 organisations were contacted between October 2008 and March 2009 and were requested to engage with the research process, if it was of relevance to their client group. Over half of these responded positively to the research.

Amongst the type of organisations contacted over the course of the research were housing bodies, services for older people, national organisations, community/ community development organisations, family support organisations, education services

and other local development organisations (such as Local Area Partnerships and Local Drugs Task Force organisations).

Of the 320 contacts, approximately 170 were followed up with telephone discussions or meetings by a member of the research team. A total of 19 meetings were held with 16 organisations to introduce the research and to seek their support.

The researchers were struck by the measures to which organisations spent time and effort promoting the research and supporting the recruitment of participants.⁴ Where barriers were identified by gatekeepers, these included:

- Organisations' lack of knowledge of their service users having literacy difficulties.
- Service users' not disclosing literacy difficulties and difficulties for organisations in approaching such a sensitive issue.
- Boundary issues, especially for some statutory service providers which had a very specific role (which did not include literacy or related issues).
- Other organisations actively disseminated information about the research, but no service users volunteered to participate.
- A very small number of organisations requested that a support worker could sit in on interviews.

In some instances, there could also have been what Wiles et al (2005) describe as an over-protectiveness of gatekeepers towards their client group, even though this was never disclosed to the research team. For example, in one instance, one community worker said the sensitivity of the research subject was on a par with sexual health issues. It is not clear as to whether this was a reflection of the organisation's perception of the sensitivity of the issue, or the perceptions of the service users themselves.

We found that Family Resource Centres, Community Development Projects, homeless organisations, housing organisations (statutory and voluntary) and Traveller organisations as well as specialist elderly services (including day care centres) tended to be in a position to engage with the research and promoted the research internally.

⁴ For a more detailed discussion on the gatekeepers and methods to engage hard to reach groups, please see the 'research process report'

Many organisations felt that the research had a direct relevance to their work as well as client group, and adopted a strong partnership approach to the research. For these organisations, literacy is a key issue in their clients' lives and therefore a concern to their organisation, even though they may not have had a direct role in provision of literacy supports.

LOCATION OF ORGANISATIONS CONTACTED

Just under half of all organisations contacted were Dublin based (47%). 11% of organisations contacted had a national remit. Organisations in all but the two counties of Monaghan and Kerry were contacted, and the counties where most organisations were contacted were Dublin, Galway, Limerick, Waterford, Wexford, Tipperary and Carlow.

Outcomes

A total of 23 organisations identified and recruited eligible interviewees for participation in the research. These organisations primarily consisted of family support organisations/ family resource centres, homeless and housing support organisations, community development projects, day care centres or support organisations for older people, and Traveller organisations.

Where organisations identified ineligible interviewees, their ineligibility usually related to their age (being under 60 years) or having previously engaged in literacy services.

Approximately half of these gatekeepers had prior contact with the research team or had been referred to the research team by another contact.

Fieldwork

A total of 50 research participants were recruited. Of these, seven were not eligible for interview (arising from their age, or having previously engaged in literacy services: this was only discovered in the course of interview) and a total of 43 eligible interviews were undertaken.

Of the 43 participants that fit the research criteria, 74% were female and 26% were male. 47% were from outside the Dublin area and 53% from Dublin. Interviews were undertaken in Dublin, Louth, Kilkenny, Waterford, Wexford and Galway.

Each interview took approximately 45 minutes to one hour to complete. Interviews took place in community centres or the premises of 'gatekeeper' organisations or in the homes of those interviewed.

Each interview was taped, with the consent of the participants, for later transcription.⁵ However, the taped interview did not include details that could identify the participant, such as name, date of birth and location of interview. Interviews were also coded in such a way as to protect the individual's identity.

During the interview, baseline data about the participant was gathered by the researcher, and this included details on their age, gender, educational attainment and history, household structure, current employment and training status, and employment history.

Those interviewed were provided with information on the availability of literacy services in their area, and asked whether they requested any further assistance or support in accessing literacy services. In two instances, contact was made on behalf of the interviewee with literacy services, which in turn followed up with the interviewee.

Upon completion of the interview, each participant was given a voucher of €15 as a small gesture in recognition of their time given and commitment to the research process. Participants were not made aware of the voucher until each interview was completed.

Data analysis

The research team drafted the initial interview format, which went through several modifications, including changes to the research questions and language (See Appendix 1). The majority of the data were gathered using qualitative research methods with some quantitative data collected through the use of a pre-coded questionnaire (used to gather baseline and profile information).

⁵ In two instances, notes were taken as the interviewees had requested that the interview was not taped.

Verbatim transcripts of all interviews were prepared (with the exception of two interviews where notes were taken at the request of the interviewees).

Quantitative data were stored in an Excel spreadsheet and were used to generate graphs and charts as a visual representation of this data (these are included in the 'demographic profile' section of chapter 3).

The initial stage of the analysis process involved a thorough reading and re-reading of the interview data. Open coding was used in the case of all the transcripts to group concepts under category labels. The participants' experiences were used to generate themes during analysis and these governed the structure and content of the findings and analysis chapters. Representations of the older learners' views and experiences are supported by edited excerpts and/or quotes in full.

Limitations of this study

This research does not make any claims regarding the frequency or commonness of particular educational experiences among all older people with literacy difficulties, or all older people with literacy difficulties who have not engaged in literacy services in particular. Rather it sought to elicit the views and experiences relevant to this particular group of older people. As with any qualitative study, care should be taken if generalising the results of this research to all older people with literacy difficulties in the Irish context. The sample size is relatively small and while every effort has been made to recruit older people with literacy difficulties from diverse backgrounds (gender, age, geographical profile, etc.), there may be a systematic bias in the type of older person willing to participate in the research. Another possible bias may have arisen from interviewer style. However, by designing an accessible information leaflet and liaising extensively with a broad spectrum of potential gatekeepers, and by designing an interview schedule that was relatively flexible and responsive to issues raised by the older participants, all reasonable attempts were made to reduce possible bias.

This study is small scale and limited in its range. The researchers acknowledge that the data collected here and findings are as a result of interviewing a small sample. While

extensive efforts were made to recruit larger numbers, the sensitivity of the topic being researched and the time constraints imposed did not support a larger study.

Format of report

The report is divided into six sections as follows:

- **Executive summary** - provides a brief synopsis of the contents of the report
- **Introduction & methodology** - provides background information on NALA and the research study, including reference to previous reports on older people with literacy difficulties produced by NALA. The introduction also outlines the aims and objectives of this research. The second part of the chapter is given over to the methodology employed in conducting the research, which included the use of snowball sampling in the recruitment of older adults with literacy difficulties and conducting profile questionnaires and in-depth interviews.
- **Literature review** - collates and presents literature on older people with literacy difficulties available both nationally and internationally, including literature on conducting research with 'hard to reach' groups and on barriers to participation in education.
- **Research findings and analysis** - set out the information gathered from questionnaires and interviews conducted with older people and identifies and analyses significant themes emerging in relation to early educational experiences, impact of literacy difficulties on the individual, on home, work and family life; coping strategies devised by participants and attitudes to returning to education.
- **Discussion and recommendations** - offers an overview of the main findings and puts forward suggestions for developing literacy services for older people with literacy difficulties who have yet to engage, based on the findings from this research. The chapter ends with a conclusion of the report.
- The **bibliography, glossary, and appendices** sections follow the above sections of the report.

Chapter Two - Literature Review

Introduction

This section examines available literature from both the national and international contexts on older adults with literacy difficulties.⁶ The policy context influencing literacy service provision for older people is also explored. The chapter also outlines literature on barriers to participation in learning and identifies gaps in the existing body of research.

Terminology and definitions of literacy

The OECD has defined literacy as a particular capacity and mode of behaviour: the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community - to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential. Differences in levels of literacy can have both an economic and social impact: literacy affects, inter alia, labour quality and flexibility, employment, training opportunities, income from work and wider participation in civic society.⁷

NALA's own definition is more expansive and takes into consideration the social practice element of literacy - literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. However, it includes more than the technical skills of communication: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situations; explore new possibilities and initiate change.

Profile of older people in Ireland

Older people in Ireland make up more than one-tenth of the population. Census 2006 figures indicate that the number of people aged 65 years and over currently stands at 467, 926⁸. Furthermore, the population of older people in Ireland is on the increase. By 2025 it is predicted that 36% of Ireland's population will be aged 50 plus.⁹ By 2036, older

⁶ Adapted from FGS Consulting (2009): *Literature Review – Older People with Literacy Difficulties*

⁷ (http://www.oecd.org/document/2/0,3343,en_2649_39263294_2670850_1_1_1_1,00.html) retrieved 10th November, 2008).

⁸ <http://www.cso.ie/statistics/popnbyage2006.htm>

⁹ Manpower Ireland Older Workers Survey, March 2008.

people (aged 65 and over) will account for one fifth (20%) of the population. This constitutes a sizeable increase on current figures. Also, by 2041, the number of people living past the age of 80 is set to quadruple.¹⁰

The following sections of this chapter present the policy context which influences literacy and other learning provision for older people in Ireland, as well as existing literature on the subject from both international and Irish contexts before drawing together and summarising the main findings.

Policy context

Policy relating to literacy and older people's literacy in particular is detailed in this section.

It was largely in response to the publication of the 1995 OECD International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), which appeared in 1997, that the Irish government introduced a National Adult Literacy Programme. The OECD investigation had concluded that one quarter of Irish people scored at the lowest literacy level.

The Fourth Report on Adult Literacy in Ireland, published by the Irish Government in 2006, is largely set against the IALS findings for Ireland. As such the specific needs for older people are not addressed in the report (as those aged 65 and older were excluded from the study here in Ireland). The report however does make a number of recommendations, including drawing up an implementation strategy for the National Adult Literacy Programme for 2007-2013 which 'sets out on a national basis the range of target groups to be addressed, and the action and initiatives planned to support them'. Later the report highlights the importance of family literacy, and recommends the provision of a dedicated family literacy budget countrywide, to fund programmes, staff training, and research. The report also recommends development of a strategy for members of the Travelling Community, and those with specific learning difficulties (Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Science, 2006). No mention was given to older adults, and the family literacy provision highlighted the role of parents and children, rather than a more inclusive concept of family to include older adult

¹⁰ Central Statistics Office, 2001, Pp.2

relatives, such as grandparents. However, the National Development Plan 2007-2013, 'Transforming Ireland – A Better Quality of Life for All' identifies adult literacy as an urgent priority, and 'Towards 2016', the 10 year framework social partnership agreement also aims to increase the number of adult literacy learners to 42,000 per annum by 2009. But Murphy (2007) reports that over 25% of adult literacy students are in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, and it might be hypothesised that since immigration to Ireland is relatively recent, a majority of these will not be specifically older learners. Additional stakeholders, for example Youthreach, do not focus on older learners, but the Senior Travellers' Training Centres do.

After publication of a government Green Paper in 1998, followed by the White Paper 'Learning for Life' in 2000, a framework for the development of adult education in Ireland was established. Funding reached 23 million euro in 2006 and the number of adult learners increased from 5,000 in 1997 to 35,000 in 2005 (Murphy, 2007). Full-time Adult Literacy Organisers (ALOs) now operate from VEC colleges, which provide almost all the literacy education in Ireland, and are responsible for the work of part-time educators. Approximately 1,500 people derive some paid employment from these schemes, in addition to 3,000 volunteers, and students receive an average of two hours' tuition per week at no cost to themselves (Murphy, 2007).

In relation to Information and Communications Technology (ICT) provision for older people, identified by older people in this research as an area of interest, commitments made in the Programme for Government 2007-2012 identified the setting up of training programmes on computer literacy for persons over 50 years old as a priority. Through the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) (part-time) the Department of Education and Science provides funding for ICT courses for adult learners. Older people are a priority target group in BTEI. In 2007, over 5,000 participants on BTEI programmes were aged 55 years or over. This represented 20.6% of all BTEI participants. Of these 7.9% were aged over 65 years.¹¹

¹¹ www.education.ie

International literature on literacy and older people

It is important to note that much of the available research does not use the same terminology as that outlined in the NALA guidelines in respect of literacy, or older people. A large number of publications (mostly emanating from the US and Canada, where such terminology is widely accepted) refer to 'illiteracy', 'low literacy skills', 'poor literacy skills', 'low literacy levels', and to 'the elderly', 'senior citizens', 'seniors'. In as much as is possible we have avoided using such terminology in this review, unless where it is directly quoted from those authors, or where to use any other term would change the inference or meaning of the findings from the literature reviewed. In such instances, it must be borne in mind by the reader that such terminology is not emanating from the authors of this report, or from NALA, as commissioners of this report.

While there is a wealth of research conducted and available on adult literacy¹², there are significant gaps in the research on older people (aged 60 and above, for the purposes of this study) who experience literacy difficulties. Even the International Adult Literacy Study (IALS), the most comprehensive study to date on adult literacy, focuses on working age population – aged between 16 and 65 years¹³ - and the data from that study is now almost 15 years old. The IALS findings have, however, demonstrated that literacy skills amongst the older age cohorts in the study were lower than amongst the younger cohorts in the study across the participating countries.

The IALS study demonstrated that those with the lowest literacy skills were also the least likely to have been involved in formal education or training. Older people are less likely to be as well educated, or to have completed second or third level education as younger generations today.

However, older people may value literacy differently to younger adults. This assertion has certainly been borne out by the findings of this study. This will be discussed further in the findings and analysis chapter of this report. US, Canadian and Netherlands research has shown that many older individuals with limited literacy do not perceive themselves as having literacy difficulties (for example, Brown et al, 1996 cited in FGS, 2009). In spite

¹² See <http://www.nala.ie/index.cfm/section/publications/top/1/ext/Publications/> or <http://www.dalc.ie/publications.html>

¹³ See http://www.oecd.org/document/2/0,3343,en_2649_39263294_2670850_1_1_1_1.00.html for details of the IALS survey. Canada extended the survey to include people up to the age of 69 years old.

of lower formal educational attainment, and poorer literacy than today's younger adults, most of the older generation functions and contributes to society, having worked and participated in family and community effectively throughout their lives. Many older people have worked in jobs that that did not require high numeracy or literacy, where second level or even primary schooling was adequate for entry to the workforce. However, even for those that finished school, the education they received may not have prepared them for the demands of today's society (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2000, cited in FGS, 2009).

Experiences of literacy difficulties: the individual and beyond

How literacy difficulties impact upon the individual cannot be measured in quantifiable terms, unlike literacy levels, or skills; nor can such impacts be generalised, as the felt impact is dependent on the individual circumstances. What is clear is that literacy difficulties affect the individual on numerous levels, including at the workplace, as a consumer, as a parent and in social situations (Poff Roman, 2004). In their study on older learners in Dublin, NALA researchers (2008) found that many participants feared that immediate and extended family members would 'think less' of them, once the extent of their literacy difficulties was revealed. Similarly some older learners were reluctant to engage in community activities, or to associate with nearby neighbours.

Many older people began their working lives at a time when high literacy skills were neither required nor necessary to do the job (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2000, cited in FGS, 2009). In Ireland, for example, many of today's older people entered the workforce with primary school education only, as free second level education was only introduced in 1967.

According to Poff Roman (2004) one of the most serious implications of literacy difficulties for adults is the inability to obtain employment and receive competitive wages. Freer's study (1994) examined how rural older people viewed literacy, and literacy needs in their lives. He determined a number of life-themes around which literacy and literacy needs impacted upon older people, including family, work, retirement, church, health, shopping and banking, information needs. He also gained older peoples' views on learning to read with a literacy volunteer and their views on

older adult literacy. These themes provided the social-context perspective necessary to understand how rural older adults viewed literacy. A number of the participants in his study reported literacy difficulties as having impeded them in gaining the employment that they wanted. During their working lives, promotion opportunities and advancement was often unavailable, either due to the individual's own reluctance, or inability to perform the literacy tasks necessary to achieve advancement. In this regard, the NALA study (2008) found that a significant number of older learners were reluctant to pursue promotion and training due to their literacy difficulties, and because of what participants described as their problems with reading and writing, some turned down the chance of promotion when it was offered to them. However, overall, participants reported that they had led effective and efficient work lives (NALA, 2008). Both of the findings identified above have re-emerged as significant in this study with older people who have never engaged with literacy services (see chapter 3 for further analysis).

Following on from this, a study commissioned by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) on behalf of the Australian Government, completed by Waterhouse and Virgona (2005) also documented the positive employment experiences of 'successful' people with literacy difficulties.

This study investigated how 'successful' people with limited literacy have achieved and sustained employability. In this research, success is defined by economic independence and continuous employment, stable relationships and successful parenting. Other criteria included academic achievement, attainment in business and wealth generation. In various ways, the individuals lived successful lives, *'However, their success has not been due to mastery over the written word'* (Waterhouse and Virgona, 2005).

While the research did not specifically focus on older people, it is based on ten case histories, which reveal that individuals, of all ages, can achieve success in their lives, despite their literacy difficulties. However, the strategies adopted often involve some degree of deception, avoidance and dependence. Perseverance, social networks and reliance on new technologies emerged as key strategies used by the participants, and resilience was identified as a significant personal attribute for success.

This study observes that schools and adult literacy education providers have a relatively narrow interpretation of what constitutes success. The lives of the individuals represented in the study show that broader interpretations and multiple pathways to success are possible and needed. It emphasises the importance of focusing on positive capabilities rather than perceived deficits when it comes to supporting and working with people with literacy difficulties, as this will open up possibilities for learning, personal development and vocational success.

The report also makes the following recommendation to support individuals with literacy difficulties who have never engaged with literacy services:

The experience of people with literacy difficulties who do not seek adult literacy programs is poorly understood, covert and unsupported. More work needs to be done to understand their needs and to assist employers and educators to maximise opportunities for these people. (p.8)

Coping strategies for dealing with literacy difficulties

Freer demonstrated how needs presented themselves in older people with literacy difficulties. Instrumental needs, or 'coping' needs, he argues, include skills that are required for functioning in today's society, often referred to as survival skills (Freer, 1994). Such coping or instrumental needs are those required to carry out daily tasks such as shopping, writing cheques, reading correspondence, reading, understanding and dealing appropriately with social security and other governmental literature, reading prescriptions, reading and processing work related literature and information. Expressive needs on the other hand are more to do with pleasure and leisure social interactions - such as sending cards and letters to family and friends, reading books and magazines for leisure and pleasure rather than for information acquisition purposes, carrying on community meetings, reading and telling stories to grandchildren.

Research has shown that many older adults with literacy difficulties do not perceive they have such difficulties, or that these difficulties are as severe as they actually are. Van der Kamp and Scheeren found in their study of functional literacy among older adults in the Netherlands that older people felt that, as long as there was a reasonable solution for

their literacy needs in daily life, there were no problems. Once the final outcome was satisfying for them, that was what mattered (Van der Kamp and Scheeren, 1996). Data gathered as part of this research study corroborate the findings from the Dutch study to a large extent and will be discussed in further detail in chapter 3.

While there are a myriad of such coping mechanisms practised by older adults with literacy difficulties from the literature reviewed, for the most part they consist of avoidance; reliance upon family, friends, and colleagues; reliance on memory skills and learned habits. However, Jacobs (1987) points out that an older person with literacy difficulties has had a lifetime of experience with coping and adapting to situations which require literacy, and that this is a measure of success, not failure.

For adults with literacy difficulties, the most common form of compensating strategy is to use family and friends to assist with basic daily literacy tasks such as reading mail, filling forms and so on.

Therefore the impact of literacy difficulties goes beyond the individual. Many older people with literacy difficulties are highly dependent on family members and close friends. According to Poff Roman (2004), this dependence imposes a considerable burden on the family or support system of the individual concerned. While she does not elaborate on what this 'burden' consists of, it is clear that there is a substantial time requirement of the helper, as depending on the degree of literacy difficulties, assistance can often be required to carry out many basic daily tasks, for example, shopping, reading and responding to letters, form filling, getting numbers in a telephone book and banking (Freer, 2004).

As their family structure changes (e.g., spouse or partner dies, children grow up and move out) and as friends pass away or leave the social circle, this strategy may be increasingly difficult for older people to maintain.

In such circumstances, older people often ask social workers, visiting health professionals, friends and co-workers to assist them with some reading, writing or computing task. Van der Kamp and Scheeren found that the size of the social network was important: most of the older people they interviewed were not afraid to ask

institutions for information when they experienced difficulties with document reading. This echoes Freer's finding that professionals such as bank tellers, store clerks and social service workers were asked to assist the older adult with literacy difficulties. (Freer, 1994).

Where participants were unable to read mail, or receive assistance to read and understand mail, they would often 'just lay it aside'. Without a supportive social network, older people with literacy difficulties suffered negative consequences for not being able to perform such tasks, and increasingly became dependent on social service providers (Freer, 1994).

Practitioners and researchers also recognise the legacy effect of literacy difficulties. Children whose parents have literacy difficulties are more likely to have literacy difficulties themselves. Research by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) has shown, there are statistically significant links between poor literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) skills in parents and poor test performance by their children, with the correlation being strongest at the lower levels of parental literacy and numeracy (Bynner and Parsons, 2006). While these findings from the NRDC and other studies are not supported by the testimonies of those interviewed for this research report, other findings (Jacobs, 1987) which documented parents' feelings of guilt and inadequacy in being unable to help their children with aspects of their education (including reading practice, assistance with homework and even bedtime stories), does hold true.

Changing technological demands

The increasing role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in society is reflected by the International Reading Association which claims that in order to become fully literate, students must be proficient in the new literacies¹⁴ of ICT, and that educators have a duty to integrate ICT into the literacy curriculum.

In Ireland, older people use the internet and computers far less than younger adults do. CSO data shows that in Ireland 18% of those aged 65-74 years and 35% of those aged

¹⁴ Retrieved from http://www.reading.org/resources/issues/positions_technology.html November 25th, 2008

between 55-64 years have used a computer. The percentage usage for all people aged between 16-74 years is 56%. Younger adults have a much higher usage of computers – almost 70% of those aged between 25-34 years, and 63 % of those aged 35-44 years having used a computer. As regards internet usage, 48% of those aged between 16-74 years have used the internet, however for the 55-64 year old age group this falls to 27% and for those aged 65-74 years, the figure is at 12%.¹⁵ However, commitments made by Government to funding ICT initiatives for older people (as identified above) have increased participation among older people from original low levels and are likely to continue to do so if funding continues to meet interest and demand.

The use of ICT has the potential to deeply enrich the lives of older people, not least in the field of literacy learning. The use of ICT can offer an interactive and interesting learning experience which can make language, literacy and numeracy acceptable to some older adults who would otherwise be reluctant to attend courses (NIACE, 2005). ICT, and more specifically internet usage provides new ways of communicating and social interaction which can help reduce the social isolation felt by many older people, and the skills and confidence gained from using the internet can help to boost self-esteem in older people, keep them more mentally alert and give them increased confidence to try other new technologies (Morris, 2007).

Older people & literacy learning

Older people have different reasons for returning to, or taking up, learning in later life than younger people do. Employment is not a key motivation, and older adults generally return to basic education for personal fulfilment (NIACE, 2002).

Research by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) in the UK has found that participation in learning declines with age, falling dramatically for those aged 65 years and over, and that between 1996 and 2002, the numbers of learners aged 75 years and over dropped by one third (NIACE, 2002). The NIACE study found that the earlier a person left school or formal education, the less likely they were to subsequently undertake any sort of formal learning. Another causal factor is that labour market

¹⁵ CSO, 2006 retrieved from http://www.cso.ie/newsevents/pr_informationsociety2006.htm November 2008.

concerns are driving a significant amount of learning and skills education policies and strategies, which further marginalises older learners.

The following section details existing literature on older people and literacy, which has emerged from the Irish context.

Irish Literature on older people with literacy difficulties

In Ireland there is a significant gap in available research vis-à-vis older people with literacy difficulties. However NALA is conducting research in this area which includes their 2008 study of older learners in Dublin, as well as the present study. NALA has also generated publications relating to family literacy, health literacy and financial literacy.

One of the most crucial pieces of current research regarding older people in Ireland is the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) which is currently underway. This 10 year-long study was launched in 2006 and will provide a study of a representative cohort of up to 10,000 Irish people over the age of 50 years, charting their health, social and economic circumstances. The aim of the study is to determine the health needs of older people; the social and economic needs of older people; the health and social needs of families and carers of older people; the biological and environmental components of 'successful ageing'; the contributions that older people are making to society and economy; and how each of these key components (health, wealth, happiness) interact such that we can ensure that Ireland meets the needs and choices of its citizens.¹⁶ The study is in its early phase, and it is hoped that it will provide some learning for policy makers regarding lifelong learning and literacy for adults outside of the working environment.

Aside from the NALA report 'It's never too late to learn' (2008), there is a significant gap in literature emanating from Ireland with a specific focus on older adults with literacy difficulties.

In relation to older adults, literacy and educational attainment, Denny et al (1999) asserted that the relative low literacy level of the Irish population reported in the IALS was largely attributable to a cohort effect, arising from the requirement to pay fees to attend secondary school prior to 1966. They assert that this acted as a barrier to

¹⁶ Retrieved from www.tilda.ie November 28, 2008

participation for many at secondary level in an older age group. Consequently, the older age group has a lower level of educational attainment, which they believe accounts for a lower level of literacy proficiency.

There are a number of studies relating to older people within the broader context of adult and community education which have relevance to this particular study. In a report by AONTAS (2008) on the lifelong learning needs of older people, *'Don't Stop Me Now'*, it was reported that 44.6% of adult education service providers (from a survey sample of 91 providers from around the country) offered literacy and numeracy courses. The providers included staff in Vocational Education Committees (VECs), Family Resource Centres, Local Area Partnerships and City/County Development Boards. In the survey questionnaire providers were asked how they encourage older people to engage with their services. Practitioners cited direct consultation with older people (75.4%), collaboration with other services working with older people (73.8%) and engagement in outreach work (72.1%). Tailoring services to meet the needs of older people (65.6%) and promotional activities (63.9%) were also cited but were less popular options overall. Findings from this research suggest that all of the options identified as important by practitioners in the AONTAS survey are relevant to older people with literacy difficulties. However, as chapter 3 describes in greater detail, older people with literacy difficulties who have never engaged with literacy services place a different emphasis on the factors which they feel would encourage them to participate in literacy learning. For these older people, the relevance of courses to their daily lives is paramount. This and other findings are discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters. The findings suggest that while service providers are working extremely hard on the ground to engage with older people, their efforts may not always result in greater participation by this group, since they may feel that their needs are not being addressed. Therefore a quote by McCarthy (1988) may be as relevant to literacy service providers today as it was over 20 years ago:

The lack of participation of older people in educational courses could be taken as an indication of how little relevance or interest existing provision has for them. It is how to respond innovatively and creatively to the needs of older people which is one of the many challenges facing adult education in Ireland today. (p.24)

There is a dearth of information available on the educational needs of older people in an Irish context and literature pertaining to the learning needs of hard to reach groups (such as older people with literacy difficulties) who are not engaging with literacy services is almost non-existent. This is also true within the international context, as identified by Waterhouse and Virgona (2005) in section 0, above.

Gaps in the Literature

Most known statistics on literacy amongst the adult populations of developed countries is derived from the IALS, which is now more nearly 15 years old. In a number of respects, the IALS data is not sufficient for depicting the specific characteristics of older people with literacy difficulties. Apart from Canada, participating countries measured the skills of adults of working age, i.e. those under the age of 65 years. Canada extended the study to those aged 69 years. Consequently, there is an absence of up-to-date statistics on older people with literacy difficulties. Furthermore, the OECD IALS definition of literacy is heavily skills based, and for many literacy practitioners and researchers is quite narrow, and does not include the social practice aspect of literacy. The IALS cannot depict the specific needs of older people over 65 years, and does not take into account the changing social, health and economic circumstances of those beyond that age.

There is a dearth of research on the effectiveness of targeted literacy learning programmes amongst the elderly. This is not to say such programmes don't exist, but evaluations and reviews of such schemes are not presenting in the literature to the same extent as literature on other adult literacy programmes.

Barriers to participation in adult education and literacy services

This research is concerned with older people who have not returned to adult education to address literacy difficulties. In this section consideration is given to different barriers to participation in adult education and literacy services identified in the literature.

There are five main barriers to adult participation identified in the literature (Cross, 1981; WRC, 2003; Bailey and Coleman, 1998). These are:

- **Contextual** – these barriers include prevailing trends and policy issues towards issues such as social exclusion, equality and educational disadvantage.
- **Institutional** – the ethos, practices and procedures that exclude or discourage adults from participating in organised learning activities, such as inappropriate timing and location of programmes.
- **Informational barriers** – information about opportunities for education, for example, materials used to provide information as well as a paucity of outreach measures to target groups.
- **Situational** – barriers that arise from one’s situation or environment at a given point, for example, lack of time, family commitments, etc.
- **Dispositional** - those related to the attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner, for example, issues to do with age, gender, educational levels and experiential, attitudinal and motivational factors.

Tett (1994) argues that participation in learning is influenced a combination and interaction of diverse factors rather than one or two obstacles, which would be relatively easy to overcome.

Barriers to participation in adult literacy

Personal and dispositional issues appear to be dominant barriers to participation in adult education and literacy services. In Bailey and Coleman’s study into barriers to participation in adult literacy schemes for adults in Ireland, over 50% of both men and women reported cited embarrassment and stigma as a reason for not engaging in literacy services, and it was the most common cited reason (Bailey and Coleman, 1998).

Similarly, in Scotland, the evaluation of the Scottish Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategy in 2006 identified personal sensitivity issues such as the learners’ age, lack of confidence, problems to do with meeting new people or how friends would react as well as identified perceptions of stigma and literacy difficulties as the most important barriers to participation. Other barriers that arose included fears that participation in programmes might be similar to school arose, particularly for those who did not have positive school experiences.

These findings generally reflect the literature in that the most significant barriers reported were related to attitudes and feelings, rather than institutional issues (Tett et al, 2006).

With regard to overcoming barriers to participation, 55% of respondents in the evaluation identified increased publicity as a means of enhancing participation. Other research (e.g. McGivney, 2001; Schuller et al, 2004) has suggested that participation in adult literacy and numeracy learning is often in response to life changing events (such as the loss of a partner, new employment, and children starting school) but this only applied to 7% of the Scottish evaluation's respondents.

In the Scottish evaluation, learners were most likely to be encouraged to enrol on programmes by friends and family in addition to self-encouragement. Service providers were the next most common source. Once learners decided to enrol in programmes, it was important that the process was easy and they met friendly, approachable and knowledgeable people: this was the case for the overwhelming majority of the respondents.

In Bailey and Coleman's study, people returned to literacy services for a range of reasons, for example, in order to help their children, improve their job prospects or change jobs, and to meet their personal development needs. For almost 60% interviewed, joining an adult literacy programme was their first experience of education and training since leaving compulsory education. All survey participants reported non-formal adult education as having a very positive effect and outcome, and examples of benefits included the enjoyment gained from reading a newspaper, increased participation in social and community activities, improved mental health and feelings of personal empowerment. It appears that the most important barrier to be removed is the stigma attached to being a literacy/numeracy learner and the clearest pathway into learning is better publicity both locally and nationally. The research also notes that this implies that publicity should be directed at changing the negative public images of adult literacy and numeracy programmes. A key emphasis should be on how people can improve their own skills and in so doing become more capable and self-confident.

Conclusions

A review of existing research, both Irish and international, highlights the dearth of available information on older people (60 years plus) with literacy difficulties. Older people have different attitudes to literacy than younger generations and those with literacy difficulties may not perceive these difficulties as problematic or may not recognise that they have difficulties at all. Older people are also more likely to experience numeracy difficulties, especially in financial circumstances and are less technologically literate than younger age groups. The policy shift in Ireland towards lifelong learning as a mechanism for up-skilling the workforce often precludes older people interested in availing of literacy services. Even less is known, on a national and an international level, about older people with literacy difficulties who do not engage with literacy services. It is hoped that this research will go some way to addressing the gaps in information regarding the needs and challenges of this group.

The following section details the findings from this research and offers an analysis of emerging themes based on the experiences and attitudes of older people with literacy difficulties who have never engaged with literacy services.

Chapter Three - Research findings & analysis

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from interviews with older people with literacy difficulties who have not engaged with adult literacy services. It analyses the significant themes emerging from these findings as they relate to the main aims of the research: namely, to understand the participants' attitudes, views and experiences of literacy; to explore their coping strategies; and to uncover their educational and service needs while identifying any barriers which might impede their participation. Interviews were conducted during the fieldwork phase of the research study, which began in December 2008 and was completed in April 2009.

This chapter must be prefaced, however, with an acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of the group of older people who were interviewed.

The interviewees ranged in age from almost 60 years old to late 80's. A proportion of the interviewees lived in cities and urban areas while the remainder lived in towns and remote rural areas.

Interviewees were born into varying socio-economic circumstances. Difficulties with literacy existed among some interviewees' parents but not among others. Interviewees were split between those who enjoyed their early experiences of education and those who had negative memories of it. Some attributed their literacy difficulties to being ignored by teachers, while others missed out on school due to lifestyle, illness or working to financially support their families. Many of the interviewees had never married and did not have children, while others had extensive family networks. A small proportion of the interviewee sample had experienced homelessness; others had experienced discrimination due to membership of an ethnic minority group. All of these factors have impacted on the interviewees experiences of literacy difficulties throughout their lives. Their experiences therefore are not homogeneous.

Despite this, however, commonalities existed among the interviewees which are highlighted thematically in this chapter. By analysing these themes further we can

identify the learning to be gained from this research and also generate recommendations for the further development of literacy services for older people in Ireland, especially for those who have yet to address their literacy difficulties. The chapter is structured as follows:

- **Participants' histories**
 - Demographic profile
 - Early experiences of education
- **Experiences, attitudes and views of literacy**
 - Personal and social life
 - Working life
 - Family life
- **Coping strategies**
 - Practical coping strategies
 - Personal coping strategies

- **Returning to education**
 - Low self-confidence and anxiety
 - Age
 - Benefits of returning to education
 - Choice of literacy services

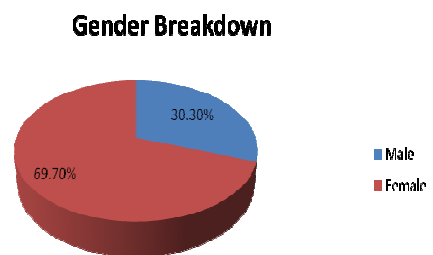
Participant's histories

By providing a breakdown of the responses to a quantitative survey conducted with each of the participants to gather baseline data, and coupled with qualitative data gathered from the interviews regarding the participants' early experiences of education, it is possible to assemble background information in this section, which will provide both an introduction to the participants lives and offer various explanations as to how their literacy difficulties came about. These histories are presented below.

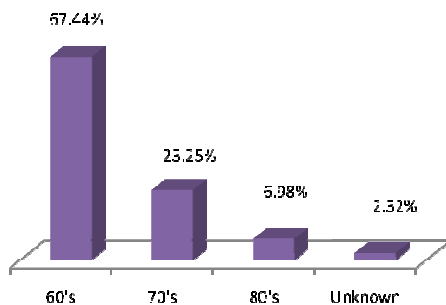
Demographic profile

Older people participating in the research were asked to complete a brief questionnaire at the end of each interview. From the responses given, it is possible to build a profile of the participants. The following graphs and charts illustrate the information provided in 43 of the 50 questionnaires returned. Seven of the interviews conducted were deemed ineligible for inclusion in the research based on the age of participants (under 60 years) or after it emerged that the interviewees had, at some point in their past, engaged with literacy services.

Of the 43 eligible participants, 31 were female and 12 were male. This equates to almost 70% female participation and just over 30% participation by men.



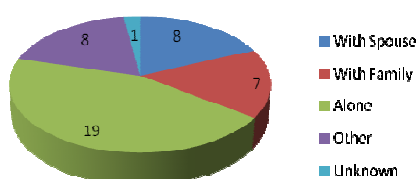
AGE RANGE



Ages varied among the 43 respondents but the majority (more than 67%) of participants could be grouped in the '60s' category (29 respondents). The oldest participants, who made up almost 7% of the total were in their mid-to late 80's. With just under 25% of respondents reporting their age as in their 70s (10

participants). Just over two percent of respondents did not provide information on their age.

DO YOU LIVE...?

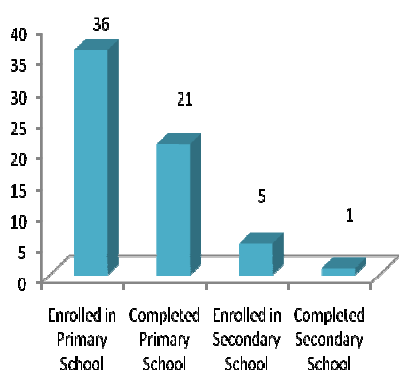


Respondents were asked about their living situations. Almost half of all participants reported living alone (19 respondents in total), while the living situations of the remaining interviewees were almost evenly divided

between living with a spouse (8 respondents), living with family (7 respondents) and 'other' (8 respondents). This last category includes older Travellers living on halting sites and those living in temporary hostel accommodation.

SCHOOL HISTORY

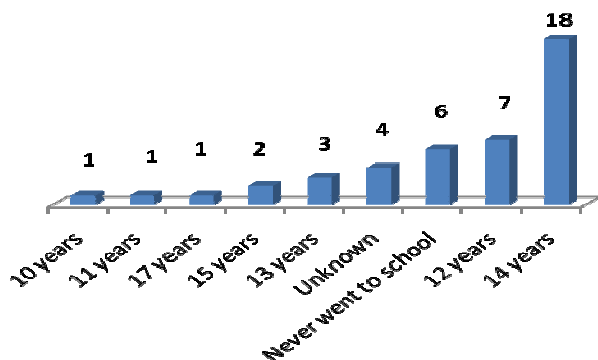
Respondents were also asked about their school history, including enrolment and completion of primary and secondary school. The graph, below, illustrates the responses given.



The majority of respondents (36 in total), with the exception of members of the Traveller community, enrolled in primary school education. Of these, 21 completed their primary education. However, it should be noted that not all of these respondents graduated with a primary certificate.

Of the 21 respondents who completed primary education only five individuals went on to enrol in a secondary school. Of the five, only 1 completed secondary education. These low numbers may reflect the financial constraints, which paying fees placed on Irish families prior to the introduction of free secondary education in 1967.

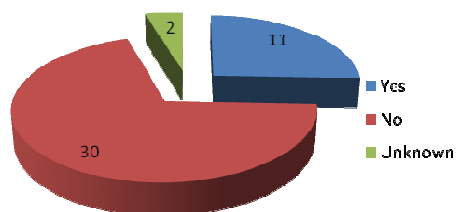
AGE LEFT SCHOOL



The vast majority of respondents (30 in total) left primary school at the age of 14 years or younger. The most frequently arising age to have left school was 14 years (18 respondents), followed by those who finished primary school at 12 years (seven in total). A small

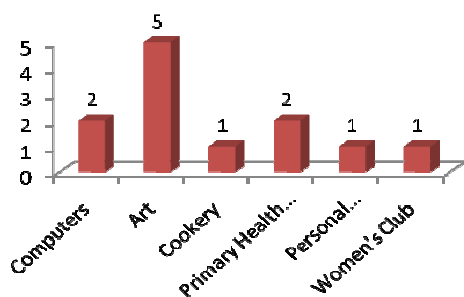
number of respondents finished school at the earlier ages of ten and 11 years. Six of the 43 respondents had never attended school. This number is drawn from the Travellers who participated in the research.

PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING ACTIVITIES



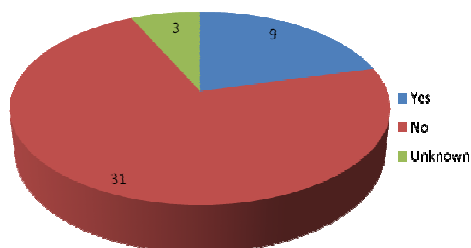
A small minority (11 respondents) of the older people participating in the research confirmed attending some form of learning activity in the past 12 months. However 30 respondents reported they had not engaged in any form of organised educational activity.

TYPES OF ACTIVITIES INVOLVED IN



Among the 11 respondents who participated in a learning activity, the majority (five people) were taking part in art classes. Two of the older Traveller participants had been involved in Primary Health Care Training with other Travellers for a number of years. Other activities cited include computer training, personal development and cookery classes. One respondent had been involved in more than one activity during the same period.

WORKING OR RETIRED?



Finally, respondents were asked whether or not they were in the work force. The vast majority (31 individuals) of these older people stated that they were no longer in paid employment, while nine interviewees reported currently working. Some of the respondents answered 'no' to both

the questions around work and retirement as a number of these older people were too young to retire but were not working due to illness or invalidity and were in receipt of a disability/invalidity payment from the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

The following sections of the chapter outline the findings from the interviews conducted with older people with literacy difficulties who have not engaged with literacy services.

Early experience of education

Interviewees were asked about their early memories of education and their experiences in the formal education system. They recalled both positive and negative memories of school. As outlined in the demographic profile above, for the vast majority of those interviewed their experience of education was limited to primary school only. Positive memories usually centred on an interest in and enjoyment of the subjects offered as part of the curriculum. Interviewees specifically mentioned subjects such as English, history, poetry and religion.

I loved it, I cried if I couldn't go to school. I liked all the subjects.
(Female, 68, Dublin)

Negative experiences of education were more prevalent however. Interviewees cited boredom at school and teasing from other pupils as some of the negative occurrences which shaped their early experiences of education.

Did I like school? That's a definite NO! (Male, 64, Louth)

It was boring, you know, and you thought out of the place you would never get. (Female, 69, Dublin)

Children who were labelled as 'slow' or 'weak' by teachers were sometimes teased by their class mates and made to feel "small" (Female, 61, Leinster) which had a demoralising effect on their attitudes to learning.

For some of the interviewees consulted, their early experiences of education were also shaped by cultural background or events in their home and personal lives. Members of the Traveller community who participated in the research study had never enrolled in primary school and had not engaged in formal education for any significant period of

time. This was due in part to the amount of time their families spent travelling 'on the road'.

We wouldn't have gone to school because we wouldn't be let you see, we were travelling... around the country. And the Travellers that time, they didn't believe in living in a house ...that was my father and mother's life on the road ... we were reared up on the road. (Female, 64, Dublin)

The conflicting demands of formal education and the Traveller way of life were further compounded by intervention from the Gardaí. Interviewees stated that when their families tried to set up camp in towns around the country they would often be moved on by Gardaí. An exception, however, was usually made in the weeks and months before First Holy Communion and Confirmation were due to be celebrated.

They says 'they can't shift them for the month, because the kids, the childer is going to school, they have to make their confirmation'. But when the confirmation was over we were moved on again. (Female, 69, Dublin)

Enrolling in school for longer than a month or two would have required Traveller families to settle in a particular area for long periods of time, which, for some Travellers would mean compromising their identity and nomadic way of life. The combination of nomadic lifestyle and discrimination practiced by members of the settled community and law enforcement meant that none of the Travellers interviewed for the research study attended primary school for a period of more than a couple of months during their childhoods. This had a major impact on their literacy levels. Their experiences of education were shaped by discrimination on the part of local communities and institutional racism practiced by the Gardaí and local schools. The education system did not cater for their way of life, in particular their nomadic lifestyle. However, these interviewees were also influenced by aspects of the Traveller culture which, they argue, at the time placed little emphasis on education, especially for women. These attitudes and assumptions may still influence the mindset of older Travellers experiencing literacy difficulties and may act as a barrier to returning to education in later life.

Among the remaining older people interviewed, some had been absent from school as children due to health problems or due to the illness of a loved one. This impacted negatively on their schooling, in particular their ability to keep up with school work. As a result, they were often 'left behind' by teachers.

I was always sick when I was a child. So I missed out. I could spend six months in hospital at a time. So when you went back [to school] you couldn't catch up. No matter what class you went into you were always put at the back of the class. (Female, 69, Dublin)

I was in bed you see, for three months [with polio]. Then you'd be lost in school. (Male, 62, Dublin)

Other interviewees had to leave school for months at a time in order to care for one or other or their parents when they became ill. Some were also required to take time off school in order to earn extra money to support their families. A few were taken out of school permanently by their parents, in order to help support the family financially, despite not being legally old enough to work full time.

I went to work, it was in a sewing factory but I was so small I had to stand on a box. (Female, 69, Dublin)

TEACHERS

The vast majority of negative experiences recounted by interviewees stemmed from feelings of fear or anger directed toward the educators who taught them. This was by far the most prolific topic of discussion. Some interviewees were taught by lay teachers while others attended schools where the majority of teaching staff were members of religious orders.

A number of interviewees have positive memories of the teaching staff at the schools they attended and some had very fond memories of specific individuals who had taught them over 50 years before. A few interviewees recalled their teacher's kindness and gentleness. Some also received additional literacy support from their teachers.

She used to bring me up to the top of the class, and I'd sit at the side of her table, and she used to try and help me with the spelling.
(Female, 61, Leinster)

Positive memories relating to teaching staff were far less prevalent among interviewees than examples of negative experiences. The types of negative experience recalled by the majority of those interviewed can be divided into two categories:

- Physical & verbal abuse
- Exclusion & neglect

Both members of religious orders and lay teachers were described by the majority of interviewees as using physical force and corporal punishment in the class room.

She [nun] was a brute, you know, that's the only way of putting it. She'd be beating the legs, anywhere she could get me. She was a violent, very violent person. (Female, 68, Dublin)

They'd beat you. They treated you like an auld dog that time!
Rough. (Male, 66, Louth)

An interviewee recalled being hit by a nun as a child. The nun used the back of her hand or the handle of a hurley stick. The nun was not always able to physically discipline the children as she suffered from rheumatism. In these instances she nominated another child to administer the punishment. If the second child did not make sure to hit the first child with sufficient force, they were also physically punished (Male, 62, Dublin). One interviewee labelled his teachers "thugs" due to memories (which he shared with many other interviewees) of regular beatings for minor misbehaviour. These beatings were administered using canes, switches, golf clubs and bamboo sticks (Male, 66, Louth). Experiencing this physical violence at the hands of their teacher was described by the interviewees as being so traumatic that it impacted on their desire and ability to learn.

I got on well with the other nuns but I just couldn't learn with that nun, I just couldn't. I was hurted [sic] that much I didn't want to learn anything else with her. (Female, 68, Dublin)

Verbal abuse was also widely reported by interviewees, some of whom remember being called a 'dunce' or 'slow learner'.

I couldn't [stand up and read], because I'd start 'uh, uh, uh' [stammering] and I was told I was 'stupid, and sit down'... I got no encouragement or anything. (Female, 74, Dublin)

Other teachers made efforts to publicly humiliate children in the classroom. These experiences often led to feelings of powerlessness for some.

Many of those interviewed spoke of being made to sit at the back of the class in school, usually because the teacher perceived them to be 'slow learners'. Some interviewees suggested that an element of class snobbery was also at play, with farmers' daughters seated at the front of the class and farm labourers' daughters seated at the back of the class in rural schools. Those who sat at the back spoke of feeling 'left behind' and forgotten about, while the children at the front of the class got the teachers' attention. This led to feelings of isolation and exclusion among children sitting at the back of the class. Some interviewees spoke of being left almost entirely to their own devices, encouraged to draw pictures while the teacher got on with the task of teaching everyone else in the class. These children were then excluded from all lessons. One interviewee remembers drawing, or sometimes "pretending to write, but it was really only scribbling." He remembers that this made him feel terrible and he dreaded going to school every day as a result (Male, 64, Dublin). Another interviewee expressed resentment toward the school inspectors who visited her class as a child, since she felt they were often complicit in the practice of ignoring and segregating 'weaker' students.

Like I seen when the inspectors used to come in to the school, the inspectors knew not to ask the ones in the back of the class the question but you could ask the ones in the front, you know, and then he would think the teacher was doing a great job, 'you're doing a great job' (laughs). He didn't want to rock the boat. (Male, 64, Dublin)

The practices employed by their teachers shaped the interviewees experiences of school, more so than any other. They believe that this shaped their attitudes towards education and learning, which were mostly negative as a result. Feelings expressed by these interviewees, which they associate with early experiences of education, include fear, anger, bitterness, resentment and boredom.

While the origins of an individual's literacy difficulties are often multi-faceted and complex, some teachers' practices are likely to have contributed to or even exacerbated the interviewees' literacy difficulties. These difficulties could be viewed as a legacy of the unjust teaching practices which proliferated in the Irish school system at the time and which were elaborated upon in the interviews. Such practices may also have contributed, at least partially, to reluctance on the part of some interviewees to enter learning environments in subsequent stages of their lives (due to negative associations with their childhood and perhaps to lacking the confidence to succeed in an educational setting). Feelings such as these can become barriers to learning for older people with literacy difficulties.

Other factors which may have impacted on the participants' early experiences of education are outlined briefly here. The majority of interviewees came from two parent households and had large families with numerous siblings. In a small number of cases, interviewees grew up in one parent families or orphanages. Many of the interviewees' parents (either one or the other and in some cases, both) had literacy difficulties or were not involved in their children's education.

My mother couldn't read or write and father was away in England during the war so I had nobody to help me. (Female, 77, Dublin)

Due to busy work lives, the limited emphasis placed on homework and few opportunities for communication with teachers, many parents were unaware of their children's literacy difficulties. However, some interviewees spoke of parents who were very supportive of their education and who often helped them with school work. One interviewee remembers his mother using the Beano comics to help him practice reading at home (Male, 64, Dublin). Other parents paid for additional tuition for their children to help them improve in reading, writing and spelling. Some interviewees received help with school work from older siblings.

Pursuing secondary education was not an option for many of the interviewees due to the expense involved. Although a small number of interviewees attended secondary education, including the local 'tech', for up to a year after finishing primary school, the experiences of primary school were so negative for many, that the possibility of

attending secondary education would not have been considered, even if the expense was not a factor.

Interviewees fortunate enough to attend secondary school often did not stay to complete their education. Parents who could afford it paid for one or two years of additional schooling, after which point their children were expected to go out to work. An interviewee who had developed literacy difficulties in primary school felt she benefitted from attendance at secondary school and might have overcome her difficulties completely had she not been required to leave in order to find work.

I felt I was kind of overcoming the, what I lacked in the national school, I was beginning to, but then I had to come out of it [secondary school], and go to work. (Female, 72, Leinster)

The absence of free secondary education in Ireland until 1967 may have contributed to the literacy difficulties of these interviewees and other older people who were in the education system at the time, as asserted by Denny et al (1999). This is not to suggest however, that literacy difficulties which developed during primary education would automatically have been rectified if an opportunity to attend secondary education had arisen. However, the expense of secondary education prior to 1967 curtailed any opportunities for those with literacy difficulties to seek supports to address these difficulties before leaving the school system. A further difficulty which specifically affected some of those interviewees from rural areas, in continuing their education, was the absence of any post primary schools in the local area or vicinity of their home.

There was no other school around then. To go to [secondary] school, you'd have to go to Kilkenny, on the bus, and that was fifteen miles, or you'd have to go to Thurles, and cycle there, and that was nine miles. (Female, 59, Dublin)

For the boys in rural areas in particular, there was always the opportunity to undertake casual and seasonal work on a farm, and this, coupled with harsh financial circumstances, often undermined ongoing school participation. Some interviewees, mostly women, remained in the family home after finishing primary school and helped their parents out around the house or farm for a year or more before seeking employment. However most of the interviewees went straight into a job after school, since their financial

circumstances required that any child in the family who was old enough to work should contribute to the household income. The impact which literacy difficulties had on the interviewees' working lives is examined in a subsequent section of this report.

The attitudes of older people in this research study towards formal education and their early experiences of the education system are largely identical to those of the older people who participated in an earlier NALA research study 'It's never too late to learn'. Both groups reported negative experiences, particularly in respect of relationships with school staff. Despite this, however, the groups participating in the earlier study went on to engage with literacy services later in their lives while the older people participating in this study did not. This insight offers new learning for NALA, since it could be reasoned that other factors in the lives of both groups must have been more influential in decision-making about their literacy.

Moving on from early experiences of education, the following section examines the impact which literacy difficulties have had on the personal development of the individuals interviewed.

Experiences, attitudes & views of literacy

Personal and social life

In a small number of cases, interviewees experienced difficulties with all aspects of their literacy. However, this is not true of the majority of older people interviewed. While these older people reported profound difficulties with one aspect of their literacy, e.g. spelling, they often had little or no difficulty with other aspects, e.g. reading (many of the interviewees expressed great enjoyment in reading books, newspapers and magazines on a regular basis). A much smaller number of interviewees had no difficulties with reading and writing but were unhappy with the extent of their numeracy skills. In the adult literacy sector this occurrence (the uneven distribution of difficulty with reading, writing, spelling and/or numbers) is referred to as spiky profiling.¹⁷ It was common among the

¹⁷ Having gaps in basic skills does not mean that the individual has problems with all of the basics of reading, writing, verbal communication and number work. Individuals have different skills, strengths and weaknesses. It is unusual for someone to be equally strong in all areas. People's abilities tend to be 'spiky', which means that they can be very good at one thing but have a real difficulty with another, which can interfere with their overall performance. For more detail on 'spiky profiles' see NALA (2006) and Hickey (2008).

interviewees who participated in this research study to address this imbalance by utilising their strengths to offset the weaker aspects of their literacy. For example, those who considered themselves poor spellers but were more confident with reading and writing usually tried to memorise the spelling of a word by reading and re-reading it several times or by carefully copying the word from a book, a dictionary or a newspaper.

SELF-CONFIDENCE

The vast majority of participants agreed that their literacy difficulties have impacted negatively on their self-confidence. Many described battling with low self-esteem and feeling 'less than' due to low academic attainment in general and difficulties with literacy in particular. As identified in the sections above, interviewees recognised that the educational institutions they attended had failed them in many respects. In spite of this, it was common for many of the interviewees to internalise feelings of guilt and inadequacy and to blame themselves for what they perceived to be personal shortcomings which resulted in their literacy difficulties.

Some described their difficulty in terms of defeat and failure while others referred to it as a debilitating condition or compared it to a sickness:

The education won't do them [grandchildren] any harm anyway, it's a good thing, because I know, I know what it's like for not to be able to do it. I'd start telling them about meself then, 'Look at the state of me, look at the state of me, I can't read or write ...and you see how handicapped I am'. Well, it is a handicapness [sic], isn't it? (Female, 69, Dublin)

It was like years ago when people had TB, like people would walk the other side of the street, like they'd put a mask over their face, and people are kind of the same today [about literacy]. (Female, 69, Dublin)

As a result, many of the interviewees conceal their literacy difficulties from other people, particularly those outside their family circle, for fear of dismissal or ridicule. A homeless

interviewee explained that he does not tell other men in the hostel about his literacy difficulties as he believes they would "make a laugh of you." (Male, 64, Louth)

I think they think that because you are illiterate (sic) you don't have an opinion, that's the way I feel, so I wouldn't let people like that know. (Female, 67, Dublin)

Some interviewees also believe that their confidence in expressing opinions has been curtailed as a result of their literacy problems.

I always remember my husband saying 'Jesus if you had got an education' he said 'you'd have started World War III!', because I think I would want to voice an opinion. (Female, 69, Dublin)

It is evident from the quotes above that many of the interviewees view their difficulties with literacy as severe enough to warrant comparison with physical disability, illness or pathology. These difficulties impact on the interviewees confidence levels, which in turn impact negatively on their perceived lack of entitlement or ability to express their opinions on a range of subjects.

Nevertheless, a considerable number of older people interviewed did not believe their literacy difficulties affected their self-confidence or their ability to voice opinions. While acknowledging the importance of strong literacy skills this group suggested that literacy is only one important element of personal development and one gauge, among many, for measuring achievement. They spoke of a sense of achievement in having managed their whole adult lives without literacy skills. They were also proud that they had developed other skills throughout their lives to compensate for the literacy difficulties, which were cultivated as a result of life experiences. These skills include honing memory, developing avoidance tactics and cultivating relationships with individuals in various settings, who were in a position to offer support with tasks requiring literacy. These and other coping strategies are discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections of the report.

International literature referenced in preceding chapters highlights the trend among older people with literacy difficulties to taking a very pragmatic approach to their literacy. Once they believe they can 'get by' and accomplish the tasks which make up their daily lives, they are often unconcerned with addressing their literacy difficulties.

The international literature reviewed also suggested broadening definitions of 'success' to acknowledge the life achievements of those experiencing literacy difficulties. The interviewees in this study also understood that their skills and life experiences had allowed them to make their way relatively successfully through life (perhaps not in academic or career terms but in other ways, such as running their homes, providing for their families and raising happy, well adjusted children).

I can work in the house and cook, even though I can't read and write. (Female, 70, Galway)

[W]hen I was small I could do anything... I used to make stools ...and I used to help my father building the wall, and making pony carts. I knew what I was doing, I could do anything, I used to sow the potatoes and everything, I used to sow the potatoes, the beetroot, the carrots, the parsnips, cabbage, everything. (Female, 70, Galway)

I am confident. I'm gifted in one way because they're (her children) so good. (Female, 70, Galway)

The final interviewee quoted above believes her child rearing skills and talents as a parent more than compensate for her limited literacy skills. She believes she has done a good job raising her children because they are all very 'quiet' and never gave her any trouble growing up. It is a source of pride for this interviewee as it demonstrates that even without literacy skills she is 'gifted'. Other interviewees pointed out the distinction between being an educated person and being a 'good' person. Many interviewees were quick to verify that having literacy difficulties did not preclude them from possessing many other worthwhile qualities such as honesty, integrity, humanity and love.

SOCIAL LIFE

Most of the interviewees participating in this research spoke of having moderately active social lives, with many interviewees living extremely busy lives, engaging in diverse and varied social activities. Many of the interviewees are involved in activities run by local day care centres or are members of social clubs run in local community centres. The

majority claimed that their literacy difficulties were not an influencing factor in their decision to participate in such activities.

Ah no, it doesn't stop me from enjoying life. (Male, 59, Louth)

This was particularly the case among older people living in sheltered housing. Sheltered housing schemes, by design, nurture communities made up of individuals of similar age, often from the same geographical areas and socio-economic backgrounds. It is plausible that people of this generation had broadly similar experiences in the formal education system in early life, many of whom are likely to have developed literacy difficulties. Among residents of sheltered housing schemes, who inhabit the same communal living spaces, there may exist a pervading attitude of everyone being 'in the same boat' and may therefore make it less daunting for residents to participate in group social activities. These activities often take place in the communal areas or on-site community centres provided in sheltered housing schemes, so are familiar, 'safe' spaces for residents, again easing an anxiety which older people with literacy difficulties may possess in engaging in social activities.

These trends suggest that older adults with literacy difficulties living in sheltered housing may benefit from membership of the sheltered community in general, as well as benefitting specifically from the links which sheltered housing schemes develop with other services such as social clubs and day centres, and other vital services such as health care professionals and the Gardaí. This may reduce the risk of isolation and exclusion which can be experienced by some older adults, particularly those living alone or in rurally isolated areas and offers additional networks and supports to assist with the challenges associated with literacy difficulties.

Examples of activities engaged in include:

- Painting
- Drama
- Creative writing
- Ballroom dancing
- Movement to music
- Darts
- Rings
- Playing cards
- Bowling
- Bingo
- Pool
- Table quizzes
- Puzzles
- Day trips & holidays
- Going for meals

Literacy difficulties which arise when participating in these activities are usually overcome with the support of friends or family. Female interviewees who enjoy a game of Bingo sit in groups with friends who help them to mark off the correct numbers as they are called out. A male interviewee enjoys playing darts with his brother, who takes responsibility for keeping score. Another interviewee who was living in a hostel explained that a group of the men enjoy going bowling and they bring with them a key worker who calculates the scores. Another interviewee who had difficulties with her writing and spelling is a member of a women's group. The members of the group decided to write and publish a book. This woman recorded her contribution to the book on a tape recorder, the notes from which were typed up by another member of the group and included in the book along with the rest of the women's stories.

Other interviewees were also involved in local committees and residents associations as well as regular volunteer work, either at some point in the past or at the time of interview. This suggests that civic involvement is not hampered to any great extent by the interviewees' literacy difficulties. Interviewees stated that they preferred to be involved with 'hands on', practical aspects of the work of committees rather than the administrative duties required as part of the role (in particular the paper work). Other members of the committees (who would not have literacy difficulties) would take responsibility for minute taking.

One interviewee was chairperson of the local community centre when the committee collectively won the 'People of the Year' award, which she stated was a great boost for her confidence (Female, 72, Leinster).

While the majority of older people who participated in the research felt that their literacy difficulties were not a significant factor in their decision to engage in social activities, a small number of interviewees stated that they would be unwilling to involve themselves in certain activities if it required writing and particularly spelling, e.g. crosswords (Female, 68, Dublin). Following on from this, there was an understanding on the part of many of the interviewees that changes within Irish society, particularly over the last number of decades, has made it more difficult to function effectively with literacy difficulties. An interviewee who believed that as a rule his literacy problems had never stopped him from participating in activities he enjoys acknowledged that if he had to take his driving test now he would not pass it as he would be unable to complete the theory test. This would therefore impact on his mobility and quality of life, particularly since his partner is in a wheelchair (Male, 66, Louth). Other interviewees commented on the difficulties they face as a result of the increased volume of form filling required in recent years by institutions and businesses such as banks and supermarkets (e.g., loyalty cards).

Working life

This section details the interviewees' feelings about the impact literacy difficulties had, if any, on their working lives (in paid employment which took place outside of the home) and on their prospects for promotion and advancement, as well as the methods they used for overcoming these difficulties in the workplace.

The vast majority of interviewees worked in manual unskilled or semi-skilled employment. The men interviewed usually worked in farming, gardening, factories and construction (often in England, especially during the early years of their career). The majority of women worked in shops (e.g. as cashiers) cleaning jobs, sewing jobs or as factory workers (e.g. as machine operatives). Many of the older people interviewed for this research are now retired or unable to work due to illness or injury. However some of the younger interviewees (60-65 years old) are still working in broadly similar occupations.

Some of the interviewees agreed that their literacy difficulties were one factor which influenced the type of work they had undertaken. One interviewee who worked in construction stated:

I would not have wanted to do any other kind of work as I had difficulties with the writing. (Male, 70, Dublin)

The nature of manual work meant that the majority of interviewees were rarely expected to engage in tasks requiring literacy skills. If literacy was required, interviewees found ways to overcome it. For example, in his job as a pump operator, one interviewee explained that he had to commit the instructions for operating the pump to memory as he couldn't read them (Male, 64, Dublin). Occasionally, when writing was required, for example when factory workers were sometimes expected to fill out forms or keep timesheets, interviewees asked for assistance from colleagues. However, a number of interviewees stated that they were always fearful that a foreman would ask them to complete their own paperwork.

The vast majority of interviewees agreed that their literacy difficulties impacted negatively on their prospects for promotion, either because they would not be considered by employers due to their literacy difficulties or because they did not have the confidence to go for promotion as a direct result of their difficulties.

I wouldn't take a job had it been writing, so I worked as a builder's labourer. I applied for a job up in X, as Foreman, and the man says 'no, we can't take you on', I says 'why is that?' He says 'Your writing is very bad.' (Male, 64, Louth)

However, the emphasis on educational attainment and qualifications, which are seen as so important to career advancement today, were not as significant for previous generations. The socio-economic status of the families into which the interviewees were born also had a profound impact on the type of employment they participated in and the progression they made in their careers.¹⁸

One interviewee explained that while she enjoyed her job (working in a seed shop):

¹⁸ Expert Group On Future Skills Needs (2006)

I couldn't do anything else." "I'd have liked a higher education."
[But] "We weren't brought up with ambitions. (Female, 77, Dublin)

Furthermore, class structures at the time, were more rigid with fewer options for advancement than there are today. While those from lower socio-economic groups continue to face many obstacles in relation to educational attainment and career prospects, opportunities in education and employment are far greater today across the class system, comparatively speaking. The interviewees' attitudes in relation to their work lives reflect a reluctant acceptance of the structure of Irish society at the time: that even if they had not had literacy difficulties, it is still unlikely they would have secured better jobs or experienced much in the way of career advancement. It is necessary to view the interviewees' literacy issues and work histories in this context.

It should also be noted that a small number of interviewees did not feel that their difficulties held them back in their career because their work gave them much job satisfaction. They were happy to have worked in the type of jobs they were employed to do and did not want to work at anything else.

Family life

This section details responses from interviewees to questions about their home and family lives. The section is concerned with the impact, if any, of literacy difficulties on their personal lives and family relationships.

A significant number of older people interviewed for the research had never married and did not have any children. A small number had married and were now separated while others had been widowed. Some interviewees had never married but had partners.

Among the interviewees who were married or in a relationship, the majority of spouses and partners were aware of their literacy difficulties. Among those who chose not to discuss this information, the following reasons were given:

No, it's the kind of thing you hide, it's personal. (Female, 77,
Dublin)

Well it wouldn't be really discussed, it was just a thing that it just fell into place like, he would look after that side of it, and I would look after the practical side of things like, and that would be it. The two halves came together. (Female, 64, Leinster)

Once again, the perceived stigma attached to literacy difficulties may have prevented interviewees from opening up about their difficulties, even to loved ones, perhaps due to feelings of shame or fear of judgement. Some may also have felt that it was something to keep private and to carry alone. While the vast majority of interviewees stated that their difficulties did not cause arguments with their spouse or partner, concealing their difficulties may have led to interviewees distancing or isolating themselves from loved ones, which might place a strain on relationships in the long term. In some instances, however, as with the quote above, interviewees and their spouses or partners have been able to strike a balance by developing a partnership where tasks involving literacy are dealt with by one half of the team and other, more 'hands on' tasks are taken up by the person with literacy difficulties. A number of the interviewees' spouses and partners also had literacy difficulties:

Ah yea, well both of us came out something similar, so we could understand each other, so it was good. (Male, 59, Louth)

One interviewee spoke of her husband's efforts to learn to read after the birth of their eldest son. Her husband decided he didn't want to bring up a child without first knowing how to read. He had one-to-one tuition in their home but didn't stick with it. The interviewee explained that she often has to help and encourage him with his difficulties which are worse than hers. She doesn't know if he even realises she has literacy difficulties of her own (Female, 60, Dublin).

Others spouses/partners also have difficulties but not to the same extent as the interviewees. A smaller number of the interviewees' loved ones didn't have any difficulties with their literacy. In these instances it was common for interviewees to receive help with their reading from their spouses/partners, usually over the daily papers. Among interviewees with children, it was common for their spouse/partner to take responsibility for writing any notes which needed to go to the children's teachers and for signing any forms which came from the children's schools.

Most of the older people interviewed, who had children, did not hide their difficulties from their children.

Why should I hide anything from my kids? It's the truth. (Female, 70, Galway)

Most of these interviewees describe their children as very supportive and understanding, often encouraging their parents to take up adult literacy classes in order to address the problem.

In one situation, an interviewee's literacy difficulties became a unifying factor for her family. The interviewee had difficulty with reading, particularly when it came to deciphering larger words. This, coupled with a stammer which she developed in childhood, was used by her and the children and turned into a game, whereby the children would randomly select words from the dictionary and encourage their mother to pronounce them. All of the family, including the interviewee laughed when she got it wrong. The interviewee insisted that this was all done in good fun. It was a family activity conducted around the family dining table for amusement.

Unfortunately, in other cases literacy problems sometimes caused tension and frustration among their children, who failed to understand the complexities of their parents' problems with literacy.

Among interviewees with children, their strongest feelings were to ensure their children received a better education than they had received growing up. The majority were extremely anxious that their children would do 'better', academically speaking, than they did and would not experience the difficulties with literacy which had impacted on their own lives.

This commitment to their children's education was particularly evident when they were advocating for their children's education, including additional resources and supports for children with certain learning conditions such as dyslexia. It was also evident when they spoke of going without, financially, in order to pay for materials or additional tuition for their children.

If they were short of anything I wouldn't pay a bill, I'd make sure that they had [*whatever they needed*], that they didn't go through what I went through, having to go into school without certain things, that was needed for school. (Female, 59, Dublin)

Each of the interviewees who had children were staunchly committed to ensuring that their children receive a better education than they had. Despite admissions that their literacy difficulties have impacted on their self-confidence, it was common for interviewees to offer examples, where they had advocated on behalf of their children with fierce determination, for better treatment and a better education than they themselves had received:

When my young one went to school I said to meself well she's going to get a good education...I remember going up to this teacher, , and she hit my daughter, this was a nun hit my daughter across the face with a book...I didn't realize I had it in me, I went to the Board of Education so she (the nun) had to apologise. (Female, 69, Dublin)

Their early experiences with some teachers' and the negative impact which verbal abuse had on their confidence levels also spurred parents to boost their children's self-esteem and promote confidence in their children regarding their academic abilities.

I would never [put] my children down, no matter what. And I never did, no matter what. The simplest of [achievements], I would make it such a big thing, and I'd do the same there with my grandchildren now and the confidence they have, and they excel at everything. I think it's brilliant. (Female, 64, Leinster)

These interviewees demonstrated a desire for a better standard of education for their children and their grandchildren, and this may have influenced their children's and grandchildren's educational outcomes. Watching their children and grandchildren fulfil their own aspirations has given many interviewees a sense of achievement and reward.

But I remember cleaning, when UCD was a college on Earlsfort Terrace I worked in it as a cleaner and I remember one night saying 'I'll scrub it out but I hope one of me children go to it' and she did (laughs). (Female, 77, Dublin)

However, it was also common for interviewees to experience feelings of guilt in relation to other aspects of their children's education as their literacy difficulties meant they were unable to help their children with home work.

You helped them with their reading as far as you could, yea. But when it came to secondary school that was out of the question they had to do it themselves. (Male, 59, Louth)

An interviewee from the Traveller community felt very strongly that her children and especially her grandchildren should go to school and remain in school for as long as possible. She believes education is vital in order for them to secure 'good' jobs. As Travellers she feels her grandchildren may experience discrimination in the jobs market due to their ethnicity and that education would be the most effective means of counteracting this.

It is also worth noting that among members of the Traveller community interviewed, their children's education was valued just as much for its facilitation of religious devotion, as for developing literacy skills. For one interviewee it was as important that her children are all devote Catholics as well as good 'scholars'.

Some of the interviewees are now grandparents and their grandchildren are also relied on as part of the support networks which many of the interviewees have cultivated. Some of the grandchildren are at an age when they can read and write and help their grandparents with form filling, card writing, sponsorship signing, etc.

An interviewee received a letter in the post which she assumed was a fine because the letter head had a crest on it, but her grandson was able to read it and tell her that it was actually just a receipt (Female, 67, Dublin).

However, this aspect of family life raises questions in relation to older people with literacy difficulties who do not have strong or extensive networks of family or friends. These older people may have far fewer supports to rely on in terms of navigating their literacy difficulties in old age.

Coping strategies

In this section findings are presented which detail specific coping strategies identified by the research participants as effective ways of limiting the impact of literacy difficulties on their daily lives. These coping strategies can be broadly divided into two categories. The first category is made up of practical methods designed to assist in 'working around' their difficulties in everyday situations where literacy is required. The second category is made up of methods which bring comfort to the person experiencing literacy problems and help to alleviate the impact these difficulties have on their lives.

The coping strategies can be grouped as follows:

Practical Coping Strategies	Personal Coping Strategies
Pretence	Humour
Excuses	Faith
Reliance on others	Bravado
Deciphering	Avoidance

Practical coping strategies

Trivialising their literacy difficulties or pretending their difficulties do not exist is a tactic common among the older people interviewed. In a situation which required that they read, the interviewees simply pretended to follow the text while actually looking at the pictures. When there was discussion of a written piece (for example a newspaper article), the interviewees would often nod in agreement with comments made by others, without revealing they had not read the piece.

You pretend to know it. You just keep quiet and pretend to know everything. (Male, 62, Dublin)

In situations where pretence is not feasible, the interviewees use excuses to avoid revealing their literacy difficulties. Common examples include filling out forms in public, where interviewees' fear detection by others, particularly strangers, and the resulting ignominious embarrassment. Among the group of older people interviewed for this

research by far the most common excuse is 'I've forgotten my glasses' (Female, 77, Dublin). This excuse shifts attention away from the individual's literacy difficulties and instead redirects the focus to their failing eyesight, which can be easily attributed to old age. Literacy difficulties are, perhaps seen by the older person (and others) to be their own fault, while failing eyesight is merely a symptom of growing older and therefore nobody is to 'blame'.

The most common coping strategy reported by interviewees was reliance on others. This finding corroborates earlier research findings, including NALA's research with older literacy learners (2008) in relation to common coping strategies. Other evidence includes the following:

For adults with literacy difficulties, the most common form of compensating strategy is to use family and friends to assist with basic daily literacy tasks such as reading mail, filling forms and so on.¹⁹

All of the interviewees who were married or in relationships and all of those with children relied on this network, either to take responsibility for the day to day literacy tasks, such as reading letters, signing forms, writing school notes and paying bills or to support the interviewee to accomplish these tasks and offer help when needed.

These extensive support networks are a form of social capital which is an extremely important resource for older people with literacy difficulties to draw on in order to develop successful coping strategies. Those without extensive networks may find themselves further isolated by their literacy difficulties. Interviewees also rely on people, often strangers, outside of their immediate circle of family and friends. Some interviewees are more willing to ask for help of this nature than others, who prefer to leave it as a last resort. For the most part, these strangers are made up of service providers and those staff members working 'behind the desk' in businesses, banking institutions and Government departments.

The majority of support sought from service providers as cited by interviewees, centred on form filling. Assistance with this task has been sought by interviewees in banks,

¹⁹ FGS (2009): *Literature Review - Older People with Literacy Difficulties*, P.11

airports, post offices, social welfare offices, bookmakers, doctors' offices and hospitals, among others. While in most cases interviewees recognise that asking for assistance is usually productive particularly when help is needed with very detailed and complex forms, it nevertheless requires the interviewee to trust in the good nature and patience of the service provider. As a result, some interviewees gave accounts where the experience had been difficult and upsetting. Examples include inappropriate and insensitive comments and behaviour from some banking and post office staff when dealing with customers with literacy difficulties.

Some of the interviewees explained that the pressure to complete forms quickly exacerbates the difficulties they already have in filling them in. The strategies employed by these older people allow them to 'buy time' as they attempt to overcome their literacy difficulties and address these obstacles. This would suggest that an individual's literacy difficulties can be exacerbated by the time restrictions imposed in certain settings, in other words by being 'hurried' along to complete a task in order to make way for the next customer. This has implications for how core services should be delivered. This point will be examined in further detail in the recommendations section of the report.

In stark contrast to this situation, one interviewee spoke of her pleasure in visiting her local library. She enjoys being able to browse the aisles of books and read extracts from them without pressure from anyone to finish quickly. For the interviewees the challenge often is not just trying to complete the task, it is attempting to complete the task in the time allowed, under pressure and scrutiny from members of staff and often from other members of the public also.

An interviewee explained that if someone is standing over her expecting the form to be filled in quickly, she feels under pressure and can't do it. "But if she'd leave me alone for a half an hour, and let me sit down and do it, I'd do it" (Female, 61, Leinster).

In order to work around this problem some of the older people interviewed explained that they prefer to take forms home with them and complete it at their own pace, usually under the pretence of forgetting some important piece of information which they

need to double check before submitting the form. This then becomes another effective coping strategy.

Interviewees linked in with certain services, for example sheltered housing providers, day care centres, rehab workers and homeless services, singled out these services as offering great support in terms of form filling as well as many other tasks.

This is consistent with the research team's engagement with support organisations, or gatekeepers. In many instances, relationships had developed over some years between the participants and the support organisation. Given the stigma associated with literacy difficulties, these relationships were very important and they could form the only means of support for some people (particularly those homeless). Because these gatekeepers had a long standing relationship with the individual, they could approach the issue of literacy with sensitivity to the individual's needs. In some cases, they could provide assistance without either party directly asking for - or offering - support. The fact that they also did not have a specialist literacy function enabled this discretion.

According to some organisations consulted, in rural areas, where individuals may be at greater risk of isolation, individuals such as the postmaster and postmistress played a critical role in supporting people with literacy difficulties. Again, these were most effective as a support when they had long standing relationships with the local community.

The following examples further illustrate the very practical measures which the interviewees adopt when tackling literacy related tasks. These examples highlight the resourcefulness, innovation and commitment required to overcome their difficulties. With specific regard to reading, a number of the interviewees explained that when they have difficulties reading a word, they try to identify the first and last letters of a word or break the word up into manageable chunks.

When reading a novel, another interviewee adapts to the difficulties of deciphering the names of characters (as names are a particular problem for her) by renaming the characters with a name similar to the original but easier to read and pronounce.

But now Catherine Cookson, I read a few of hers, but, I could make out 'house', I could make out 'car' and things like that, but names, people's names, like Stephanie Something, I wouldn't have a clue. I'd call her maybe Sunny or something. (Female, 62, Leinster)

The same interviewee enjoys making intuitive leaps when reading, as a means of following along with the story in order to fill in the gaps caused by her literacy difficulties. She uses her imagination to embellish the parts of the story she understands and to make up for the parts she cannot follow.

Now I do read books, and like I can make a tale out of it for myself. I'd look at the book, the covers, and make out what was in that. Then when I'd be reading the book, I'd be associating with what I'm after reading at the back of it, like what's going to happen. (Female, 62, Leinster)

Coping strategies used by interviewees when writing ranged from initialling or marking 'X' rather than signing a document which requires a signature, to copying words from one piece of paper to another.

A female interviewee described developing letter writing skills which were self taught:

If I was writing anybody a letter, I'd sit down, and I'd have the newspaper, I'd have cards, looking for the words that I'd want. How I'd find out what the word was, I'd read the sentence to make out what the word was. (Female, 67, Dublin)

A male interviewee who had been in the army earlier in his life, had to take a training course at one point in his career in order to become a Corporal. The participants on the course had to take notes in a notebook during the day, which would be inspected by their commanding officer the following day. While on the training course, the interviewee kept two notebooks, a "wee one" and another 'official' notebook. He scribbled in the small notebook as best he could during the day and at night he transferred the notes he had taken during the day into the other notebook in neater, more legible handwriting.

And all the boys would be sleeping, and I would be still awake at one or two in the morning, writing. (Male, 64, Louth)

The interviewee's difficulties with writing required that he decipher his own notes and replicate them in neater hand writing in a second notebook. Once again, literacy difficulties appear to be exacerbated by the need to complete a task within a certain time frame, usually quickly. This example illustrates, yet again, the strategy of 'buying time' (scribbling in a small notebook as a short term solution until he had a chance to re-write the notes usually while the other men in his unit slept) in order to complete a task which required literacy skills.

Personal coping strategies

Personal coping strategies were also identified in the findings as significant in the lives of interviewees. A small number of interviewees emphasised the importance of humour as a means of coping with their difficulties. For these older people, humour acts as armour protecting them from the often uncomfortable and sometimes painful experiences which their literacy difficulties can generate. Humour is also a way of disarming other people who might wish to belittle or dismiss them because of their difficulties with reading, writing or numbers.

I've developed a good sense of humour, so it's kind of 'laugh at myself, before anybody else will laugh at me'. So if I hit on something that I know I'm going to have difficulty with, I'll just make a joke of it. (Female, 64, Leinster)

A small number of interviewees acknowledged that sometimes the best way for them to deal with their literacy difficulties was to not worry about it or at least pretend not to care too much about it. Once again, by adopting a casual air regarding their difficulties it is hoped this will, at least appear to protect them from other people's reactions.

You get used to it. To hell with it. (Male, 60, Dublin)

I'd put it off as 'I'm not bothered' although I would be, I'd pretend I'm not. (Female, 67, Dublin)

Some interviewees, particularly those from the Traveller community, draw great strength from religion and derived comfort from their faith in dealing with situations in all aspects of their lives, including coping with their literacy problems. One interviewee could not

read the prayer books she owned but had memorised the decades of the rosary, which she recites daily (Female, 82, Galway). Another interviewee spoke of particular devotion to St. Martin (Female, 70, Galway).

Other interviewees find that avoiding thoughts on the subject of their literacy difficulties helps them to deal with the situation better, since dwelling on their problems would not be productive and would certainly not change their circumstances. A tendency to avoid acknowledging difficulties rather than addressing them may act as a barrier to returning to learning in later life.

I just don't think about it, I don't concern myself with it. For the most part I just wing it. (Female, 64, Leinster)

Finally, in relation to coping strategies, interviewees made particular and repeated reference to the strategies which they needed to develop in order to successfully manage their literacy difficulties while raising their children. The emphasis which these interviewees placed on childrearing, as a specific challenge when also dealing with literacy difficulties, correlates with findings from the earlier NALA report '*It's never too late to learn*'. In the earlier study with older people who were engaging with literacy services, interviewees spoke of their feelings of guilt and frustration at not being able to get more involved in their children's education. This was reported by more women than men in the earlier study. These findings and the interviewee's responses and strategies for dealing with them also emerged in this study and are detailed below.

Many interviewees regretted not being able to read to their children and later in life, to their grandchildren, at bedtime. Most of the interviewees explained that they worked around this problem by making up their own stories inspired by the pictures they saw in their children's story books or purely from their imagination. Another interviewee also involved her children in other activities such as painting and drawing, to make up for the fact that she could not read to them or help with homework (her spouse/partner did this instead).

When children were sick and had to stay home from school it was often the interviewees' spouses or partners who wrote the notes. However, one interviewee stated that she never wrote a note to the teacher when her children were sick, as she

preferred to go to the school in person. She preferred to deal with the teacher face to face rather than risk sending a note which contained words spelled incorrectly.

Summary

The older people who participated in the research spoke honestly and frankly about the often devastating impact which literacy difficulties have had on their personal development, their work and social lives, their family relationships and not least of all their attitudes to education. They identified the embarrassment, fear and frustration many of them have felt as a result of their difficulties with reading, writing and numbers. However, the coping strategies devised by interviewees and identified in this section also illustrate the incredible resourcefulness, tenacity and grace with which they have approached their difficulties. The concept of 'buying time' was introduced and discussed while 'reliance on others' was identified as one of the preferred coping strategies among older people. This suggests that older people's support networks are vital to their continued success in completing day to day tasks and making their way through life.

Returning to education

As part of the interview process each participant was asked if they had ever considered returning to education for support in overcoming their difficulties. They were also asked what their main reason for doing so would be, and what they thought the major benefit of returning to education might be for them. The interviewees were also asked about practical considerations such as the types of literacy education they would prefer, e.g. class setting, distance learning etc. The responses to these questions are detailed below. The section is divided into recurrent themes which identify subtle difference among interviewees, between those who are uninterested in returning to literacy learning and those who framed their responses in relation to barriers (both real and perceived but largely attitudinal in nature) which prevent them or discourage them from attempting to address their literacy difficulties.

It is important to note from the outset that while a number of interviewees who participated in the research were involved in various learning activities, including art classes and personal development, many were not, and when asked the majority of older

people interviewed stated that they did not want to return to education specifically to address their literacy needs. In fact, a small number of interviewees were strongly resistant to the idea.

I got through life without it. What would motivate me to go back?
Nothing! Because I wouldn't want to go back! (Male, 64, Louth)

There was a feeling among many of these older people that the bias toward formal education, including literacy learning and on pursuing qualifications is overrated. These older people valued other more practical forms of 'knowledge', which they had accumulated over a lifetime and which they need to accomplish the tasks and activities which make up their daily lives.

Some of the interviewees who were resistant to the idea of literacy learning also cited lack of patience and motivation as reasons for not wishing to return to learning.

Low self-confidence & anxiety

While some of the older people interviewed were adamant that they had no interest in receiving support with their literacy, others expressed concerns which act as barriers and prevent them from taking the first steps towards addressing their difficulties. One of the most prevalent barriers to returning to education cited by this group of older people was a lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem. It was common for some interviewees to blame their literacy difficulties entirely on what they perceived to be their own shortcomings.

Yeah, I don't think I'd be any good at it. I often did [think about going back] but I never thought meself good enough for it, that I wouldn't reach it. I told them [computer tutors] that I wasn't very bright but they said not to worry. (Female, 68, Dublin)

As referenced earlier in the chapter, their negative experiences of school, particularly the verbal abuse and derogatory comments made by teachers, may continue to impact on the interviewees' confidence levels, thus making it difficult for them to think about returning to learning.

Some of the interviewees felt strongly that the shameful stigma they perceive to be attached to having difficulties with literacy today would prevent them from admitting their problems to others, especially in public, and some fear attending local literacy services in case they would be seen entering or leaving the centres by members of their community. The stigma which society has so long attached to literacy problems in adulthood is keenly felt by the participants who also internalise the feelings of blame and guilt for having difficulties in the first place.

Some people are very embarrassed, you know, to go into a class and sit down and say 'I have a problem'. Now there's lots of people out there that have a problem and they can't read nor write but they're so ashamed. (Female, 69, Dublin)

A lot of people think because you can't read or write that you are stupid. Illiteracy, that's the word I don't like, because to me illiteracy means, you never took the time to learn. (Female, 67, Dublin)

Age

By far the strongest attitudinal barrier in relation to thoughts around returning to learning related to the participants' age. Many of the interviewees felt that they are 'too old' to go back to education.

The idea of education as the sole occupation of youth has, only relatively recently begun to be challenged in Irish society. Some of the comments from interviewees suggest that they too have absorbed the traditional idea that education is a preserve of the young and that they are 'too old to learn'. As a result, one of the largest barriers to returning to education is this group's perception of themselves.²⁰

Following on from the previous point, many of the interviewees were of the belief that learning is a pursuit solely for the young because when people are young they can more readily and easily absorb the information passed on in an educational setting. The suggestion is that as a person gets older they become less able to retain the information required to succeed in their education, including literacy learning

²⁰ These obstacles also referred to as dispositional barriers have been discussed in detail in the literature review in chapter 2.

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

While these interviewees agree that having the opportunity to address their literacy difficulties would have been a blessing when they were much younger, and many would have been delighted with a 'second chance' as younger people, the majority felt that at their current time of life, literacy supports or any form of education would be wasted on them. Other interviewees felt that since they had managed (relatively successfully) without literacy skills for most of their lives that it was pointless to learn in their later years.

It's a bit late now, I'm seventy-eight years of age. "I'm after getting through the world, what's the use doing it now? (Female, 78, Dublin)

[A]t this hour of me friggng life, I just say to myself 'I'm not bothered.' Yea, well I'm going on sixty-two years of age, so, do you know, I say to meself 'well I'm after getting this far.' (Female, 61, Leinster)

This theme was advanced by other interviewees who suggested that since they can successfully complete the everyday tasks of their lives, they have little need for literacy and so would not see the benefit of returning to education. For these interviewees it is a case of 'better the devil you know than the devil you don't know'. They value practical skills which they use on a daily basis to successfully navigate their lives. Their impression of literacy learning or education in general is that it is largely unrelated to their needs and interests and far removed from their lived reality. Furthermore, they feel that just because they have difficulties with literacy (which they feel bad about) this does not mean that they are somehow 'less than' good, decent and hardworking people. The participants have developed techniques which work for them and which they are comfortable with, and changing these or learning to address their difficulties would require taking a step into the unknown and would upset their routine. Most of the interviewees participating in this research were uninterested or unwilling to do this.

Despite this however, not all of the older people interviewed were opposed to the idea of returning to education later in life and while some have not yet acted on it, there is a desire and an interest in learning among a number of the interviewees.

Nothing's stopping me. I'd like to do it. (Male, 64, Waterford)

However, not all of these interviewees are interested in returning for literacy classes, preferring instead to sign up for (some have already taken) computer classes.

In addition, even those interviewees who expressed an interest in returning to learning were nervous about it. Concerns included the possibility that tutors would be younger than them and would think that the older people are too old or not bright enough to participate in the class:

The tutor might say: 'This stupid auld one coming in here with us.'
(Male, 62, Dublin)

Again, the perception or concern that education is solely the realm of the young, surfaces here.

It is a widely held perception among a number of the older people interviewed that they would be the oldest in the class, the rest of the students being 'youngsters' and as a result the older people feared being ridiculed for going back to education at their age.

There is also a pervasive fear that their younger class mates would know more than they do and they would be made to look foolish. There was a very genuine concern among the interviewees that they risk appearing stupid in front of others and would feel embarrassed and inadequate, which obviously they wish to avoid.²¹

All of these concerns, while dispositional/attitudinal in nature, constitute considerable barriers for these older people when contemplating returning to education.

Some of the older people interviewed had moved beyond thinking about the barriers which prevented them from accessing literacy services or any educational opportunities and had thought about the supports they would require if they decided to return. The

²¹ Many interviewees were concerned about the classroom setting as a result of negative childhood memories of the classroom, which can create institutional barriers for many older people contemplating a return to learning. The concept of barriers have been discussed in detail in chapter 2.

importance of an understanding and considerate tutor was emphasised by a number of interviewees when asked about the factors which might persuade them to give learning a second chance.

Doesn't it all really depend on the teacher, or whoever is going to teach you! (Female, 66, Dublin)

I think it all depends on the person and the teacher. (Female, 69, Dublin)

It wouldn't really matter where it was as long as the person (tutor) wasn't, didn't give the impression that they knew it all. (Female, 67, Dublin)

Benefits of returning to education

Despite the mixed reactions from interviewees, all of those who participated in the study could identify the clear benefits to their lives if they were to return to education to improve their literacy skills. Among all the interviewees who discussed the benefits addressing their literacy problems, the majority cited very practical reasons for wanting to try. This group emphasised wanting to achieve mundane, everyday tasks which people without literacy difficulties might easily take for granted. These include:

- Write a card or letter
- Complete an application form
- Read a book
- Write a will

Some interviewees also identified computer training as a learning activity which they were curious about or had already engaged in. Once again the focus of this learning was practical. Interviewees wanted to learn how to send emails, write letters and access the internet.

Another interviewee identified the benefit of being able to spell her children's names without having to check with another person or in a dictionary and also to be able to write out a will (Female, 67, Dublin). A male interviewee knew he would benefit from

further literacy education as he could then write a letter to his son who lives in Donegal and write Christmas cards to his daughter every year (Male, 64, Louth).

The benefits of literacy learning identified by participants revolve around very practical and commonplace activities. This reinforces the arguments made earlier that these older people value skills which assist them to carry out tasks which arise in their everyday lives such as filling out forms and writing letters etc. The older people recognise that literacy skills would help them to complete such tasks more easily and successfully than they are currently able and this is why they value literacy skills. These older people are more likely to consider the possibility of returning to literacy learning as adults when the educational is coupled with the practical.

Choice of literacy services

The majority of interviewees stated a preference for one-to-one tuition if they were to return to learning to improve their literacy. Class room settings were considered intimidating for many and also held negative associations with school. There was anxiety about returning to the 'classroom' environment even among those who had not experienced abuse or harassment in their earlier school days. One interviewee explained that she would feel very intimidated joining a class because she has a perception of adults returning to education as being very 'scholarly types' and 'knowledgeable looking' (as they are presented on television) and she knows she doesn't fit that mould.

However, if classes were available, some interviewees said they would consider attending if class sizes were small, with approximately 4-5 people in each, or if they knew everyone attending the class was 'in the same boat' or at the same level of literacy.

One interviewee explained that the only issue she has with attending a class is if participants are required to take notes since she is not in a position to do this without support. If she knew everyone in the class was in the same position she would not feel intimidated.

While none of the interviewees participating in this research had engaged with literacy services before, one interviewee had followed the 'Read Write Now' series a number of years previously, as well as a radio series on literacy. She bought the book and followed

along with each of the programmes and felt it helped her a little. She would consider participating in a similar exercise again in the future (Female, 68, Dublin).

Another reason some of the interviewees gave for not wishing to return to education to address their literacy difficulties was the strength of the supports which they receive from various support services, which makes the need to address their literacy difficulties less urgent in their current situation. This was particularly true for homeless older people we spoke with.

One interviewee explained that the support he received from Simon Community and Rehab staff with writing and form filling is invaluable. He acknowledges that had he been more 'isolated' or less supported he might have considered going back to education but not at present since he is happy and has people to help him.

Like they're actually doing your work, along with their own, but they never complain about it. (Male, 59, Louth)

The only reason now, if me husband died for instance, and I had to cope with a lot of writing like you know like, you usually, you always find somebody that will do it for you, you know. (Female, 67, Dublin)

The previous comments are consistent with findings in the 'It's never too late to learn' report, produced by NALA in 2008. This report noted that older people often decide to address their literacy problems when a significant individual such as a loved one (usually a spouse) was no longer available to help them with their literacy: supports are lost and coping mechanism break down. It may be the case among the group of older people participating in this study, (who never accessed literacy services), that their support network and, therefore their coping mechanisms are still in place or have been successfully replicated and so they have never been spurred on to access literacy supports.

A number of the people interviewed stated that they would be interested in taking up a literacy course but didn't know how to access information on courses available locally. Lack of available, relevant information on appropriate literacy opportunities or at least

the absence of knowledge on how to access this information compounded the difficulties faced by these older people contemplating a return to education.²²

Some interviewees would not wish to attend a course in their local community for fear of being identified by neighbours or other people they know. However, as many of the interviewees did not own a car or lived in remote locations without access to public transport, the opportunity to access services in location outside of their community was limited.

Some of the interviewees were aware of the existence of NALA, usually through the television advertising campaign sponsored by An Post, however the majority were not aware of the work of NALA.

The remaining sections within the chapter highlight broader themes identified in the research findings which are based on issues of gender, social class, membership of the Traveller community and household status (homelessness).

Other issues arising

This section outlines issues relating to gender, social class, ethnicity and household status which emerged from an analysis of the interview data but which has not been discussed in detail as part of the themes laid out above.

Gender

For the most part issues affecting men and women were largely similar and difficulties were not divided along gender lines. However, one female interviewee believed that the power of the Catholic Church, which was at its peak in Ireland during the lifetime of most of the older people interviewed, did impact on the level of education women received.

She feels the control the Catholic Church exercised on Irish society had much to do with her literacy difficulties. She believes the Church did not desire that women be educated at that time, rather preferring that they stay at home and have children 'so they could

²² Detailed in the literature as informational barriers.

dominate them'. All of which, she felt, had an impact on how her life turned out, the decisions she made and the path she took (Female, 69, Dublin).

Social class

The same interviewee (referenced above) believed that her literacy difficulties were also symptomatic of her position in the class structure of the day. Everybody in the area she lived in left school early to go to work in a factory. This was the type of work they did for life. This point was also made by other interviewees, as raised earlier in this chapter. The following examples are worth mentioning again:

- Interviewees spoke of favouritism practiced by teachers toward certain pupils (usually those from financially well-off backgrounds). This was manifest in the favoured pupils being placed at the front of the class for lessons, while children from lower socio-economic backgrounds were sometimes ignored and excluded by being placed at the back of the class.
- Inequalities were perpetuated when school inspectors visited schools. It was noted by one interviewee that they would be complicit in the practice of ignoring and segregating students placed at the back of the class, when undertaking school inspections.
- A small number of interviewees had to go without school books as their parents did not have sufficient income to purchase these.
- Some interviewees were forced to leave school early in order to support their families by contributing to the income of the household.
- In rural areas, the availability of casual labour on farms to supplement the home income was reported to have been a factor in school attendance and performance.
- A number of interviewees were required to take any available employment (usually manual and menial) after finishing primary school, without the option of planning a career.
- Finally, the inter-generational nature of disadvantage arose in some cases, where literacy difficulties were experienced by the parents of some of the interviewees.

Membership of the Traveller community

A number of older Travellers participating in the research suggested that in the past, Traveller culture did not place as much emphasis on the importance of education as it does now (this was also suggested to be the case among members of the settled community). This, combined with the difficulties of reconciling a nomadic lifestyle with the requirements of the formal education system as well as the difficulties caused by institutional racism, created barriers to participating in early formal educational opportunities.

Some of the members of the Traveller community who participated in the research suggested that their pragmatic emphasis on completing everyday tasks is often ranked higher in importance among Travellers than accumulating academic knowledge. Once an individual is honest and upstanding and can go about successfully completing their daily business, there is little need for formal education. This was certainly the overwhelming feeling among older Travellers with literacy difficulties. However attitudes towards the educational attainments of their children and grandchildren were different. Older Travellers appreciated the value and benefits of high levels of literacy and educational opportunities in improving the lives and career prospects of their children and grandchildren and were supportive.

Homelessness

Most of the older people interviewed for this research that had literacy difficulties but were also experiencing homelessness were men. Of these men, the majority had never married, were separated or were divorced. Only a small number had children. As a result of this, the homeless interviewees were not, overall, as well supported by family and friends as other interviewees were. In terms of their literacy difficulties, this required that the interviewees sought support with reading, writing and numbers from key workers and other members of staff at the organisations they were linked in to. Literacy supports are integrated with other supports offered as part of homeless services. Without this support it is likely that these interviewees would be further isolated.

The following section offers recommendations generated by analysis of the findings from this research and suggests potential means of addressing the literacy support needs of this hard to reach group.

Chapter Four - Discussion & recommendations

Discussion

The preceding chapters of this report presented the design, methods used and findings of this research study. The review of literature in chapter 2 gathers existing research on older people experiencing literacy difficulties, from both national and international perspectives. However, it should be noted that there is a lack of available relevant literature on the subject of older people's literacy. In this chapter the main findings are discussed and accompanied by recommendations for change.

This section offers an overview of the main findings of the study. These findings are as follows: participant's histories including a demographic profile of the older people and their early experiences of formal education; experiences of and attitudes towards their literacy difficulties on an individual and social level, in their work lives and in their family lives; the coping strategies these older people have developed to compensate for their difficulties; and finally, the barriers which they identify in returning to education.

Participant histories

A total of 50 older people were interviewed for this research study, and 43 of these people were eligible for inclusion. All of these participants were over the age of 60 years and had never engaged with literacy services. Of the 43, 31 were female and 12 were male. The majority of interviewees had enrolled in primary school. Those who had not were largely from among the Traveller community. Only five of those interviewed enrolled in secondary school and only one completed their secondary education. The majority of older people had left school by the age of 14 years old. Among those interviewed, less than a quarter were engaged in any form of educational activity at the time of the interview. The vast majority of interviews stated that they were not longer in paid employment.

When asked about their early experiences of formal education the majority of respondents, irrespective of age or gender, recounted negative memories of school and of the teaching staff in particular. As children, their self-esteem was compromised as a

result of being ignored, being isolated at the back of the class, being ridiculed or being passed over in favour of wealthier children from a higher social class. Regular and severe physical abuse at the hands of teachers also left many interviewees with residual feelings of fear and/or anger, which were unequivocally linked to 'school', the education system and even concepts of 'learning' in their minds so many years later.

Experiences, attitudes and views of their literacy difficulties

These were examined in relation to personal and social lives, work lives and family lives. In relation to personal and social lives, all of the older people interviewed acknowledged that their literacy difficulties have impacted negatively on their daily lives in some way. Some interviewees reported low confidence levels, particularly in relation to voicing opinions, as a result of their literacy difficulties. However this was not the case for all those interviewed, as while they acknowledged that literacy problems had made aspects of their lives difficult, their problems had not prevented them from engaging in social activities and activities within the community. This was particularly the case among older people living in sheltered housing. This suggests that a secure location where interaction and participation are encouraged and fostered by communal living and access to support networks, such as those that sheltered housing provides, may increase the likelihood of older people engaging in activities which can increase their confidence and reduce isolation. For the most part older people acknowledged that at times, their difficulties require that they ask for assistance, especially when taking part in some social activities. However, they also recognise their own achievements at having made it to this point in their lives without the literacy skills that others might take for granted.

The vast majority of older people interviewed worked in manual unskilled or semi-skilled labour. The nature of the manual work meant that the majority of interviewees were rarely expected to engage in tasks requiring literacy skills. The vast majority of interviewees agreed that their literacy difficulties impacted negatively on their prospects for promotion, either because they would not be considered by employers due to their literacy difficulties or because they did not have the confidence to go for promotion as a direct result of their difficulties. However the socio-economic status of the older people and their families also impacted on their employment opportunities. Even without

literacy difficulties it may not have followed that they could have secured better jobs or experience much in the way of career advancement. It is necessary to view the interviewees' literacy issues and work histories in this context. Having said that, a few of the interviewees emphasised that they had never cared to work in 'better' jobs as they enjoyed the jobs in which they were employed.

Some of the older people interviewed had never married or had children. Others were separated or widowed or had partners. The majority of those in relationships had informed their spouse/partner of their difficulties and for the most part, this did not cause any problems in the relationship. Among those who had children, interviewees own early experiences of school had strengthened their resolve to support their children in their education, including advocating on their behalf when needed and providing financial supports in the form of extra tuition and emotional support such as encouragement and building their self-esteem. However, these older people also spoke of their regret that they were not in a position, due to literacy difficulties, to help their children with other aspects of their schooling, such as homework. Many of the interviewees now have grandchildren who have also become part of the interviewees' support network and can help with literacy task such as reading letters. Older people who do not have support networks made up of family and friends are required to call on other supports to assist with their literacy difficulties, such as members of staff working in social support services.

Coping Strategies

Interviewees identified a variety of methods for dealing with their literacy difficulties which have been grouped into practical and personal coping strategies in this report. Pretending and making excuses to avoid revealing their literacy difficulties is common but the most common coping strategy adopted by interviewees is reliance on others. All of the interviewees who were married or in relationships and all of those with children relied on this network, either to take responsibility for the day to day literacy tasks or to support the interviewee to accomplish these tasks and offer help when needed. Interviewees also rely on people, often strangers, outside of their immediate circle of family and friends, such as service providers and those staff members working 'behind

the desk' in businesses, banking institutions and Government departments. The majority of support sought from service providers as cited by interviewees, centred on form filling, and in some instances interviewees reported negative experiences. Some of the interviewees explained that the pressure to complete forms quickly exacerbates the difficulties they already have in filling them in. The strategies employed by these older people serve to 'buy time' for them as they attempt to overcome their literacy difficulties and address these obstacles. This would suggest that an individual's literacy difficulties can be made more pronounced by the time restrictions imposed in certain settings.

Many interviewees have yet again developed strategies to deal with this additional problem, such as taking forms home where they can be completed at their own pace. Other practical strategies include deciphering the spelling of a written word by breaking it up into manageable chunks and putting these together to unlock the meaning and pronunciation of the word. Deciphering often requires imagination and dogged determination to succeed as it can be a time consuming and frustrating process. This and other practical coping strategies speak to the resourcefulness and commitment of these older people in dealing with their literacy difficulties.

Personal coping strategies are also used by older people, including humour and bravado, which act as a buffer for older people when interacting with other people in situations which require that they demonstrate some level of literacy ability. Religious faith and avoidance are also used by the older people interviewed as a means of softening or lessening the negative impact which literacy difficulties have on their lives.

Returning to Education

In relation to returning to education, analysis of the data identified subtle differences between interviewees who were adamant that returning to education in general - or literacy learning in particular - was not a prospect they were interested in, and those interviewees who merely identified barriers which prevented their return. These barriers present challenges which need to be overcome by both policy makers and practitioners if larger numbers of older people are to be encouraged to access literacy services. Barriers identified were largely dispositional, in other words they related to attitudes which the interviewees had formed in relation to education. Among them included the sense that

education has an age limit and that at their time in life it was too late for them to start addressing their difficulties. Many of these interviewees felt that education was a pursuit solely for the young and feared ridicule from 'youngsters' if they attempted to seek help with their literacy.

In addition, many older people interviewed for this research took a very practical view of their literacy difficulties and believed that once they could function relatively effectively in their day to day activities that resolving their literacy problems was not important. Older people identified that literacy learning would need to be connected very explicitly to achieving daily practical tasks such as form filling and letter writing in order to be desirable to them. However some interviewees were open to the idea of returning to education and expressed a preference for one-to-one tuition. The role and functions of NALA were largely unknown to the majority of older people interviewed.

The findings and analysis chapter of this report ended with a review of the findings as they relate to gender, class and ethnicity.

Recommendations

Arising from the findings of this study and based on the requirements of the participants, the current policy context, and lessons learned from this process we have identified the following recommendations in relation to older people with literacy difficulties who have never engaged with literacy services.

Recommendations are devised under a number of headings and directed at NALA, service providers and practitioners, and recommendations for further research.

How to reach older adults with literacy difficulties

NALA

Promoting the importance of literacy as part of a broader approach to lifelong learning should be developed further. This might be achieved by the following:

1. NALA should continue to partner with agencies, for example, the Equality Authority and Age and Opportunity, particularly for events during Positive Ageing

Week; with AONTAS during the Adult Learners Festival; and with organisers of Cork Adult Learners Festival. It should also continue networking activities with other agencies to identify existing best practice and generate innovative approaches promoting literacy learning amongst older people.

SERVICE PROVIDERS AND PRACTITIONERS

2. Service providers should continue to develop and promote adult and community education models for learning which do not evoke memories of the formal education system for older people. This can be achieved by continuing to adopt an integrated approach to literacy provision, by incorporating literacy modules and interventions with settings and activities where older people are engaging, for example in day care centres, sheltered housing complexes and bingo halls.
3. Service providers should continue to partner with those organisations already delivering non-formal and flexible learning opportunities (e.g. working with local groups using an outreach approach to continue to integrate literacy provision and modules into local informal and non-formal learning activities already in existence, e.g. art classes in the local day care centre).
4. Consideration should be given by service providers to developing literacy materials and literacy learning sites which are culturally appropriate for minority ethnic older people including members of the Traveller community.

Where to reach older adults with literacy difficulties

NALA

5. NALA should continue to explore opportunities to further develop tools to help workers to discuss the issue of literacy difficulties amongst their client group. For example, increasing the provision of Literacy Awareness Training (LAT) to housing support workers and community development workers to discuss with clients an issue which they view as very relevant but also very sensitive.

6. Consideration could be given to promoting literacy awareness training to organisations who provide particular supports to older people and who engaged in the research. These include family resource centres, community development projects, housing support and homeless organisations and others.
7. Many of the organisations who engage with older people are members of networks²³ and could be provided with options for undertaking literacy sensitivity training on a group basis. This would also further the promotion of literacy issues amongst gatekeepers.

SERVICE PROVIDERS AND PRACTITIONERS

8. There is an opportunity to engage with organisations who work with older people, to establish needs and supports and to collaborate with them in developing and delivering literacy interventions as a form of outreach work in settings where older people are likely to gather and spend significant periods of time on a regular basis.
9. Formal links should be developed with relevant organisations, such as sheltered housing providers, to explore opportunities for working in partnership (for example through outreach programmes) in order to encourage participation by older people with literacy difficulties in community settings, or literacy supports to be delivered as part of other non-formal learning opportunities (for example, art classes and personal development classes).

FURTHER RESEARCH

10. Research (commissioned by NALA) could be undertaken to carry out a systematic review of the experiences of organisations that work with older people to establish:
 - The extent of literacy issues amongst their client group, and how it manifests itself.
 - The needs of their client group in relation to literacy support.

²³ For example, voluntary housing bodies may be members of the Irish Council for Social Housing.

- The training and resources that organisations need to address and support their client’s literacy needs.
- Whether these organisations would be interested in hosting outreach measures.

Practical approaches to literacy

NALA

11. NALA should increase the distribution of literacy resource materials, including the NALA series of literacy workbooks, which contain sections dedicated to assisting literacy students with form filling. In addition, NALA could further develop literacy software to allow older people to undertake literacy learning using new technologies. This would have the advantage of enabling an individual to initially access supports without having to disclose their literacy difficulties. This was a concern for a number of interviewees. While literacy software is already in existence, additional software specifically developed with older people in mind and suitable for individuals who have had limited exposure to IT tools would be useful. Finally, NALA should continue to raise awareness of www.writeon.ie.²⁴
12. NALA has already developed literacy awareness training (LAT) which interested organisations may avail of. In order to ensure maximum take up of such training NALA might consider the following:
 - Develop a promotional campaign targeting the sectors mentioned above.
 - Develop additional tools and materials in collaboration with other advocacy groups, working on behalf of older people, in consultation with regulatory and membership bodies, such as the Financial Regulator, Irish Banking Federation and others.

SERVICE PROVIDERS AND PRACTITIONERS

13. Literacy interventions may need to be packaged differently, for example, a programme on ‘keeping in touch’ to aid with letter writing could be explored by service providers.

²⁴ The interactive website to help people improve their reading, writing and numbers skills.

14. Some of the women interviewed expressed a preference for reading magazines and Catherine Cookson novels, while men expressed a preference for the sports section of the daily newspapers and books about sport. Literacy modules could be developed which incorporate these interests.
15. Similarly a number of interviewees were already enrolled in learning activities at the time of the study, including art classes, personal development and computers classes. Service providers may consider building on these existing interests by:
 - Exploring whether or not the educational opportunities pursued by older people may be amenable to building in literacy development.
 - Developing literacy courses which incorporate subjects of interest to older people which also have relevance to their lives.
16. While the majority of interviewees had a preference for one-to-one tuition if they choose to return to learning, some interviewees expressed an interest in attending classes. In order to increase the numbers of older people attending literacy classes for the first time, service providers and practitioners should continue to:
 - Establish dedicated classes for older people as well as mixed age groups.
 - Train older people as literacy tutors and mentors for other older adults accessing services for the first time.
 - Provide clear guidelines on the literacy levels of class participants.

Developing models through action research

The findings from this research study suggest that older people's negative experiences of early education and their attitudes toward literacy require that service providers are conscious of this when tailoring literacy services for this age group. The following actions are recommended:

FURTHER RESEARCH

17. A participatory action research project (commissioned by NALA) should be conducted. This may occur in two sites across the country (one rural and urban),

with some of the organisations that participated in this research to date. It could also include some of the participants who took part in this research or other older people that these organisations work with.

Each site would research and test approaches to literacy support for older people, drawing on the findings of this research, and the action research project would develop models and tools with NALA for older person's literacy. Other sites (or other groups in the existing sites) could test the models or approaches used and the outcome would be a model (including a toolkit) for older persons' literacy that could be used on a national basis.

Final comments

In conclusion, the findings from this research have highlighted a number of important points in relation to older people with literacy difficulties who have never engaged with literacy services. Some of these offer possible reasons for their lack of engagement with literacy services during the course of their lives.

Firstly, the interviewees identified barriers, largely dispositional in nature, which prevented them from accessing literacy services to address their difficulties. The barriers include attitudes about age, ageing and the legitimacy of learning in later life. Many of the interviewees believe learning is a pursuit solely for the young and that they are too old to learn anything new at this point in their lives. They also feel they would be exposing themselves to ridicule from the 'youngsters' if they attempted to access a literacy programme. Other barriers include older people's perceptions that learning and education have little relevance to their lives and would not benefit them in any meaningful way as they have 'gotten this far' without much formal education. The exception to this is in relation to achieving practical tasks such as writing a letter, filling in a form or reading for pleasure, such as magazines, sports articles and romance novels.

This pragmatic interest in achieving specific literacy related tasks provides service providers, policy makers and organisations like NALA with a unique opportunity. Actions which may increase the take up of literacy services by older people, by reducing barriers to participation, are detailed in the recommendations section of this report and include

continued integration of literacy interventions in settings and activities accessed by older people, developing literacy modules in partnership with local organisations already engaged with older people, the need for continuing promotional campaigns aimed at those working in the banking sector and in Government departments, as well as further research actions.

The report identifies further learning for NALA in relation to older people with literacy difficulties. The experiences of those older people interviewed for this report bore striking similarities on a number of issues, with the experiences of older literacy learners in NALA's 2008 study 'It's never too late to learn'. Both groups reported harrowing experiences at the hands of teaching staff in school, including verbal and physical abuse which had a profound impact on their self-esteem and confidence levels. Both groups also adopted similar coping strategies to compensate for their difficulties including avoidance, pretence and reliance on others.

This report builds on the findings from 'It's never too late to learn' research study in relation to the experiences of older people with literacy difficulties and is the first report of its kind in Ireland on the literacy difficulties of older people who have never engaged with literacy services. The findings have identified a number of barriers which prevent this group of older people from realising their full potential as learners. It is hoped that this report adds to the body of knowledge on the specific needs of this hard to reach group and that it will go some way to addressing the additional supports which they require if they are to be encouraged to access and successfully engage with literacy services.

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Glossary of terms

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.

Cohorts

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

Coping strategies

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

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.

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.

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.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Interview schedule

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE OLDER PEOPLE WHO HAVE NOT ENGAGED IN ADULT LITERACY SERVICES

Introduction

Participant profile and education profile

Experience of literacy difficulties in everyday life

Barriers to returning to education

Conclusion

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to meet with us today. We are researchers from NALA, the National Adult Literacy Agency. As part of our work we carry out research to find out information on what people with literacy difficulties think about different things in their lives. For example we are talking to you to find out the effect, if any, that literacy difficulties have had on your lives, your school experiences, your day-to-day life, that kind of thing. The information you give us will be very valuable and will help NALA improve services for people with literacy difficulties.

The interview today should take about an hour to complete. During the interview we will discuss things like your previous education experiences, some background information, your work life, your family and day to day life and any reasons why you have decided not to take part in adult literacy classes. It is important to stress that there are no right or wrong answers we would just ask that you be as honest as can. It is also important to point out that you can decide to withdraw your consent to take part in the interview at any time. You can also decide not to answer questions if you do not want to, or you can skip certain questions if you want. You may find some of the research language we use a bit unfamiliar or 'jargoney', and if this is the case let us know immediately and we will explain what we mean.

We will also ask you to fill in a brief questionnaire that will give us some background information as such your age, you highest level of education to date, your work history and things like that. These questions will help us compare the information you give us with the information other participants in the study provide. Some of the language used in the questionnaire may be hard to understand, if you have any difficulties with it we are here to help.

Before we start we need your permission to record the interview. We like to record interviews for a number of reasons. The most important reason is that we are capturing your words and not our interpretations of what we think you are saying. It is also very hard to write notes about what you are saying and to try to concentrate on what you are saying at the same time, this can lead to us missing something really important that you have said.

We want to stress that all the information you give us is confidential and only us and some NALA staff will have access to it. The information you give us will be written up in a report. All real names and other details that may identify you will be taken out the report so that anyone reading it will not know who you are.

We would also like you to sign a consent form to say that you agree to take part in the research. The form explains that the information you give us is confidential. If you are

happy to take part in the interview please sign your name. Once again we would like to thank you for giving us your time and agreeing to be part of this research, your contribution is much appreciated.

Participant profile and education profile

I'm going to start by asking you some questions about your learning and your school experiences, if at any time you feel uncomfortable or don't want to answer the questions let me know and we'll move on to talk about something else.

Can I start by asking you where you went to school? Did you like school? What was it exactly you liked? What were your favourite subjects? How did you get on with the teachers? What would you say was the best thing about school?

Were there things you didn't like about school? Can you tell me about them? How did you find school work? Did you find it easy, difficult? Can you tell me what you felt the main difficulties were?

Can you tell me a little bit about your parents attitude towards school and education, was it something they would have encouraged you to do/go to? Did you get support at home, with your schoolwork? Who would have been the person to give you the most support and encouragement?

Can you remember when you first started to notice that you were having difficulty? Can you remember what you felt/thought at the time? Can you recall how the teacher responded to you for example, were they helpful, supportive? Were there other people in your class who had similar difficulties? In general, did you get much support from your class mates?

How long is it since you left school, what age were you? How far did you go in school? Did you leave with any certificates for example the primary certificate?

What did you plan to do when you left school for example, get a job, get married, start a family? What type of work did you want to do? Did you get talk to/get any advice from anyone at home or in school? What job did you work at after you left school? Did you ever want to do anything else? Can you tell me about that? Do you think that having literacy difficulties has held you back, if yes, how, can you give me an example?

Experience of literacy difficulties in everyday life

I'm going to move on and talk a little bit about your difficulties and how they might have affected you in different areas of your life, for example your home life, your work life and your social life. Is that okay? Once again I want to stress that if at any time you feel

uncomfortable or do not want to answer certain questions, just let me know and we will move on.

Can I start by asking you, do you see yourself as having literacy difficulties? Is it something you give a lot of thought to? Can you tell me how you manage to 'workaround' your difficulties? Do you read? How often do you read? What do you read? In what situations are you most likely to read, can you give me an example? How about writing, how is your writing and spellings? Or numbers, say for example who deals with the bills? Can you tell me a little bit about what impact all of this has on your everyday life? Is there any one person or group that you turn to for assistance? Would you say that your difficulties have had an impact on your confidence? In what way? Can you give me an example? Have there been times when your difficulties have caused you to feel self-conscious? Are there certain places or circumstance where this happens more?

Do your difficulties ever stop you from voicing your opinion in certain places or on certain subjects? Has it impacted on the decisions you have made in your life/things you have done? [Explore]. Is there someone you can go to for support? What/who has been particularly useful to you in boosting your confidence?

How about your day to day life, is your difficulty something that you feel you hide from others? Do you encounter many obstacles because of your difficulties? Does this happen more in certain situations/places? In what way, can you describe some to me?

Work life

We talked a little bit before about the kind of work you did/didn't do when you left school. Can you tell me why you made that decision? This will already have been covered in the last few questions in the education profile. Did you ever turn down the chance of promotion and/or training because of your difficulties?

Home life (Some questions in this section are only applicable to participant who are, or have been married, and/or those who have children and grandchildren).

Some of the questions I am going to ask you now are more personal than before and I understand that it may not be easy for you to talk about them. But let us try anyway, if that's ok with you. Again I want to remind you that if at any stage you feel uncomfortable let me know. I also want to say to you again that anything you tell me in this interview is confidential and no details about your identity will be told to anyone else.

For those who are married and/or have children and grandchildren

Did you ever discuss your difficulties with your husband/wife. If no, why not? Does your husband/wife have any difficulties? Did s/he encourage you to or did s/he ever suggest that you get support with your difficulties? Did it ever cause arguments?

How about your children, were they aware of your difficulty? If yes how did you react/respond? How did they react/feel about it? How did that make you feel? If no, how did you go about disguising it from them? What happened when they needed help with say their homework? Can you tell me about that? Let's say that the children wanted to join the local library, is that something that you would have encouraged? Have you ever used the library yourself? Can you tell me about that experience? Overall do you feel that your literacy difficulty may have had an effect on your relationship with your children? In what way? Did it spill over into other parts of your relationship with them? Can you tell me how? Did you or your husband/wife take a leading role in that part of your children's upbringing? How did that make you feel? What was your relationship like with your children's school/school staff? Did your difficulties influence your level of involvement in your children's education? If no, why not? If yes, can you give me an example?

Is your difficulty something your grandchildren are aware of? Does it matter to them? Has it ever become an issue? Has it stopped you from doing certain activities with them?

For all participants

What about your extended family, did they know? Was it something you hid or kept quiet about? If no, why not? If yes, can you give me an example? Did other members of your extended family, say a brother or sister, have similar difficulties? Is it something you talked about now or in the past? Can you tell me a little bit about those conversations? Do you know if they have ever taken part in an adult literacy course? Do you know what might have motivated them to do that, is it something you discussed together?

Social life

Can we talk a little bit about any affect your difficulties might have had on your social life? Has your difficulties ever stopped you from doing something you always wanted to do, for example, learning to drive, going on holiday? Has your difficulties ever stopped you from going to a social occasion, can you tell me how? What about a night out down the pub, is there a Darts board or a pool/snooker table? Do you play these games? Does your difficulty hinder you in any way?

Is there a local community centre in your area? If yes, do you know what different activities take place there? Do you ever get involved in community activity? Are there community activities you would have liked to be involved in but were reluctant to do so because of your difficulties?

How about local sports clubs or GAA clubs? Are there any in your area? Are you involved? If not, why not? Has your literacy difficulty impeded or hindered your participation in community or sporting activities? What about when you were younger, would it have stopped you from joining community or sports clubs or groups?

Coping strategies

Can you tell me a little bit about how you coped with your difficulties? In what way did you cope, what was most successful for you?

Barriers to returning to education

We talked a little bit earlier on about your difficulty with reading and writing, how they might have affected different areas of your life and how you have learnt over the years to cope with them. Now we're going to move on ... talk about your reason or decision for learning to live and cope with your difficulties. We will also talk about your reasons for not engaging with adult literacy services, is that ok?

Have you ever thought about returning to education for support and help in overcoming your difficulties? If no, why not? If yes, can you tell me why you haven't follow up on this? Is it something that you have talked about with family and friends? If yes, what has their reaction been? When did you first start to think about returning to education? Is it a big decision to make? Are you nervous about it?

If you were to return, what would be your main reason for doing so? Why do you think that you are ready now and not before now? If you're not, what is behind this decision? If you are not thinking of returning to education can you tell us why this is? Do you need more information? Are you nervous about it? Why? Do you know how to go about joining an adult literacy class? Do you know of any literacy classes in your area? How do you know about the service, What is the main thing that would stop you from joining an adult literacy class? Are you anxious about going into a class room situation? Is it something you would prefer to do from home, outside of your local community?

If you were to return to education at what time of the day would you like to go? Are there any particular courses that you would be interested in taking? What do you think would be the major benefit to you from returning to education? Where would you like the classes to be held?

Can I ask you have you ever heard of NALA, from where? Do you know that NALA has a Distance Learning Service that has a freephone number and offers you one-to-one tuition, or refer you to your local VEC? Have you seen the An Post ads, what did you think of them? What do you think of Distance Learning is it something you might be interested in doing in the future? Would you prefer Distance Learning than going into a group or one-to-one session? Can you tell me a little bit more about why that is?

Conclusion

Before we finish I would like to thank you again for taking part in this interview. I'd like to ask you if I've left anything out that you feel is important, perhaps I have not included things that you would like to discuss?