

**Learning Through Life:**

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

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



**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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# 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'.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> NALA (2008): It's never too late to learn: A Study of Older Literacy Students in Dublin. Dublin: NALA.

- 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<sup>2</sup> 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.

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<sup>2</sup> '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.

## 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 networks<sup>3</sup> 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](http://www.writeon.ie).<sup>4</sup>
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.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, voluntary housing bodies may be members of the Irish Council for Social Housing.

<sup>4</sup> 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.