

Literacy Matters

Keeping you up to date
with literacy news in Ireland
and informing you of the
work NALA is doing



Step up for literacy

Author Sinead Moriarty
and journalist Charlie Bird
raise awareness about
adult education.

Also:

- Brian O'Donnell talks about how he conquered his fear of writing
- Challenges and opportunities for parents in the digital age
- Attorney General Seamus Woulfe on how to communicate effectively

A photograph of three people walking on a cobblestone street in a city. A woman on the left is holding the left end of a banner, a man in the middle is holding the middle, and a woman on the right is holding the right end. The banner reads 'take the first step.ie' in blue and white text. The background shows city buildings and a street.



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On the cover:

Author Sinead Moriarty, journalist Charlie Bird and Dr Inez Bailey, CEO, NALA at the launch of this year's 'Take the first step' campaign.

Welcome

to our latest edition
of Literacy Matters.



We were delighted to have journalist Charlie Bird and author Sinead Moriarty launch the third phase of the 'Take the first step' campaign in September.

This year we produced five new videos promoting local learners and ETBs in Tipperary, Carlow, Waterford, Cavan and Dublin. You can read more about the campaign on page four.

We are always impressed by the bravery and dedication of people who go back to education to improve their literacy skills. On page 10, Brian O'Donnell from Kilkenny and Carlow ETB, talks about how he avoided anything to do with writing for 30 years but now he is able to help his kids with their homework. On page 12, Gerard Maher from Tipperary ETB, talks about why he feels more confident and independent since going back to education.

Over 160 adult literacy students from ETB adult education centres attended our Student Days this year. On page 20, you can read

about some of the issues they raised about their experience of adult education.

Attorney General Seamus Woulfe was a guest speaker at our conference on International Literacy Day. On page 24 he shares some tips for organisations that communicate with the public.

NALA is always interested in supporting projects that bring benefits for people with literacy or numeracy difficulties. On page 9, our members can apply for funding for suitable projects.

We would love to hear what you think about Literacy Matters magazine. Please see page 30 for details of a short feedback survey. Everybody who completes it will also have the chance to win a €50 National Book Token.

If you have a story for Literacy Matters please email Patrick Gleeson at pgleeson@nala.ie

Until next time, we hope you have a lovely Christmas and a happy new year.

Best wishes from all the team at NALA.

One step will change your life

Journalist Charlie Bird and author Sinead Moriarty join forces for literacy awareness campaign.



This year's 'Take the first step' campaign was launched by two people who hold literacy close to their heart.

"The most important message is that there is help out there for anyone who is struggling with literacy," says broadcaster and journalist Charlie Bird. Charlie's difficulties with spelling and maths meant he found school very difficult.

"I have trouble with spelling because of my dyslexia and I have always struggled with maths.

I failed my Leaving Cert because of that," he says.

Despite this, Charlie eventually managed to break into a career as a researcher at RTE.

"As a researcher it didn't matter so much about your spelling. Then when I joined the RTE newsroom I carried a dictionary, and if I got stuck on a word I would look it up. I'm taking part in this campaign because I want people to know that there are lots of opportunities out there for people who need help."

Best-selling author Sinead Moriarty agrees.



Author Sinead Moriarty, ETB students Eamon Delaney and Catherine Devlin and journalist Charlie Bird encourage people to take the first step back to education.



Robert Shannon, a student at City of Dublin ETB, says that going back to education is the best thing he ever did.

"For years I struggled with reading and writing but that's all changed now. It's made a big difference to my life."

Robert Shannon



"It's never too late to seek a helping hand to improve your literacy skills. My own mother used to be a literacy tutor and I know how much difference it can make to somebody's life when they are more confident reading and writing," says Sinead.

About the campaign

The 'Take the first step' awareness campaign featured students from local ETB adult education centres around the country sharing their experiences of returning to education. Each person's story focused on what they gained from doing classes to improve their literacy, numeracy, maths or digital skills.

"Taking the first steps on any difficult journey requires courage and commitment – and for those who have difficulties with reading, writing, maths or technology, the stigma attached can prove daunting and discouraging," says Inez Bailey, CEO, NALA.

"People often think they are the only one who needs help but there are lots of people returning to learning to improve skills. We helped learners from all around the country to tell their stories and show that, no matter where you live, there are lots of free classes that you can do."

National and regional advertising

This was the third phase of the 'Take the first step' campaign and it was developed following feedback from ETB adult literacy centres. The campaign included national and regional radio advertising as well as video, digital and outdoor advertising. It also included print and public relations (PR) activity.

All national advertising and PR activity directed people interested in improving their reading, writing, maths or digital skills to call the freephone 1800 20 20 65, text LEARN to 50050 or log onto **takethefirststep.ie**

NALA then put them in contact with their local ETB adult education centre or told them about other free services that would help them improve their skills.

More promotion for local ETB services

This year NALA produced five new videos promoting local learners and ETBs in Tipperary, Carlow, Waterford, Cavan and Dublin. Each video featured learners in their home town talking about how going back to education has benefited them.

The videos showed them going about their daily routines in their local communities – working, volunteering, doing hobbies and attending their local ETB adult education centre. The videos showed how these people had gained more confidence and were able to do more with their life since improving their literacy and numeracy skills.

It also gave us an opportunity to use local voices, accents and locations so that viewers would be able to identify their local ETB services.

We also broadcast regional radio ads again this year. The local ads were 40-second interview style vox pops with students from each ETB talking about how going back to education has changed their life. The ads promoted local ETB services and phone numbers.

"We built on the success of last year's radio ads by tweaking them to incorporate some useful suggestions from adult literacy centres. So this year the ads told people about the free ETB classes that are available in computers as well as reading, writing and maths.

"The new ads also gave people details of takethefirststep.ie as well as the local ETB phone number," says Clare McNally, communications manager, NALA.

The ETBs that were promoted on radio stations were:

- › City of Dublin ETB on FM104;
- › Cork ETB on 96FM;
- › Limerick and Clare ETB on 95FM and Clare FM;
- › Galway and Roscommon ETB on Galway Bay FM; and
- › Waterford and Wexford ETB on WLRFM.

Raising awareness among young people

NALA worked with 30-year-old City of Dublin ETB student Robert Shannon and his tutor Fionnuala Carter for an interview about the benefits of returning to education. It was accompanied by a video featuring Robert and two other CDETB students Brian Flannery and Thomas Murphy. The interview and video were shared on several radio stations' websites and social media.

In his interview, Robert says that going back to education was the best thing he ever did.



"The videos showed how people had gained more confidence and were able to do more since improving their literacy and numeracy skills."

"I'd been out looking for work but I couldn't get anywhere. I didn't have any qualifications because I left school so young. For years I struggled with reading and writing but that's all changed now. It's made a big difference to my life. Now I'm doing homework with the kids and I can actually help them.

"Not so long ago I couldn't. It used to have to be their mam doing it but now I can actually do it myself," says Robert.

Posters for centres

As we did in the second phase of the campaign, NALA sent all ETBs and adult literacy centres or services bespoke posters with local contact phone numbers, websites and corresponding ETB logos. In total, 75 centres received bespoke posters with local contact details while 69 centres received generic posters with national contact details.

Working together

The campaign is managed by NALA and SOLAS, the State Further Education and Training Authority, with support from Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI). It was a key action in Ireland's Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2014-2019. Adult Literacy is co-funded by the Irish Government and the European Social Fund (ESF) as part of the Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020.

Thank you!

The success of the 'Take the first step' campaign would not have been possible without the help of many people.

We would like to say a huge thank you to the ETB students who shared their stories in the campaign's radio and video ads: Brian O'Donnell from Carlow; Michael Duffy from Cavan; Gerard Maher and Eamon Delaney from Tipperary; Robert Shannon, Brian Flannery, Thomas Murphy, Catherine Gavin, Olive Phelan and Rita Murphy from Dublin; Liz Carey, Tony Moloney and Margaret Scully from Cork; Rosaleen Rice, John Williams, Kenneth Kenellan and Marion Higgins from Galway; Maurice Sammon, Rosaleen O'Neill, Ann Johnston and Bernie Sherlock from Waterford; Tanya Byrne and Lee Mitchell from Wicklow; Joe McDonagh, Angela Gleeson, Pam Noonan and Terence Conway from Limerick; Catherine Devlin from Donegal; Chris Carthy from Sligo and Gerardine Dunphy from Meath.

Thank you also to all the ETBs, ALOs and tutors who supported the campaign, including those who put us in touch with students and allowed us to film video ads in local centres: Tara Kelly in Carlow; Mary Roche Cleary in Tipperary; Siobhan Crotty and Margaret O'Connor in Waterford; Siobhan McEntee in Cavan; Fionnuala Carter in Dublin. Thank you also to Kevin Kelly and Alison Jones in Galway; Emma Tobin Coles and Joann Power in Waterford; and Lorraine Markham and Mary Dunne in Limerick.

And, of course, we would also like to say a very special thank you to our student subcommittee for their hard work and enthusiasm throughout the campaign.

The campaign in numbers



600

NALA answered **600 calls** from people who wanted information about improving their literacy and numeracy skills. This is over twice as many as last year and each person was given details of their local ETB adult literacy service.



42,000

The campaign's website, takethefirststep.ie, received **42,000** views.



1,600

1,600 promotional posters were sent to literacy services around the country.



95,000

Promotional videos of students sharing their stories were watched **95,000** times on YouTube.



200

After chatting to students at our stand at the ploughing championships, **200** people signed up to request information about local adult education options.



38%

An independent evaluation showed that **38%** of the adult population in Ireland recall the campaign. More importantly, among people who have difficulties with literacy or numeracy, **75%** recall the campaign compared to **57%** in 2016.



9 in 10

Among the people who saw the campaign, **9 in 10** believe it was effective at encouraging people to seek help to improve their literacy, numeracy, and digital skills.



51%

Awareness that free courses are available in local ETB adult education centres has increased from 47% to **51%**.

Win funding for a literacy or numeracy project



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh



NALA has €7000 available to support projects that will improve the skills of people with literacy and numeracy difficulties. This funding has come from our partnership with Better World Books. It has also come from generous donations from the Jonathan Swift Festival, which is run by St Patrick's Cathedral, and Pepsico.

We would like to share this with our members and we are delighted to invite you to apply for funding to support a suitable literacy or numeracy project. The funding can be used for new resources or any initiative that supports adult literacy or numeracy.

We are especially looking to promote innovative projects that promote digital, health or family literacy or numeracy so get your thinking hats on!

This funding is only open to organisations that are NALA members. Projects will be chosen based on the benefits they will bring for people with literacy and numeracy difficulties. The most you can apply for is €400 and the closing date for applications is Thursday 31 January 2019. Successful applicants will be told by 21 February 2019.

Apply now!

To apply for this funding please fill out an online application form by visiting the following link **www.bit.ly/literacyfunding**



Brian O'Donnell says that he has conquered his fear of writing since going back to education.

Face the fear

Brian O'Donnell avoided anything to do with reading or writing for 30 years. Now, he's able to help his kids with their homework.

Brian O'Donnell has always had a big personality. When he was 20 he met his wife-to-be Siobhan in a supermarket in Carlow and serenaded her with the song Do Wah Diddy Diddy. In his job as porter at Aut Even hospital he ran the social club and was the life and soul of Christmas parties. But Brian was also using his larger-than-life personality to hide behind.

"I was outgoing so I was easily able to hide my problems with reading and writing. The old saying goes that the pen is mightier than the sword, but to me the pen was a sword. I avoided it at all costs," says Brian.

Brian's difficulties began after he spent a year

in hospital when he was seven.

"I had a hip condition and spent a year strapped to the bed. There were classes in the hospital but it wasn't the same as being in a classroom environment and I didn't learn as much as I should have. I never caught back up with the other kids and ended up leaving school before my Junior Cert mocks.

"For the next 30 years I avoided anything that involved writing, reading or filling in forms," Brian says.

Soon after leaving school Brian got a job working in the stores at Teagasc. It was here that he first started hiding his literacy difficulties.

"It felt like I had a gremlin on my shoulder telling me not to get help, that I wouldn't be able for it. But that gremlin disappeared as soon as I walked into the centre."

Brian O'Donnell



"Other workers would come to the stores to get equipment they needed, such as shovels or wheelbarrows. I was supposed to write down what they wanted but I used to ask them to write it themselves," he says.

A few years later, when Brian was looking for a different job, Siobhan typed up his CV and sent 48 job applications to prospective employers for him. He got a job as a porter in Aut Even Hospital in Kilkenny where, for years, he was able to hide his literacy difficulties from colleagues. But all that changed two years ago when he was selected to take part in a new training course at the hospital.

"When I saw that I was going to have to write a 1,500-word essay I knew that I would have to face my fears and deal with my literacy difficulties. Unbeknownst to the hospital, I decided to take the first step and went to the ETB adult education centre in Carlow. As soon as I met the tutors in there it was like a weight had been lifted from me," he says.

"For 30 years it felt like I had a gremlin on my shoulder telling me not to get help, that I wouldn't be able for it. But that gremlin disappeared as soon as I walked into the centre."

Brian went on to write the essay for his course. And his new skills in reading and

writing also enabled him to fulfil another personal dream.

"Six months ago I helped my kids with their homework for the very first time. It was a great achievement for me. For years as soon as the schoolbooks were opened I went out of the room and Siobhan was the one who helped them," he says.

Brian says that he no longer thinks of the pen as a sword to be avoided. Instead, he says that he now thinks of the pen as a friend that helps him get through some tough times.

"When my dad died I wrote a poem that helped me to cope with the pain. Before going back to education, I would never have been able to use a pen to express myself but writing out my feelings really helped me to cope with his death," he says.

"I am so happy that I have now faced the fear I carried around with me for 30 years. I know that there are lots of people out there like me and I want them to know that education and learning is for everybody. Taking that first step back to education was one of the best things I ever did and I haven't looked back since."

Check out a video of Brian telling his story on NALA's YouTube channel

www.youtube.com/takethefirststepnala



Gerard Maher is a literacy student in Tipperary ETB.

A new man

Gerard Maher says he feels more independent and confident since returning to education.

Gerard Maher was thrilled when he was asked to be best man at his nephew's wedding. But none of the other wedding guests knew how worried he was about giving a speech.

"I didn't have anything prepared beforehand because I wasn't able to read or write very well. Luckily I was able to just speak from the heart and say how proud I was of my nephew. Everybody was delighted with what I had to say about him but I still would have liked if I could have had something written down," Gerard says.

Gerard left school when he was 13 and hiding his literacy difficulties was something he had grown used to.

"After I left school I started working in a chip shop peeling potatoes so I didn't need to be able to read or write for that. If I got a letter in the post I would have to ask my parents to read it to me because I couldn't do it myself. When I went to the supermarket I used to draw the things I needed so that I would remember them. I used to do the shopping for an elderly neighbour and she used to write down what she needed. I was afraid to tell her that I couldn't read what she had written. Thankfully I knew one of the girls who worked in Dunnes Stores so when I went into the shop I'd ask her where I'd find what was on the list."



"The tutors in the centre were so welcoming it was almost like I was after walking in through my own front door."

Gerard Maher

Gerard's literacy difficulties also meant that he didn't go for jobs that he knew he would have been well able for. A friend offered to put in a good word for him at Aldi so Gerard decided to pay a visit to ask about a job there.

"But when I got there the secretary gave me a sheet and said that I had to fill it in. I was so mortified that I just walked away and didn't apply," he says.

Gerard had often thought about trying to improve his reading or writing.

"It was always in the back of my mind. Then one day I finally decided to take the first step into the adult education centre in Clonmel," he says.

Taking that first step wasn't easy.

"I was absolutely petrified. I didn't know what to expect and I was very nervous. But the tutors in there were so welcoming it was almost like I was after walking in through my own front door," he says.

"I had a reading assessment with my tutor Mary so she could see what level I was at. She put me at ease straight away and told me that we could go as slow or as fast as I wanted. During the assessment Mary told me that I was brainier than I thought I was.

That gave me confidence straight away and I couldn't wait to start the classes after that."

It's only been two years since Gerard took that first step and now he loves reading and writing.

"I'm always trying to read whenever I can now. If a subtitled film comes on at home instead of just changing the channel I leave it on and try to follow it. I'm proud of myself if I figure out what the gist of it is," he says.

"I enjoy reading so much that when the centre was closed during the summer I started going to the local library and doing some reading exercises by myself. I had never been in the library before in my life," he laughs.

Does he have any advice for anybody else who is thinking of going back to education?

"You have nothing to lose so you might as well take the first step. If you don't like it you can always leave again but if you're anything like me you'll love it."

Check out a video of Gerard telling his story on NALA's YouTube channel

www.youtube.com/takethefirststepnala

When the numbers don't add up



A little-known condition called dyscalculia could be the reason so many people struggle with maths.

We all know what it's like to be standing at the till in a shop counting out money to pay for something. For most people the mental arithmetic isn't a problem. They can add up what to pay and they will know if they receive the correct change.

But for people like Mark Daly, situations like that can be very fraught and stressful. That's because Mark has dyscalculia, a learning condition which makes understanding numbers and making calculations very difficult.

"I really struggle with counting out money in a shop. I'll keep making a mistake and have to start over. I was diagnosed with dyscalculia 30 years ago when I was on holidays in the United States. My mother found it very frustrating and upsetting when I couldn't understand basic maths concepts. She was a financial secretary so she was very good at maths herself," Mark says.

While it might not be very well known here, recent research in Northern Ireland has found that many people are affected by dyscalculia but they are not aware of it.

A team of researchers at Queen's University Belfast examined the performance of more than 2,400 primary schoolchildren and found that 112 of them had a specific learning disorder in maths. However, just one of these children had been previously diagnosed with dyscalculia.

The research team was led by Dr Kinga Morsanyi and he says that the findings show that in almost all cases, children who appear to have dyscalculia are not being diagnosed.

"In society, there is sadly a widespread notion that you need a special talent to be good at maths, and that struggling with maths is normal for some people. But this is not the case and it's not something we would accept if a pupil was unable to read," says Dr Morsanyi.

The researchers found that dyscalculia is almost as common as dyslexia, which affects reading and spelling. Unlike dyslexia however, there is far less awareness of dyscalculia and it's not easy for people who have the condition to access the support and help that they need.

Mark Daly says that dyscalculia has had an enormous impact on his life.



"I really struggle with counting out money in a shop. I'll keep making a mistake and have to start over."

Mark Daly

In fact, the research team estimates that a child with dyslexia is more than 100 times more likely to receive an official diagnosis and educational support than one with dyscalculia.

Mark is all too aware of the lack of awareness and support for people with dyscalculia.

"It has had an enormous effect on my life. When I was in school I wasn't able to do exercises on the blackboard and I used to get detention because I couldn't do some of my homework," he says.

Mark's dyscalculia has also made it difficult for him to get a job.

"It has left me unemployed because nobody wants to hire somebody who has numeracy difficulties. I used to have a job with a charity but I got in trouble for making a mistake with a bag of coins that I counted," he says.

Two years ago Mark decided to tackle dyscalculia and this meant going back to education to get some help with maths. He is now a student at an adult learning centre in Loughlinstown and the experience has inspired him to become an advocate for people with dyscalculia.

"When I was younger I wanted to be an actor or a writer. I never thought that I'd end up being an advocate for people with learning

difficulties. But it's very important to me that people who struggle with maths are still able to find their place in society."

For more information about maths learning difficulties and dyscalculia please visit www.ncse.ie or www.stevechinn.co.uk



Dyscalculia

(pronounced
Dis-kal-cool-e-a)

is a learning condition which makes understanding numbers and making calculations very difficult.



"If parents spend a lot of time online checking Facebook or answering emails then that means they have less time to interact with their children."

Laura Barret

Parenting in the digital age



Whether they spend too much time online or don't know enough about the online world, life is not easy for parents in the digital age.

What would we do without our smartphones? With just a few simple scrolls and clicks we can check out a friend's holiday photos, read the news, book cinema tickets and watch videos of cute kittens. And the best part is, we can do it almost anytime and anywhere.

But concerns are growing about how much time we spend using smartphones and other online devices such as tablets and laptops. Recent research carried out by Deloitte found that Irish adults use their smartphones an average of 57 times a day with some heavy users admitting to checking their devices more than 100 times a day.

The research also showed that 44% of people check their phones during the night while 40% look at their smartphones within five

minutes of waking up in the morning.

In fact, we are now spending so much time distracted by our online devices that it could be having a negative impact on our children.

Laura Barret, family learning resource worker at Limerick and Clare ETB, says that parents' excessive use of online devices is disrupting the interaction that is necessary for their children's cognitive development. This is especially true during the first six years of their life.

"Those early years are when children experience momentous growth in the areas of comprehension, perception, memory, language development, concept representation and problem-solving.

"This growth is influenced by the ongoing parental interaction between children and parents. But if parents spend a lot of time online, whether it's checking Facebook or answering emails, then that means they have less time to interact with their children," says Laura.

Of course, not every parent spends too much time online. And for a lot of parents, the most challenging issue they have is trying to manage the amount of time their children spend online.

"Every week a new study emerges warning about the consequences, including social isolation and bullying, of children spending too much time online. But for many parents, trying to understand and keep track of what their child does online, especially on social media, is a minefield of confusion.

"The pace of technological innovation simply exceeds the digital knowledge-base of many parents," she says.

So what advice does Laura have for parents who aren't familiar with the online world their child is growing up in?

"It's all about communication. Talk with them about the online content they see. Help them question and analyse online media messages. Share your own values and make connections to real-life events. This interaction increases parents' digital literacy and enables them to see how their children are interacting with technology," she says.

Even though there are many challenges for parents in the digital age, Laura is keen to emphasise the positive impact that technology can have for families.

"When used thoughtfully and appropriately, technology and interactive online media have huge potential to enhance family activities and interactions. Technology should work for and within your family values and parenting practices.

"We can't change the digital world that we find ourselves in but if we are confident navigating the complexities of parenting and technology then the learning and benefits are endless."

Visit www.webwise.ie for more tips about parenting in the digital age.

Laura's top three survival tips for parents on the technology battlefield

1. Practise what you preach

Parents are their children's first teacher and how they use, manage and view technology will have a significant impact on their children's technology use.

2. Balance your technology diet

Just like with food, children need a balanced technology diet. This means that parents could set times when it is ok to go online and when it isn't, for example during mealtimes and at bedtime.

3. Get creative

Think of different activities within the home that are not technology-focused. Reading to your child is one of the best activities in the home as it strengthens bonding and sets the stage for learning. Or you can just make up stories — it's the sounds, rhythm and communication that are important for a child's development and the parent-child relationship.



How to communicate more effectively

Roisin Doherty, director of further education at SOLAS with Attorney General Seamus Woulfe at NALA's conference on International Literacy Day.

Some useful tips for organisations that produce information for the public.

Attorney General Seamus Wolfe had some home truths to share when he spoke at our conference on International Literacy Day.

The conference looked at how individuals and organisations can be more effective in meeting the needs of those who use their services.

Most people and organisations are unaware of how widespread low literacy levels are in Ireland. As a result, they often fail to communicate with the people they need to reach. This means they waste time and money providing information many people cannot understand.

Mr Woulfe highlighted the legal system as one area where the language used can be confusing for people.

“Low literacy levels are much more common than is often thought, and this should be more widely recognised in the legal system. The law and legal system can be confusing for individuals, whether due to unfamiliar phrases or unusual practices. While accuracy and precision must be achieved, wherever possible plain language should be used,” he said.

"Language is a remarkable instrument and should be carefully used."

Attorney General Seamus Woulfe

Mr Woulfe said that while the legal system can be complex and detailed, there is an obligation on solicitors and other legal professionals to use language that people can understand. Otherwise people feel uncomfortable and intimidated when they are in a courtroom.

"Often, the law must provide for something in a very precise, specific and detailed way. However, this must not be at the expense of clarity. It must be recognised that there are many levels of literacy skills. Not doing so risks excluding people from understanding the law and accessing their legal rights," he said.

So, what can be done to change things?

Mr Woulfe's final bit of advice for legal professionals is something that organisations from any sector should keep in mind when communicating with the public.

"The value of communicating with clients without jargon and without unnecessary terminology should be emphasised. Language is a remarkable instrument and should be carefully used. Simple, plain English can often go a long way to helping people understand exactly what you mean, in a very short time," he said.

More useful tips

There was plenty more good advice from some of the other great speakers at the event.

Rob Waller, director of the Simplification Centre in England, said that literacy is a two-way street.

"If a reader has problems understanding something then this also says something

about the writer of that information. So if someone struggles to read some information, such as a contract or a form, it's not their fault, it's actually the fault of the organisation that wrote it because they didn't make it clear enough," he said.

Sarah Lane, cancer information editor, at the Irish Cancer Society, recommended using personas when writing information for the public.

"We always use personas when we're writing any information for the public. We try to imagine who we are writing for and what their challenges and needs are. This makes it easier to write information they will find useful," she said.

One thing all organisations have in common is that they don't want to end up in front of the Ombudsman. Jennifer Hanrahan, from the Office of the Ombudsman, gave the audience some very useful tips to help avoid this.

"The main thing is to ensure that everyone is included and that nobody is left behind. All information such as leaflets, booklets, forms should be written with the reader in mind, in English that is easily understandable by that reader.

"If public service bodies do that then the person they are dealing with will know what is expected of them. There will be fewer communication related problems and fewer cases brought to the Ombudsman's attention," Jennifer said.

What NALA is doing

NALA is currently working on a draft Bill with clear-cut proposals to make sure that all information written for the public by government departments is in plain English. A Bill is a proposal for a new law or a change to a current law that has yet to be passed by the Oireachtas.

Students talk, we act



People who came to our Student Days had lots of useful feedback and suggestions about the adult literacy service.

Over 160 adult literacy students from 35 Education and Training Board (ETB) adult education centres attended our Student Days in Galway and Dublin this year. The Student Days provide a relaxed and fun opportunity for students from different education centres to meet each other and learn new things during workshops. The Student Days are also a platform where students can give feedback about their experience of adult education.

The feedback students gave this year came under the following themes:

- › Access and participation;
- › Teaching and learning; and
- › Progression.

Access and participation

All of the students who gave feedback spoke very highly about their tutors. They described how the support, confidence and encouragement they got from tutors helped to make their return to learning such a positive experience. Many students said that their new love of education was all down to their tutors.

Fear, stigma and embarrassment are still an issue for many literacy students. They said that when they first went to their local education centre they were very nervous. Some people raised concerns about centres that did not have the front door open to new visitors during opening hours. They said that this creates a negative first impression for anybody who has decided to take the brave step to visit the centre to find out about classes.

They also said that there should be an open door policy at centres where everyone, from security guards to receptionists, has a role to play in encouraging people to feel comfortable and informed about the services available. Also, they said that centres should focus more on people who are coming back to education voluntarily rather than on people who are only coming after being referred from the social welfare service.

Teaching and learning

Students said that one-to-one tuition is crucial for some people. They also said that they would like more tuition hours. Even a half hour extra tuition at the end of a maths class could make a huge difference to learning.



Hanan Absi and Larisa Kovalenro were two of the many students who attended our Student Days this year.

ESOL students (English for Speakers of Other Languages) also said that they need more classes. They said that it takes a long time to get into an ESOL class because of waiting lists. Students would like ESOL courses to be longer and they would like if conversation classes were available so they could become familiar with different accents. Students suggested having an exchange of learning where ESOL students could teach other students computers in exchange for conversation practice.

Students want to learn more. Many students wanted to learn to use computers but were unable to access free computer classes. Some students were unaware they could use **www.writeon.ie** outside the classroom to learn. Some students were interested in other learning, for example doing a health and wellbeing course.

Progression

The feedback we received shows that there is a lack of awareness among students about the Adult Guidance Service. Many students are unaware they can use the service for advice on further education and training. Some students are unaware of grants available for part-time students or how to apply for them.

Concerns were also raised about how difficult some students found it to have their prior learning recognised.

Some non-Irish students experience difficulties if they don't have certificates when they arrive in Ireland, even though they are qualified in their home country. ESOL students were also disappointed that there were no certificates for ESOL learning.

Other feedback

Students said they would like to be able to get a student card. The card would provide benefits and discounts to adult education students similar to those available to students of other institutes of education.

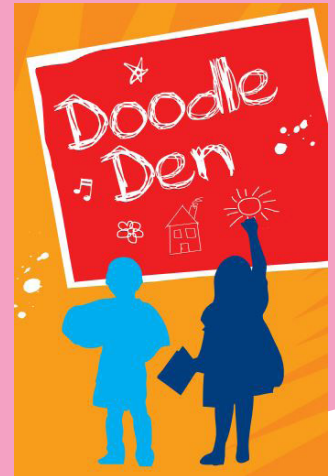
The importance of plain English was also raised. Students said that health professionals should use plain English instead of medical terms that are difficult to understand. Students welcomed the 'Ask me three questions' initiative that they learned at the health literacy workshop at the Student Day. They said it would help them when talking to a doctor.

What NALA is doing

Over the coming months NALA will share this feedback with other stakeholders in adult education. Together we hope to put in place a number of actions arising from this feedback so that we improve the quality of our work and respond appropriately to the needs of learners. We will let people know these actions at the 2019 Student Days.

Family learning is fun learning

Two after-school literacy programmes help parents to get more involved in their child's learning.



Everybody learns more when they are having fun. This is the inspiration behind two literacy programmes which have been a hit both with children and their parents.

Doodle Den

Doodle Den is an after-school literacy programme for children in senior infant classes. It has been developed by the Childhood Development Initiative (CDI).

"Doodle Den involves 90-minute sessions, three times a week after school, for 32 weeks over a school year," says Tara Scott, programme manager at CDI.

"In each session literacy skills are taught and developed through games, arts and crafts activities, drama and physical education. It is delivered by teams of two facilitators; one teacher facilitator and one facilitator from a youth work, childcare or social care background. This co-facilitation approach adds to the overall experience for children and families engaged with the programme.

It also helps children to distinguish between school and Doodle Den," says Tara.

There is a strong emphasis on involving parents with the programme.

"Six sessions for parents are delivered throughout the year. These sessions are usually delivered in the school at a suitable time such as the morning drop off time, lunch time or after school. These informal sessions offer parents the opportunity to learn about the work their children are doing and explore ways to support the learning done in Doodle Den. The sessions also help parents learn about other available services, such as the library, in their local community. The facilitators also deliver three family sessions in which the children and parents work together in a variety of Doodle Den activities," says Tara.

An evaluation of Doodle Den, carried out by an independent research team from Queens University Belfast, found that it led to many improvements in children's literacy skills. The team found that children's skills improved



“Doodle Families is a fun, interactive, activity-based programme for both the parents and children.”

Tara Scott

when it came to sentence structure, word choice and word recognition.

The evaluation also found that children’s behaviour improved, that the time they spent reading at home increased and that the families used the local libraries more frequently.

There are currently 270 children across Tallaght, Limerick and Dublin city centre taking part in Doodle Den. There is also a website, **www.doodleden.ie** with lots of games and activities that children aged five and six can enjoy with the help of a parent or other adult.

Doodle Families

Doodle Families is an eight-week family literacy programme aimed at children in First class. It was developed by CDI as a response to requests from schools who wanted a follow-up programme to Doodle Den.

“There are two components to Doodle Families. One is for parents and guardians and the other is for children. The one-hour sessions for parents are delivered during the school day and the one-hour sessions for children are delivered after school,” says Tara.

Doodle Families focuses on family literacy. The programme recognises the importance of literacy in the home and the need to support parents to increase their own literacy skills.

The programme enables parents to better understand their children’s literacy development, and maximise their learning and achievement.

“Engaging parents in their children’s learning is critical to improving outcomes, and so we were very clear that this needs to be a targeted element of Doodle Families.

The two components have been designed to complement each other and to maximise the opportunities to support the home learning environment, through fun activities such as treasure hunts and trips to the local library,” says Tara.

“At the end of every session there is an opportunity for parents to join their children to observe their work and give the children time to share what they’ve been doing. It is a fun, interactive, activity-based programme for both the parents and children.”

To find out more about Doodle Den and Doodle Families, and to get access to other materials and resources that support family literacy and learning, please visit **www.twcdi.ie**

Literacy for life, literacy for all

Creating a new vision for learning.



Helen Ryan,
NALA's policy
officer, meeting
with Michael
Collins TD.

NALA is creating a vision for improving adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills over the next 10 years. As part of this, we are meeting with political representatives to advocate for increased priority and investment in literacy.

Throughout this year, NALA has been in contact with all 158 TDs and 60 Senators about adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills. We have met with 35 of them and they all agreed that it is an important issue and the state should make it a priority.

During the meetings with policymakers we explored potential solutions to Ireland's poor level of literacy and numeracy. This includes developing a creative, ambitious and aligned cross-departmental strategy setting out how we should improve our literacy and numeracy levels over the next 10 years.

What we learned

The meetings enabled us to find out just how much the TDs and Senators know about adult literacy and numeracy.

Interestingly, they were all shocked that one in six adults struggle with reading and understanding everyday text and one in four adults find everyday maths difficult.

The meetings also highlighted the importance of raising awareness as literacy is more than just technical skills. It is also about self-confidence and self-esteem and has personal, social and economic implications. People need to know that literacy is changing and that literacy skills are important for all aspects of life, including health, family, education and work.

The politicians we met also didn't realise that adults can only access a small number of tuition hours each week. Nor did they know that there are no financial supports for people to return to adult literacy learning — for example, no paid learning leave, tax relief, child or elder care or transport.



Students
Michael Duffy
and Liz Corkish
with NALA's
Helen Ryan in
Leinster House.



Some highlights

In May we met Richard Bruton, the then Minister for Education and Skills. We had a good discussion on innovative measures to address adult literacy and numeracy that could be part of the Upskilling Pathways plan. NALA's CEO, Dr Inez Bailey, sits on the Upskilling Pathways Steering Committee which is chaired by the Department of Education and Skills.

Over the summer we prepared a pre-budget submission for the Department of Finance and the Department of Education and Skills. We made the case that strong literacy skills are good for everyone – the individual, community, family and society.

We asked for increased investment to improve literacy, numeracy and digital skills to achieve a better and more equal Ireland. You can see our submission online at this link

www.bit.ly/nala-budget

Two political parties, the Social Democrats and People Before Profit, included adult literacy in their pre-budget documents.

In their alternative budget the Social Democrats said they would “provide an additional €30m to effectively double the funding for adult literacy”.

In People Before Profit's pre-budget submission they proposed that €76 million should be allocated to adult literacy.

We are now following up with other political parties to make sure adult literacy is included in their education policies and upcoming manifestos.

In September Gino Kenny TD (People Before Profit) invited us to give a presentation to TDs and Senators on why literacy matters. Adult literacy students Liz Corkish and Michael Duffy shared their story and experience of literacy and returning to learning. NALA then talked about the extent of Ireland's literacy and numeracy issue, why the government needs to invest more in the area and what the TDs and Senators could do to support this.

If you would like to support our policy work please contact NALA's policy officer Helen Ryan **hryan@nala.ie**



Literacy student Thelma McDonnell with her tutor Patricia Flannery at the creative writing awards ceremony.

The write stuff

Thelma McDonnell improved her literacy skills so much that a piece of her writing was shortlisted for a creative writing competition.

Three years after going back to education to improve her literacy skills, Thelma McDonnell wrote something for the Christmas newsletter at Ballymun Adult Reading and Writing Scheme (BARWS).

She enjoyed the experience so much that she decided to enter Dublin City University's (DCU) creative writing competition. Thelma's story was shortlisted in the competition and, when she read it at the prize-giving ceremony, there wasn't a dry eye in the house.

"Everyone was so moved by Thelma's story and her courage to speak so openly about struggling with low literacy levels.

When she finished reading the audience were on their feet applauding her," says Patricia Flannery.

Patricia had been Thelma's one-to-one tutor for three years and she says that, during that time, Thelma's new literacy skills helped her become a more confident person.

"To say that Thelma was overjoyed with her achievement would be an understatement. She has since moved on from one-to-one tuition and is in a class with other students," says Patricia.

Here is Thelma's shortlisted story:

"Everyone was so moved by Thelma's story and her courage to speak so openly about struggling with low literacy levels."

Patricia Flannery, literacy tutor



Imagine

Imagine a world without words, how dull and boring life would be! We would live in a completely different world. Until two years ago that was the world I lived in as I found it very hard to read and write. While I had some skills, I had absolutely no confidence to use them.

Over the years I tried to get help but I just couldn't get my head around it. As my life went on and I had my five children, I found it very difficult to help them with their homework. When my children grew up a friend tried to help me but I still found it very hard.

One day, two ladies, Christine and Jean from Ballymun Adult Read and Write Scheme, came into my crochet class and spoke about adult education. They explained to us that if anyone was interested in doing a course to come and talk to them. I immediately decided to approach them and gave them my phone number. Within a week I had a call and they told me that I could get one to one tuition. I was delighted to hear this news. At last I was getting a chance to improve my reading and writing skills. I was nervous about it but was determined to conquer my fears.

So two years ago I met my tutor Patricia and I cannot believe all that I have learnt. In a way it is like Patricia has waved a magic wand and opened up a world of words to me. Patricia taught me how to break down words which really works for me.

I look forward to our Tuesday class and I really love doing the NALA Distance Learner worksheets. I have now completed three novels from the Open Door series. Last year I had my story about a trip to Glendalough printed in the Ballymun Read and Write Scheme book of stories. I have also started doing a QQI Level 3 course in Child Development which is very interesting.

I have so much more confidence in myself now. While I couldn't help my children with their homework, I am delighted to say that I can now help my five year old grandson with his.

Most people could not imagine what it is like not being able to read and write. I have seen it from both sides now. Life was so difficult not having these skills and now that I have them it is unbelievable the change it has made to my life.

I have to say that I have the most respect for people who give up their free time voluntarily to help others to read and write. It really is a great gift to give to someone. I am so happy that I had the courage to come to Ballymun Read and Write Scheme and I would strongly recommend anyone who is struggling with reading and writing to contact them.

The BARWS centre in Ballymun is part of City of Dublin ETB.

More than numbers

Numeracy is about developing the critical thinking skills needed for everyday living and working.

Improving our numeracy skills isn't simply about numbers, it's about developing the everyday problem-solving skills needed for life in the 21st century. That's according to Marilyn Goos, world renowned maths expert and professor of science, technology engineering and maths at University of Limerick.

"Numeracy connects the maths learned in the classroom with out-of-school situations that require additional problem solving and critical judgment. Developing people's numeracy skills helps them to think for themselves and ask questions about the world," Marilyn says.

For Marilyn, this real world context is what separates mathematics and numeracy.

"Mathematics is incredibly important and one of the most wonderful human creations. But it deals in abstractions and doesn't have to have a real world context, whereas numeracy does. Being numerate is essentially all about being able to work out what to do when you don't know what to do," she says.

So, where do we find numeracy in everyday life? The simple answer is everywhere.

"Numeracy is about using mathematics to act in and on the world. Being numerate means having the skill to make sensible estimations about the impact of everyday activities. This means that your numeracy skills can help you keep control of your credit card spending or assess the calorie intake of your diet.

"Many leisure pursuits also involve numeracy, whether it's predicting what team is going to win the premiership or looking at the odds for horse racing. Numeracy also plays a part in planning a holiday because you might have to look at travel distances and assess the impact of a long journey on the rest of your holiday," she says.


Numeracy skills also help make you a better citizen.

"A good citizen is an informed citizen and to be an informed citizen you need to have good numeracy skills. In today's world, we are drowning in data. Whether it's online, in the newspaper or on the television, there is data everywhere and numeracy helps us to interpret it," she says.

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"I used to dread
filling in forms
but now I don't

- Gerardine, Meath.



Merrilyn Goos, professor of maths at University of Limerick, speaking at NALA's numeracy conference.

"A good citizen is an informed citizen and to be an informed citizen you need to have good numeracy skills."

Merrilyn Goos

Merrilyn is always on the lookout for examples in the newspaper which show how data is not represented properly in the media.

"Instead it is presented in a manner that is designed to influence people. This can have very serious consequences, especially in the world of politics and elections. Data can be used to manipulate the opinions of people who might not have the numeracy skills that would enable them to form their own critical interpretation of events," she says.

Merrilyn also says that numeracy skills are more important than ever in the modern workplace.

"As a society we are failing to capture the sense of dynamism and change that is happening in the world. The nature of work is rapidly changing. The children that we are teaching in school now will do jobs that don't even exist yet," she says.

"Today's workers are struggling with change in the workplace. Employers want people who are able to use their numeracy skills to solve unfamiliar problems.

This means that it's important for teachers to prepare students for the workplace by providing them with the maths skills that will enable them to think critically.

"Otherwise, the danger is that potential employees will only have inert knowledge. This means that they will know lots of maths but will be unable to use what they know to solve problems that they haven't come across before."

But the good news for all of us is that it is possible to continue developing numeracy skills throughout our lives.

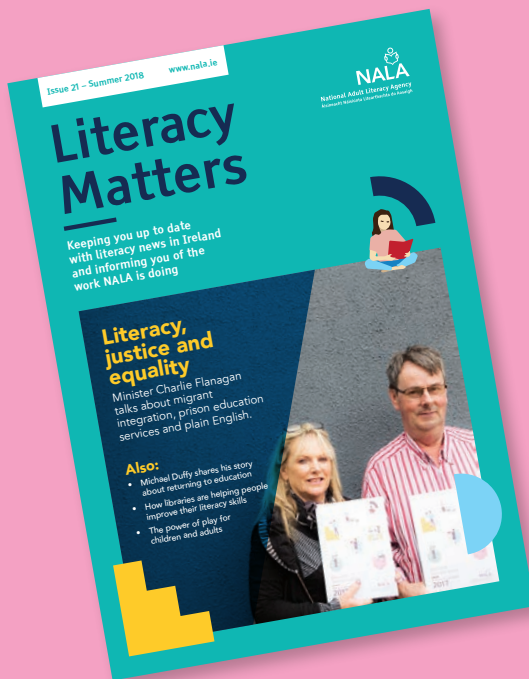
"Thankfully, numeracy is not an all-or-nothing concept. We all have the capacity to develop our skills at every stage of our lives. People can learn to become more numerate, which will enable them to function in an increasing range of situations and environments," she says.

To watch some useful videos on numeracy please visit **www.bit.ly/nala-numeracy**

We want your opinions!



Tell us what you think about our Literacy Matters magazine to be in with a chance of winning a €50 National Book Token.



We want to find out what you think about our Literacy Matters magazine. By taking part in our survey you will help us to ensure the magazine continues to feature interesting articles and provide information that readers find useful. Everybody who completes the survey will also have the chance to win a €50 book token.

The survey is anonymous and will only take five minutes to do. You can take part now by visiting the following link

www.surveymonkey.com/r/LiteracyMatters

Other news



Plain English Awards

We launched our Plain English Awards in August and we are delighted to say that we received almost 80 entries from organisations and the public. We are currently going through the entries and the winners will be announced at a special awards ceremony in February. The awards, which are sponsored by leading law firm Mason Hayes & Curran, are a way of publicly acknowledging businesses and organisations that communicate in plain English.



Pictured at the launch of the Plain English Awards were Dr Inez Bailey, CEO, NALA; Declan Black, managing partner, Mason Hayes & Curran; and Conor Pope, journalist.

Plain language conferences

We attended two very useful conferences on plain English recently. The European Conference on Information Literacy was held in Finland. This event provided us with updates on information literacy – how information is sourced and how you know how reliable it is. The other conference, Clarity, was held in Canada. It provided us with new research and insights into developments in plain legal language like proposed new international standards. We will use these to improve our plain English service.

Michael Power speaks in Cloverhill

In October, adult learner Michael Power spoke to prisoners in Cloverhill about leaving school when he was 16 and how going back to education changed his life. As always, Michael was a big hit and everybody who attended said that it was very inspirational to hear his story.



Student representative Michael Power.

Promoting health and wellbeing

Brenda Daly from NALA attended the recent health and wellbeing fair in Fettercairn Community Centre in Tallaght. The event was held during South Dublin County Council's Health and Wellbeing Week. Brenda spoke to many people at the event to let them know about free literacy classes available in local ETB adult education centres.



Brenda Daly at the NALA stand during Health and Wellbeing Week. Photo courtesy of South Dublin County Council.

Dates for the diary 2019

National Forum for Adult Literacy Tutors 2019

Saturday 26 January

Venue: The Ashling Hotel,
Parkgate Street, Dublin 8

Numeracy conference 2019

Thursday 7 March

Venue: Trinity College Dublin

ESOL conference 2019

Thursday 9 May

Venue: The Ashling Hotel,
Parkgate Street, Dublin 8

For more details about these conferences
please email Fergus Dolan
fdolan@nala.ie

NALA Student Days

Saturday 23 February

Venue: Limerick

Saturday 23 March

Venue: The Ashling Hotel, Parkgate
Street, Dublin 8

For more details about the Student Days
please email Margaret Murray
mmurray@nala.ie

Plain English Training

We will be holding plain English training
throughout 2019. To find out more,
please keep an eye on our website,
www.nala.ie

NALA Annual General Meeting

Saturday 6 April

Our AGM in 2019 will be held in Dublin.
Members are invited to come along to
hear how their support is helping us
improve the lives of people with literacy
difficulties. It is also a great opportunity
to elect members to our board and hear
about our work.

We would love to see you there.

International Conference on Family Learning

Thursday 28 and Friday 29 March

Venue: Temple Gate Hotel, Ennis,
Co Clare

This conference will bring national and
international experts together to look at
Family Learning as an essential element in
further education.

For more details about the conference
and to book your place please visit
www.lcetbfamilylearning2019.eventbrite.ie



Ireland's European Structural and
Investment Funds Programmes
2014-2020
Co-funded by the Irish Government
and the European Union



European Union
Investing in Your Future
European Social Fund

Adult literacy is co-funded by the Irish Government and
the European Social Fund as part of the ESF Programme
for Employability, Inclusion and Learning 2014-2020.



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh