

## **Men and Literacy:**

### **A Study of Attitude and Experiences of Learning**



**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

In recent years, significant resources have been invested in Ireland in researching men's attitudes towards and involvement in learning, within formal, non-formal and informal learning settings. In conducting this research, NALA wished to identify literacy issues among men, specifically those in informal learning settings, and to assess the impact which these difficulties have on men's participation in learning.

This report details the findings from NALA's study on men's attitudes and experiences of literacy which was conducted between November 2008 and May 2009.

## Aims and objectives

This study aims to investigate and explore men's attitudes towards and experiences of adult literacy, in particular within informal learning settings.

The intention is to identify men of various ages, cultural, economic and social backgrounds who have literacy difficulties and who are already learning informally and non-formally through community engagement in groups.

The purpose is to analyse the nature, challenges and benefits of that engagement, specifically as it relates to their literacy issues, and how this impacts on the wellbeing of the men, their families and their wider communities.

The research sought to establish:

- The attitudes, experiences and views of the men to their adult literacy difficulties, and what shapes these attitudes.
- The views, experiences and impacts of returning to adult literacy services.
- The supports needed for men to return to adult literacy services.

- What can be done to positively re-engage other men with literacy difficulties in adult literacy interventions through community engagement?

## Methodology

Firstly, a list of organisations that work with men was drawn up and each organisation on the list was contacted by post, email and followed up with a phone call. Secondly, it was agreed that qualitative research methods, namely focus groups, would best satisfy the aims and objectives of the research and would facilitate the men involved to fully share their experiences of informal learning, within a group setting which they were already familiar and comfortable with. The group setting would also best facilitate a lively discussion and enable comparison of individual experiences, in order to best address the research questions.

It was envisaged that between three and five focus groups would be held with men's groups from both urban and rural locations around the country.

Six focus groups were conducted between January and April 2009, with men's groups from around the country, including ones in Galway (Tuam), Tipperary (Clonmel<sup>1</sup> and Carrick on Suir) and Dublin (Ballymun and Dun Laoghaire). Focus groups were conducted with the following:

- A men's group engaging in workplace learning opportunities (attended by local authority staff and delivered by the Vocational Education Committee).
- A Back to Education Initiative delivered by the Vocational Education Committee.
- A barrel-top wagon<sup>2</sup> building project aimed at Travellers delivered by a Travellers' education project.
- A return to education programme targeted at those who had experienced homelessness, delivered by the Vocational Education Committee.<sup>3</sup>
- A men's group operating within a local, community based men's centre.

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<sup>1</sup> Focus groups with two men's groups took place in Clonmel.

<sup>2</sup> The use of the wagon is now very rare in Ireland; however it remains a pivotal image and focus of Traveller culture with widespread interest among the Traveller community in the lifestyle, skills, stories and traditions associated with its use.

<sup>3</sup> However, the men from this group did not report literacy difficulties so the data from this focus group was not used.

Courses undertaken by these groups include basic and advanced computers, communication skills and mathematics. The focus groups were made up of men of mixed ages and mixed literacy abilities. Each of the groups had been formed for at least several weeks, but in most cases several months and even years, prior to participating in the research. Each focus group session lasted between 35 minutes and one hour.

A total of five focus groups form the data set for this research study. In total, 32 men attended these focus groups. At least 15 of those in attendance at focus groups were Traveller men (47% of all attendees).

## Findings and analysis

This chapter outlines the findings from focus groups with men's groups engaging in workplace learning opportunities, a wagon building project and attending a local men's centre. Courses undertaken include basic and advanced computers, communication skills and mathematics. The focus groups were made up of men of mixed ages and literacy abilities. Each of the groups had been formed for at least several weeks but in most cases several months and even years prior to participating in the research.

Of the 32 participants who took part in the study, 26 provided baseline data as to the following:

- Age
- Household status
- Educational history and attainment
- Employment history

This information was gathered using a pre-coded questionnaire.

The majority of men participating in the survey were aged between 40 and 59 years old. When asked about household status, almost half reported living with their wives or partners, 40% lived with family members and 11.5% lived alone. All of the men surveyed had been enrolled in primary school as a child but 15.4% of them left primary school before completing their education. Almost 70% of these men went on to enrol in

secondary school but only 7.7% completed their second level education. In relation to learning programmes which the men were involved in, 69.2% of those surveyed were participating in the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI). More than half of the men surveyed were unemployed (57.7%), while 42.3% were in paid employment on either a full or a part-time basis.

Themes which emerged as significant from the focus group discussions include:

- Early experiences of learning
- Literacy and the individual
- Literacy in the workplace
- Coping Strategies
- Views and experiences of returning to literacy engagement
- Benefits to families, communities and to the individuals
- Supports needed

### **Early experiences of learning**

The men consulted for this research recounted largely negative memories of school, as a result of regular and often brutal corporal punishment and informal segregation based on social class which meant many of the children were ignored, left to their own devices or allowed to fall behind with school work, including reading, writing and numbers. As a result many of the men participating in the discussions had left school early and continued to harbour negative memories and attitudes toward education and learning.

### **Literacy and the individual**

Among some of the men, difficulties with literacy elicited feelings of embarrassment and humiliation, particularly in situations where they had to rely on the kindness and understanding of others in order to complete certain tasks. Many of these men had particular difficulty with staff members in financial institutions and social services. However, other reported feeling no embarrassment at disclosing their difficulties. The



men's difficulties with reading, writing and numbers also impacted on their level of participation in community and social activities. The majority of men believed that their literacy difficulties held them back and prevented them from becoming involved in these activities as much as they might like.

### **Literacy in the workplace**

An ever increasing emphasis on literacy, including computer literacy in the workplace has meant that many of the men who would have had little or no responsibility for literacy related tasks are now experiencing difficulties at work. Those men who had participated in workplace basic education courses reported negative feedback from colleagues, including some staff at management level. This meant that some of the men participating in these courses were mocked by co-workers or had their commitment to the job questioned by supervisors as a result of their participation. However, all of the men involved were extremely positive about their involvement in these initiatives and even believe that their involvement has spurred other colleagues, who were initially sceptical or dismissive, to also sign up.

### **Coping strategies**

The most common coping strategy adopted by the men was reliance on their spouse or partner, particularly in relation to tasks such as form filling. However, the men also identified strategies such as, developing excuses and thinking on their feet in order to get themselves out of situations which required literacy skills. Some of the participants, particularly those tackling their literacy problems as part of a workplace learning initiative, spoke of their reliance on colleagues when it came to reading, writing and numeracy and were conscious of how this reliance on colleagues could sometimes lead to a strain in workplace relations.

### **Views and experiences of returning to literacy engagement**

The focus group discussions revealed a variety of reasons which motivated these men to tackle their literacy difficulties in adulthood. These reasons can be grouped as follows:

- Motives relating to the individual: for some of the men, they chose to return to education because they believed the opportunity to learn had been missed or lost the first time around.
- Motives relating to the community: others believed that returning to learning would enable them to better serve their communities. A number of the men acknowledged that their literacy difficulties were the main cause, if not the sole reason, for their withdrawal from, or lack of engagement in, community affairs.
- Motives relating to the family: a number of the men wanted to improve their mathematical and computer skills, as well as their literacy skills in order to keep up with the demands of their children for help with homework. Others recognised that their own experiences of education shaped their desire to strive for a better quality education for their children.

### **Benefits to families, communities and the individuals**

A major theme identified by the men is the benefits which literacy engagement can provide for individuals and their families and the knock on effects which these benefits can have on communities.

The benefits include:

- Improved literacy.
- Self respect, self-confidence, and pride.
- Computer literacy.
- Rising to the challenge, including the satisfaction inherent in challenging themselves to overcome difficulties on a course and succeed. In a number of cases this spurred some of the men to think about engaging further in learning opportunities.
- Social interaction with other men, including the simple pleasure of sharing a cup of tea and a chat.
- Cultural knowledge, for example learning traditional skills like barrel-top wagon making.

- Supports, especially peer supports: these proved a source of strength for some members who were struggling with courses.
- Unforeseen/unanticipated benefits such as personal development, demonstrated in the men's improved abilities to communicate with one another, listen to one another and respect each other's opinion.

## Supports Needed

Supports recommended by the men's groups consulted include the following:

- An approach to learning which is radically different to the one they remember in school, first time around.
- Supportive tutors who are understanding and patient and never condescending.
- One to one attention from tutors.
- Workplace support from all colleagues at all levels.

## Lessons for good practice

Lessons are divided into categories relevant to policy makers, service providers and practitioners, and for further research. They are grouped into the main themes of promotion, workplace learning, and opportunities to progress learning/ development of additional resources.

### How to promote literacy programmes among greater numbers of men

i) OFFER MULTIPLE OPTIONS FOR LEARNING

**Policy makers** can promote literacy programmes among men by continuing to fund initiatives such as the Distance Learning Service (DLS) and facilitating its expansion through supportive policy.

**Service providers and practitioners:** By partnering with local agencies and organisations already engaging with disadvantaged men, service providers are developing literacy

modules to be integrated into other forms of learning which the men already participate in.

## ii) INFORMATION AND PROMOTION LESSONS

The following apply to **service providers and practitioners**:

- Increase opportunities, including training for men who have successfully completed literacy programmes, to share their experiences with other potential learners.
- Incorporate further peer support and mentoring opportunities in programmes.
- Continue to host 'open days'/provide opportunities for interested individuals to 'drop-in' to literacy classes.
- Continued emphasis on promotional activities targeting men and organisations supporting men.

## **Workplace Learning**

**Policy makers:** The model of workplace literacy initiatives such as those undertaken under the Workplace Basic Education Fund should be continued, in partnership with employers (both public and private), particularly with local authorities. Incentives, including financial incentives such as paid leave for employees, could encourage greater numbers to participate in the scheme.

**Service providers and practitioners:** Literacy supports should be incorporated into every workplace learning programme, as a matter of good practice, as any worker may experience literacy difficulties while participating on any workplace learning course, even those who do not consider themselves to have literacy difficulties.

Access to Literacy Awareness Training (LAT) for all supervisors working with literacy participants will ensure middle managers and supervisors of potential participants are aware of the benefits of workplace literacy initiatives and are fully supportive of the process.

The network approach adopted by Skillnets<sup>4</sup> allows micro-enterprises<sup>5</sup> to work together to access training programmes, including workplace literacy interventions, and should continue to be rolled out.

**Further research:** Approaches could be made to employers' bodies and the trade union movement to collaborate on research and document the benefits to employers (as well as employees) of engaging in literacy based workplace learning initiatives.<sup>6</sup>

### **Opportunities to progress learning/additional resources**

**Service providers and practitioners:** The Adult Education Guidance Initiative (AEGI) offers support and assistance in identifying the next steps, to men wishing to continue their learning. The NALA distance learning service (as mentioned above) and other resources such as the writeon.ie interactive learning website offer further opportunities for literacy learning (for example learning on the website can go towards achieving a FETAC accredited award).<sup>7</sup>

Links to the NALA website from VEC websites would promote ease of navigation towards potential progression routes.

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<sup>4</sup> Skillnets is an enterprise-led support body whose mission is to enhance the skills of people in employment in Irish industry to support competitiveness and employability. [www.skillnets.com](http://www.skillnets.com)

<sup>5</sup> Enterprises with less than ten employees

<sup>6</sup> As literacy is a core skill which can contribute to increased productivity and competitiveness.

<sup>7</sup> [www.writeon.ie](http://www.writeon.ie)

# Chapter One - Introduction and methodology

## Introduction

NALA, the National Adult Literacy Agency is an independent membership organisation, concerned with developing policy, advocacy, research and offering advisory services in adult literacy work in Ireland. NALA campaigns for the recognition of, and response to, the adult literacy issue in Ireland.

Towards the end of 2008, work commenced on a small research study which explores men's attitudes to and experiences of literacy, particularly in the context of informal learning. While significant resources have been invested in Ireland, in recent years, in researching men's attitudes towards and involvement in learning, including formal, non-formal and informal learning settings, the rationale behind the research brief developed by NALA was based on identifying literacy issues, among men specifically, in informal learning settings in particular and on assessing the impact which these difficulties have on men's participation in learning.

This report details the findings from NALA's study on men's attitudes and experiences of literacy, particularly in informal learning settings, which was conducted between November 2008 and May 2009.

## Aims and objectives

This study aims to investigate and explore men's attitudes towards and experiences of adult literacy, in particular within informal learning settings.

The intention is to identify men of various ages, cultural, economic and social backgrounds who have literacy difficulties and who are already learning informally and non-formally through community engagement in groups.

The purpose is to analyse the nature, challenges and benefits of that engagement, specifically as it relates to their literacy issues, and how this impacts on the wellbeing of the men, their families and their wider communities.

The research sought to establish:

- The attitudes, experiences and views of the men to their adult literacy difficulties, and what shapes these attitudes.
- The views, experiences and impacts of returning to adult literacy services.
- The supports needed for men to return to adult literacy services.
- What can be done to positively re-engage other men with literacy difficulties in adult literacy interventions through community engagement?

## Methodology

At the end of 2008 the research team began by drawing up a list of organisations (both statutory and voluntary) working with men's group. Members of the research team also pooled their resources in terms of identifying similar organisations with which they had prior connections. A letter detailing the research was drafted by NALA and circulated to organisations on the contact list. The research team followed up the letter with phone calls and emails.

It was agreed that focus groups would best satisfy the aims and objectives of the research and would facilitate the men involved to fully share their experiences of informal learning in a group setting which they were already familiar and comfortable with. The group setting would also best facilitate a lively discussion and comparison of individual experiences to address the research questions. However, each of the men was made aware of the option to participate in one-to-one interviews for those who did not wish to discuss their experiences within the group. All of the men, without exception, agreed to participate in the focus groups.

It was envisaged that between three and five focus groups would be held with men's groups from both urban and rural locations around the country. Organisations interested in participating in the research were given further information and a date and time which suited the group was arranged. A member of the research team travelled to the site where the group meets.

Focus groups were conducted between January and April 2009, with six men's groups from around the country, including Galway (Tuam), Tipperary (Clonmel<sup>8</sup> and Carrick on Suir) and Dublin (Ballymun and Dun Laoghaire). Focus groups were conducted with the following:

- A men's group engaging in workplace learning opportunities (attended by local authority staff and delivered by the Vocational Education Committee).
- A Back to Education Initiative delivered by the Vocational Education Committee.
- A barrel-top wagon<sup>9</sup> building project aimed at Travellers delivered by a Travellers education project.
- A return to education programme targeted at those who had experienced homelessness, delivered by the Vocational Education Committee.
- A men's group operating within a local, community based men's centre.

Courses undertaken by these groups include basic and advanced computers, communication skills and mathematics. The focus groups were made up of men of mixed ages and mixed literacy abilities. Each of the groups had been formed for at least several weeks, but in most cases several months and even years prior to participating in the research. Each focus group session lasted between 35 minutes and one hour.

All but one of the groups were 'men only' groups. One group comprised both men and women. However, those in attendance at the focus group in this site did not express literacy difficulties. Therefore all the eligible focus groups were held with 'men only' groups. The locations for the 'eligible' focus groups were Tipperary (three focus groups), Galway (one focus group) and Dublin (one focus group).

Therefore, a total of five focus groups form the data set for this research study. In total, 32 men attended these focus groups. At least 15 of those in attendance at focus groups were Traveller men (47% of all attendees).

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<sup>8</sup> Focus groups with two men's groups took place in Clonmel.

<sup>9</sup> The use of the wagon is now very rare in Ireland; however it remains a pivotal image and focus of Traveller culture with widespread interest among the Traveller community in the lifestyle, skills, stories and traditions associated with its use.



## Data analysis

The research team discussed the initial focus group format and where necessary, modified the research questions or 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. Verbatim transcripts of all focus group discussions were prepared and analysed. Quantitative data were stored in Excel and were used to generate graphs and charts as a visual representation of this data. The initial stage of the analysis process involved a thorough reading and re-reading of the focus group data. Open coding was used in the case of all the transcripts to group concepts under category labels. The participants' experiences were used to generate themes during analysis and this governed the structure and content of the report.

Representations of the men's views and experiences are supported by focus group excerpts and/or individual quotes, which include annotations identifying where the men's groups originate from, for example, 'Group B, Ballymun'.

## Format of report

The report is divided into five sections as follows:

- **Executive summary** - provides a brief synopsis of the content of the report and the main findings.
- **Introduction and methodology** - provides background information on the research, the aims and objectives and the research methods used to gather and analyse data presented in the report.
- **Review of research** - provides a summary of key themes from the relevant literature both from Ireland and internationally on men's participation in literacy interventions.
- **Findings and analysis** - sets out the findings from the research grouped thematically and offers an analysis of the issues emerging.
- **Lessons for good practice and conclusions** - sets out some suggestions for change based on the findings in the previous section and concludes the report.

These sections are followed by a bibliography of relevant research, a glossary of terms and appendices.

## Chapter Two - Review of research

### Men's participation in literacy education

The proportion of men participating in adult literacy in Ireland has declined since 1980, when 71% of participants were male, according to de Brún and Du Vivier (2008). They report that participation rates by males in adult literacy education in 2000 was 37%, but note that even though the relative participation of males has reduced, the actual number of males engaging has increased. They suggest that throughout this time, adult education providers increasingly oriented activities towards women, and raise the question as to whether this orientation could account for the increasing take up of adult literacy education by women.

This participation rate is not confined to adult literacy services. Men have a lower participation rate in all areas of community and adult education than women – the gender breakdown of all participants is approximately 70% female, 30% male, according to O'Connor (2002).

This follows from differences in the formal educational attainment between boys and girls, where almost one quarter of all boys (24%) exit the formal education system before passing the Leaving Certificate, compared with only 6% of girls (Cleary et al 2004, cited in de Brún and Du Vivier, 2008). A much smaller number of students (less than 4%) leave school without passing the Junior Certificate, but five out of every eight of these were male (Gorby et al. 2005, cited in de Brún and Du Vivier, 2008).

In this section, consideration is given to some of the factors that may influence men's participation in adult literacy education, notwithstanding McGivney's assertion, cited in Bailey and Coleman (1998) that this is a complex field of enquiry, and 'there is no single theory that can satisfactorily explain participation or non-participation' (McGivney, 1990, cited in Bailey and Coleman, 1998, p.9).

## Barriers to participation

The reasons for relatively low participation rates in literacy services as well as in general adult education by men can be viewed according to a typology of barriers to participation identified by Cross (1981) and elaborated by WRC (2003) and Bailey and Coleman (1998), outlined below:

- **Contextual barriers** - which include prevailing trends, the policy stance towards issues such as social exclusion, equality and educational disadvantage and the mix of programmes available as well as their target populations.
- **Institutional barriers** - which concern factors relating to the image, ethos, administration and practices of education and training providers.
- **Informational barriers** - which concern information about education and training opportunities and related issues.
- **Situational barriers** - such as lack of time, family / care commitments and the cost of participation which may play an important role in restricting access to education and training among sections of the adult population. These barriers include participation costs and opportunity costs. The former could include expenditure incurred in participating, e.g., on transport, books and materials. The latter include foregoing the opportunity to earn income by taking up a place on a programme.
- **Personal/ dispositional issues** - which arise from factors relating to demographics, particularly gender and age, initial educational levels and a range of experiential, attitudinal and motivational factors.

This typology implies a complexity around barriers that affect participation. Tett (1994) argues that engagement in learning is not just influenced by one issue or one set of issues, but that 'generally it results from the combination and interaction of diverse factors rather than one or two obstacles which would be relatively easy to overcome'.

### Barriers to men participating in adult literacy services

Personal and dispositional barriers identified by Corridan (2002) in her study of male participation in adult literacy education include:

- School experiences, including physical punishment, differential treatment by staff, differential outcomes in terms of educational achievement and a sense of educational failure, fear of being asked to read aloud, a feeling of personal responsibility around literacy difficulties.
- Embarrassment, including a sense of shame associated with literacy difficulties, and association of literacy difficulties with negative personal characteristics (for example, “stupidity” and low intelligence), and fears of meeting neighbours or work colleagues in literacy education settings.
- Male culture, such as fear of ridicule by male peers and desire to sustain approval with peers. All adult education in Corridan’s study was viewed as appropriate for women and there were fears of being in a mixed sex group.

Research by Owens (2000), undertaken on behalf of AONTAS, reiterates these personal issues. In her research *‘men on the move’*, her findings point to issues of isolation and a sense of alienation experienced by men who are socially excluded, and she suggests that this alienation, termed ‘the taboo zone’ is probably the most significant barrier to participation. The ‘taboo zone’ is manifested in deeply internalised sense of powerlessness and worthlessness experienced by men, and which is rooted in early school experiences and ‘in the wider cultural milieu wherein dominant ideologies of the social order and masculinity dictate one’s way of perceiving and being in the world’.

Her findings were consistent with Kimmel’s assertion that masculinity is ‘a public enactment, demonstrated and proved in the public domain before the evaluative eyes of other men’ (Kimmel. 1996, p45, cited in Owens, 2000). Thus ideologies of masculinity are constructed and sustained through the peer group, and the dominant model of masculinity is constructed through rejection of traits and behaviours identified as feminine.

Owen’s research also demonstrates that positive implications of education for perception of the self for men, and in addressing social exclusion.

### **Stigma as a barrier to participation**

The stigma associated with literacy difficulties is well documented for both men and women. King (2004) cites Beder who notes that the shame surrounding limited literacy appears to include a social stigma and a social conditioning that has developed over the

years as people have tried to hide their literacy problems. Waterhouse and Virgona (2005) raise the question of whether this stigma may be reinforced by traditional literacy discourse, which discusses the plight of adults with literacy difficulties in terms of limitations for personal growth and career satisfaction, and which tends to portray those with limited literacy as having a bleak future. In rejecting the 'deficit model' of literacy, they note that negative outcomes have traditionally been the focus of academic investigation. On the same theme, McGivney, cited in Bailey and Coleman (1998) reports that positive promotional strategies and careful use of language in publicity is important in overcoming the barrier of stigma.

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, the evaluation of the Scottish Adult Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, in 2006, identified perceptions of stigma and literacy difficulties as the single most important barrier to participation in literacy services. According to the evaluation, these findings generally reflect the literature in that the most significant barriers reported were related to attitudes and feelings (Tett et al, 2006).

This is reiterated by Norman and Hyland (2003), who examined characteristics distinguishing participants and non-participants in adult education as a whole. They found that age (older people are less likely to be involved), educational background (the people with least initial schooling are more likely to be non-participants) and socio-economic group (the lower the social group or class, the lower the participation rate) are all key characteristics. They assert that attention needs to be directed towards dispositional barriers, particularly factors linked to learners' confidence in order to address these barriers.

### **Other barriers**

External barriers cited in research include the following:

- Informational barriers, such as inadequate information, vague course titles and imprecise information on course content, as well as lack of information about progression possibilities arose in Corridan's study while in Bailey and Coleman's 1998 study, a significant number of participants thought that there was not enough information available on literacy services.
- Situational barriers relating to costs of participation, for example, fear of loss of social welfare entitlements, inconsistent advice around an individual's ability to take up courses and additional costs such as travel incurred by participation were cited in Corridan's study. In Bailey and Coleman's study, lack of time was the most commonly cited situational barrier for both men and women (in the case of men, this arose as a result of long working long hours). Other issues arising in their study included confidentiality concerns, particularly in small towns, villages and rural areas.

According to Owens (2000), responsibility to address people's literacy difficulties in Ireland rests in the contextual and institutional domains, even though the key barriers to participating in literacy provision may be in the dispositional sphere because of the stigma attached to literacy difficulties.

In a study of single rural men carried out by the North Leitrim Men's Group showed that in of survey of 147 men that educational attainment was low, with 58% having attended primary school only. Most of the men cited home and caring duties as their primary reason for leaving school early. This finding is reflected in the National Men's Health Policy 2008-2013 which highlights the need for adopting policies of best practice to address the high proportion of early male school leavers.

Broader international research reflects findings of research undertaken in Ireland. Golding et al (2007) cite other barriers arising for men in Australia including fear of failure, importance of work to male identity resistance to change, lack of social capital, scepticism about the benefits of learning and practical and structural obstacles including the formality and perceived feminisation of learning spaces.

They cite McGivney (2004) who argues that from a men's learning angle, while men tend to earn, women tend to learn: 'Learning is seen by men as an unacceptable form of vulnerability...something that children, retired people or women do.'

Furthermore, according to McGivney, 'to engage in organised learning is completely outside some groups' cultural frame of reference'. Furthermore, for reluctant formal learners generally, she suggests that to engage older men is 'neither an easy nor short-term task' because of... 'the psychological risks (of possible failure or ridicule); the social risks (of acting contrary to family or cultural norms) and financial risks (endangering welfare benefits or getting into debt) where there are no guaranteed (employment or fiscal) returns from learning.' (McGivney 2006, pp.94–5, cited in Golding et al, 2007)

## **Addressing barriers and engaging men in adult literacy services**

In Bailey and Coleman's study, people had returned to literacy services in order to help their children, improve their job prospects or change jobs, and to meet their personal development needs. Men, in particular, 'talked about the relevance of literacy and numeracy skills to their life plans, whether in terms of further education and training or improved employment prospects' (p.24). For almost 60% interviewed, joining an adult literacy programme was their first experience of education and training since leaving compulsory education. All the learners who participated in the survey provided evidence that non-formal adult education was responsible for such benefits as enjoyment of reading a newspaper or book, increased participation in social and community activities, being able to write letters to family members living abroad, and some referred to improved mental health and personal empowerment. For adult literacy programme participants who were in the workplace, the benefits of participation also included greater willingness to apply for workplace promotional opportunities. The research notes that 'once learners participate in adult basic education, they begin to perceive a link between literacy skills and job prospects' (p.37).

An important factor enabling participation arising in Bailey and Coleman's study was the style and approach of tutors, whereby participants were in general agreement that 'they must be specially trained to teach adults, they must be able to encourage learners and build their self-esteem, and they must listen to their learners' needs and be flexible enough to respond to them' (p.31). Furthermore, participants noted that 'kindness is vital', and anything that gives a school feeling is not acceptable.



Corridan (2002) makes a number of recommendations around addressing barriers for men's participation:

- Drop-in facilities, to enable men to engage in a learning environment without having to enrol in programmes.
- Personal support, for example, emotional and psychological support for processing negative life experiences.
- Peer support, such as men's groups.
- Recruitment on an informal basis by students in programmes.
- 'Men only' courses.
- Family learning, building on men's desire to be involved in their children's learning.
- Promoting access and demystifying the service, through open days and promotion of greater access by family members and friends of students.
- Learners' forum and the development of a student lobby group.
- Addressing social welfare barriers.

Addressing barriers to engaging in literacy interventions can also draw from the broader adult education research.

De Brún and Du Vivier cite a number of evaluative reviews and studies of participants in adult education programmes for disadvantaged men in Ireland undertaken in recent years which have identified several elements that are common to successful initiatives, including:

- Outreach
- Introductory activities
- Threat free environment
- Relationships of mutual respect and trust
- Real life context

- Personal agency
- Networking

Sligo et al (2005) have pointed to the importance of role models for participation in literacy interventions in their research in New Zealand. Some participants in literacy interventions had found out about courses through word of mouth or personal contacts. They conclude that many respondents in their research appeared to seek some sort of personal recommendation from another participant before considering adult literacy training. According to Sligo et al, 'this illustrates the importance of word-of-mouth discussion and the power of the informal social group in validating individual decisions to undertake or reject literacy training.' (p.62). They also conclude that it has implications for marketing and promoting literacy services.

According to Golding (2008), the most productive way to re-engage people in learning is to look closely and critically at where they are already learning informally. He contends that men's informal pedagogies include:

- Hands-on and practical elements.
- Doing real tasks of real and transferable benefit.
- Outside wherever possible.
- Involving informal mentoring in groups.
- In places where men already feel at home, sometimes but not always with other men.

Critically, Golding asserts that most men want to learn through being involved in an activity in real and familiar situations rather than by abstracted learning 'about' something in classrooms.

### **Lessons from the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)**

A 2009 report commissioned by the Further Education Development Unit (FEDU) provides guidelines to enhance men's participation in Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) funded programmes. The Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) was launched by the

Department of Education and Science in 2002 (as a direct result of findings identified in the White Paper (2000) 'Learning for Life') to contribute to the capacity of the formal education sector to meet the changing needs of individuals, communities and society through accredited part-time courses: 'The overall aim of the Back to Education Initiative is to increase the participation of young people and adults with less than upper second level education in a range of flexible learning opportunities leading to formal qualifications on the National Framework of Qualifications.'<sup>10</sup>

These guidelines were developed in response to the declining numbers of men taking up BTEI courses (25% in 2005, 24% in 2006 and 23% in 2007), and because '..In Ireland men are under-represented in the Adult and Community Education sector generally and on BTEI programmes in particular.'<sup>11</sup>

An analysis of participation rates on BTEI courses identified the following:

In total there were 25,860 participants in BTEI-funded programmes in 2007, of whom 77% were women and 23% were men. 3% of male participants were Travellers.<sup>12</sup> The majority of participants (58%) were between the ages of 25 and 54 years old. A quarter of male participants were over 55 years old. 76% of male participants had less than upper secondary education and 38% had primary education only. Despite this, however, only 5% of male participants received literacy support (representing 30% of the total literacy support provided). This suggests that a significant number of the men engaging in BTEI courses did not seek additional supports to counteract their literacy difficulties. These BTEI guidelines address each of the major barriers identified by Corridan (2002) using a case study approach. Best practice is identified through the successful programmes developed and adapted by VECs around the country. These include developing courses around practical and relevant subjects aimed at improving employment prospects, encouraging learner 'buy in' by consulting from the outset on course content, and supporting the up-skilling of dedicated tutors who understand the needs and interests of male participants.

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<sup>10</sup> *BTEI: Increasing Men's Participation in Adult Learning* (2009), Further Education and Development Unit, Department of Education and Science, Pp. 6

<sup>11</sup> *Increasing Men's Participation: Guidelines to Enhance Men's Participation in Back to Education Initiative Funded Programmes* (2009) Pp. 7, Further Education Development Unit, Department of Education and Science, AONTAS

<sup>12</sup> *Increasing Men's Participation in Adult Learning: Guidelines to Enhance Men's Participation in Back to Education Initiative Funded Programmes* (2009) Pp. 9, Further Education Development Unit, Department of Education and Science, AONTAS

‘The case studies illustrate how providers have addressed the barriers that inhibit men from participating in adult learning programmes and set in place motivating frameworks to engage and retain male learners.’<sup>13</sup>

It is worth noting however, that in the literature quoted in the guidelines McGivney (2004) warns against attributing men’s limited involvement in adult education to gender alone. She emphasises that social class is arguably a more significant factor than gender, and that lack of educational and professional qualifications amongst men of all ages in specific social groups poses a significant barrier in relation to the labour market, but also to broader social and community participation.

The next chapter of the report details the findings generated by this research study.

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<sup>13</sup> Best Practice Guidelines to Enhance Men’s Participation in BTEI funded programmes (2009), Pp. 29, FEDU/ AONTAS

## Chapter Three - Findings and analysis

### Introduction

This chapter outlines the findings from five focus groups conducted with men's groups from around the country, including Galway (Tuam), Tipperary (Clonmel and Carrick on Suir) and Dublin (Ballymun). Focus groups were conducted with men's groups engaging in workplace learning opportunities, a barrel-top wagon building project, and a group attending a local men's centre. Courses undertaken included basic and advanced computers, communication skills and mathematics. The focus groups were made up of men of mixed ages and literacy abilities. Each of the groups had been formed for at least several weeks but in most cases several months and even years prior to participating in the research.

Further background information on the participants is outlined in the demographic profile section below. The remaining sections in the chapter highlight themes which emerged as significant from the focus groups. These themes include:

- Early experiences of learning
- Literacy and the individual
- Literacy in the workplace
- Coping strategies
- Views and experiences of returning to literacy engagement
- Benefits to families, communities and to the individuals
- Supports needed

### Demographic profile

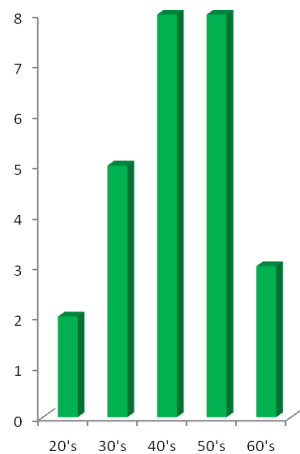
Of the 32 participants who took part in the study, 26 provided baseline data as to the following:

- Age
- Household status
- Educational history and attainment
- Employment history

This information was gathered using a pre-coded questionnaire. The following graphs offer a visual representation of the results from the survey.

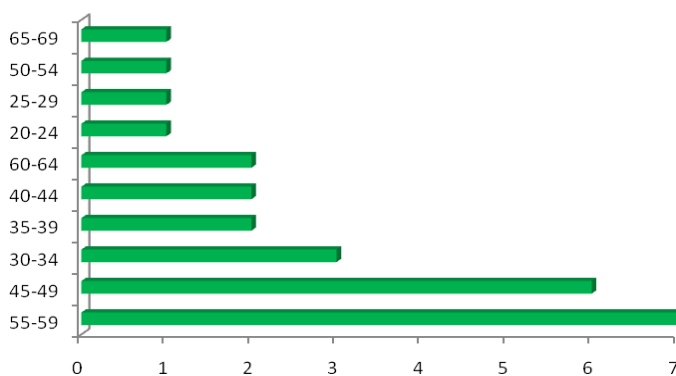
## Age

Figure 1: Age of respondents



The age range of respondents was varied. The sample included those in their early 20s, up to older men over the age of 60 years. The majority of respondents were between the ages of 40 and 59 years old.

Figure 2: Breakdown of ages



As illustrated in the graph opposite, the largest number of respondents occupied the 55-59 years age category (seven respondents), closely followed by the 45-49 year

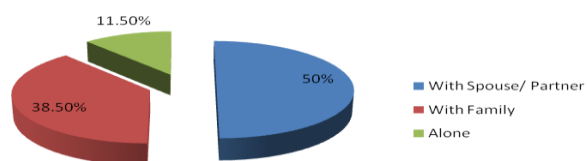
age category (six respondents). The remaining men were largely grouped in the 30's to

early 40's age category. The smallest numbers of respondents occupied the late 60's category (one respondent was aged between 65-69 years old) and the early 20's category (one respondent was aged 22 years).

### Household status

Respondents were asked about their living arrangements. The pie chart below illustrates the household status of 26 of the 32 men participating in the survey.

Figure 3: Who do you live with?

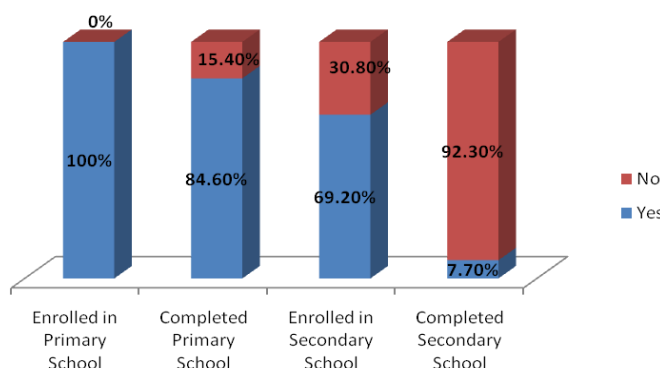


Half of the respondents lived with their wives or partners, while almost 40% lived with family members (38.5%). A small proportion of the men lived alone (11.5%).

### Educational attainment

The men were asked about their educational background and school history, including enrolment and completion of primary and secondary school.

Figure 4: Educational attainment

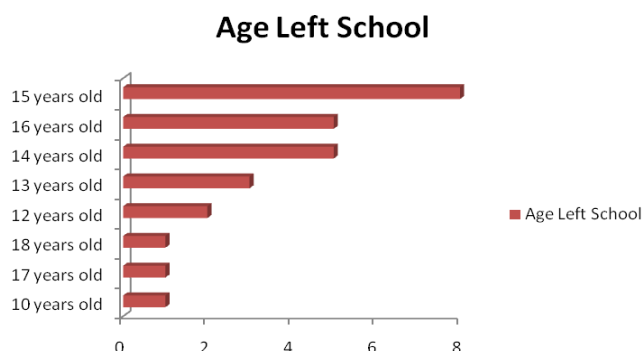


Respondents were asked if they had been enrolled in primary school as children. All of the men had attended primary school in their early years. However 15.4% of the men left before completing primary school.

Almost 70% of respondents had enrolled in secondary level education after completing primary school, while just over 30% did not. However, only 7.7% (two respondents) participating in the survey stayed in school to complete their second level education.

Respondents were also asked the age at which they left formal education.

Figure 5: Age left formal education



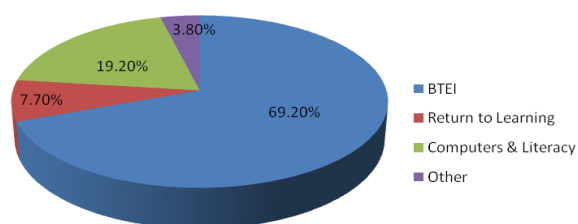
The majority of men participating in the survey left school between the ages of 14 and 16 years old. The most likely age for these men to leave school was 15 year old.

However, a very small number of respondents remained in school until they were between 17 and 18

years old. Two respondents left school at the age of twelve and another left at the age of ten (all three of these respondents were members of the Traveller community).

Respondents were also asked about their most recent involvement in educational opportunities. The following graph shows a breakdown of the types of courses and classes undertaken by the respondents in their adult lives.

Figure 6: Current educational involvement



The vast majority of respondents consulted (69.2%) were participating in the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI).

This programme allows unemployed participants to take part in a wide range of educational and personal development courses in order to

improve their prospects of gaining employment. The types of courses engaged in include mathematics, arts and crafts, information technology (IT) and English.

Almost 20% of the respondents were involved in courses which addressed their literacy difficulties and improved their computer skills. A small percentage of respondents (7.7%) were involved in the 'return to learning' initiative established by local authorities, in partnership with local VECs. The initiative offers participants an opportunity to attend a



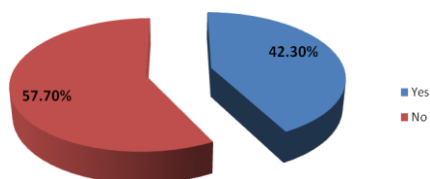
workplace basic skills course which is designed to meet their needs. The return to learning programme aims to increase the self-confidence of the participants and to provide a learning environment, where learners choose what they want to learn, at their own pace.<sup>14</sup>

One respondent was not involved in any educational courses at the time of the focus group but had completed several FETAC accredited courses over a period of seven years, as a member of the local men's group.

Courses took place in a variety of locations including VEC's, local men's centres and adult literacy centres. Each of the men had been participating in educational courses for varying periods of time, from a number of weeks, to six months to a period of between one and two years and up to seven years.

## Employment history

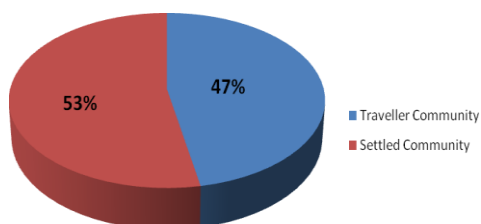
Figure 7: In paid employment?



More than half of the men surveyed were unemployed (57.7%), while 42.3% were in paid employment on either a full or a part-time basis. Positions held included drivers, tradespersons, farmers and labourers. A number of those unemployed were actively seeking work at the

time of the survey.

## Traveller men



As Traveller men accounted for almost half of those consulted (47%) the sample is not representative of the entire Irish male population. The age range of this group of Travellers was also particularly broad. Their educational attainment levels were lower than

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.tippnorthvec.com/associatedservices.htm> for further details (July 2009).

that of members of the settled community which reflects broader trends nationally.

The following sections of the chapter present the findings of the focus groups in terms of the key themes emerging from the discussions.

## Early experiences of learning

The majority of men spoke of negative experiences of education in childhood. A Traveller man involved in a wagon building project remembers segregation and division of children in his class at a very young age.

When I went to school I was 3 year old, there was the brilliant and then the middle of the road and then you had the guys who did nothing. The fella [who was] the worst in the class was at the back of the class when he should have been up at the front and he had crayons and he was colouring in so he was, that kept him quiet right. They give the lads something simple to do, the lads in the middle, they participated in the class and the number one lads well they gave them work to do and they could do it on their own initiative. But we were mostly in the last row. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

Some of these men also endured corporal punishment at school which led to fear and negative perceptions of education and which stirred feelings of hostility and resentment toward teaching staff.

One morning I went in, because I hadn't got me homework done, like that, a bamboo stick, whack across the hands like that, on a freezing cold morning. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

Where you needed help you got punished. I got punishment. And even coming into school late I used to be terrified because I wasn't going into my classroom because they would pick you out, open the door and 'which leather do you want?'. Just for being late. I had to run in and out every day like. They were cruel. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

The experiences of informal segregation and corporal punishment meant that many were eager to leave school as soon as possible and the effects continued to be felt by some of these men later in life.

Because you were afraid, you just thought you'd never get out of school.  
(Focus Group C, Clonmel)

They left a bad impression actually and they made us angry young people.  
(Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

Some of the men participating in the research suggested that social class was an influencing factor and believed that the negative experiences, including segregation and ill treatment from teachers, was a direct result of classism practiced by these teachers and a disregard for the education of children from 'poorer' families in the community.

It [opportunity to participate in education] had been robbed and I did have a brain, I knew I had a brain but because of circumstances, when I went into that class in the mornings those people looked at me and decided that I was not going to be educated. No, it was my address and where my parents worked. That's how it was. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

That was their goal; the common person was not going to be educated.  
(Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

As a result some of the men harboured regret at not being permitted to get the most out of their education first time around, despite feeling confident that they had sufficient brains to do well. The men's experiences of early education impacted on their perceptions of the value of education and their capacity to learn. The resulting emotions, which these experiences elicited, include regret, bitterness and anger.

## Literacy and the individual

### Literacy skills

The extent and nature of the literacy difficulties expressed by the men was mixed both across the groups and within the groups. Some participants had greater difficulties with

spelling and writing while for others reading caused them the greatest difficulty. A few of the participants also had problems with basic numeracy.

I was useless at reading or the writing. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

While one of the main purposes of hosting focus groups as part of this research study was to encourage the male participants to engage in a frank discussion about literacy without feeling singled out or put under pressure to reveal personal information, the majority of men were extremely forthcoming and honest about their personal difficulties with literacy.

However, the members of one group were reticent and even unwilling to discuss their individual literacy problems. This was in stark contrast to the other groups where men were very open about discussing their difficulties with both the facilitator and each other. Some of the men in the reluctant group were at pains to emphasize that they did not have literacy difficulties, and that they all had a basic understanding of reading, writing and numbers, which was required in order to participate in the computer course they were involved in. However, after some discussion one man opened up about having difficulty with spelling. Furthermore, he believed his spelling had improved as a result of using the spell check facility on the computer. The reluctance of this group in talking about their literacy difficulties may be attributed to the relatively short period of time that the group had been together (less than eight weeks). Many, though not all, of the other groups participating in the research had formed several months and even years earlier and so a level of trust and understanding had been given time to develop among the members.

For some of the men their literacy difficulties were compounded by low self-confidence.

Whereas I'd be stuck I'd say to be honest. I wouldn't have the confidence I'd say for a start. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

Often the language used by others, particularly jargonistic language used by those in positions of power pose difficulties for many of the men interviewed. This in turn undermines confidence levels and feelings of self worth and establishes power differentials.

The power of language is very intimidating for us. (Focus Group B, Ballymun)

If you go to, like we went to Ballymun regeneration thing and you had all the politicians there and you'd be sitting there listening and they are talking in a different lingo all together. They'd be talking in language that we wouldn't really understand. (Focus Group B, Ballymun)

Its power to them. (Focus Group B, Ballymun)

That's power statements you know what I mean and well rehearsed. But sure you couldn't stand up and make a comment then because you'd be talking in a total different lingo. Stuff like that. (Focus Group B, Ballymun)

While language can impact negatively on the men's confidence levels, everyday experiences requiring literacy skills can also be challenging.

In the bank about a year ago I got awful embarrassed inside it, okay, I went up to the counter and you are supposed to fill in your slips and politely I said to her would you help me fill it in. She ignored me I said it to her again would you fill in this? If you don't mind I said can you help me please. And she said 'what?' 'Just help me fill it in.' So I said hold on a second now, good luck and I went back out, I was really annoyed now, back up to the girl, it was a slip, I said I wanted to see the manager about that. 'I asked you a simple question to give me help to fill this in,' oh I didn't realise that' she said. 'Didn't I ask you twice?' .....I got embarrassed my face went pure red there, my wife was out in the car and I got her to come back in....it affected me. I went back because I was annoyed, I left the counter and I was annoyed. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

These experiences with staff in banking and financial institutions and other financial and social services providers such as post offices and social welfare offices elicited negative feelings among the men's groups, including feelings of embarrassment, humiliation and anger.

It is important to point out however that a number of the men participating in the research study did not express any feelings of embarrassment with regard to their literacy difficulties and felt comfortable discussing their difficulties. The majority of men voicing these opinions were members of the Traveller community. All of the comments below are from Traveller men.

I have a problem with that, the minute I go into a place I tell them the truth, I'd be honest. ...I just tell them straight.....I don't give a damn who knows. I can't read or write. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

I said I can't read or write, people look at me, 'oh no problem so sir we'll fill it out.' I wasn't embarrassed. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

### **Impact of literacy difficulties on engaging in community and social activity**

The men's difficulties with reading, writing and numbers also impacted on their level of participation in community and social activities. The majority of men believed that their literacy difficulties held them back and prevented them from becoming involved in these activities as much as they might like.

If you got involved with a group or say a soccer team or something it comes up where you might have to read the names or write in names for somebody or something like that, you are going to back away from that. So you can't get involved you have to be on the alert the whole time with it. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

You'd have to be aware of it the whole time like, keep your guard up that you don't get involved where it comes into paperwork. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

You can go so far and then you have to back, back. Because you haven't got the education, that's all. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

These quotes suggest that while the men participating in the focus groups for this research had built relationships with the other men in their groups which are built on openness and trust; they are more guarded about their literacy difficulties with people outside the group. This, in turn, impacts on their willingness to participate in wider social or community activities.

There is some evidence to suggest that women are more likely to become involved in organised leisure time activities than men<sup>15</sup>, it might be argued that gender, as well as literacy problems, plays a specific role in determining involvement in social and community activities. Literacy and adult education settings are increasingly being viewed as the female domain.

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<sup>15</sup> See 'Don't Stop Me Now' The Lifelong Learning Needs of Older People in Ireland (2008), AONTAS, Active Retirement Ireland Membership Survey Report (2009).

But you see how many fellas can you go up to and say you are going to go back to school again. They mightn't like to hear that, you know what I mean. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

Some men may find it difficult to reconcile their role as adult literacy learners with popular perceptions of masculinity. As demonstrated by colleagues of men participating in the workplace learning courses who were put off signing up for the same courses as a result of malicious comments by other workers suggesting that they would rather 'go back to school' than earn a living.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, some of the men acknowledged how important it is to them to hide their literacy difficulties in order to save face.

It makes you feel sick that's what it makes you feel, you know what I mean. If you get cornered you know you've got to get out of that corner without giving things away. You get embarrassed, it's an awful feeling like. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

This desire is so strong for some of the men that anxiety created at the thought of being 'discovered' or 'found out' actually affects their health.

It affects everything, it affects your health and all like. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

Because you get all tensed up, you know. It's an awful sensation if you are inside a room with a group of 20 or 30 people and there are forms going around and all that. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

The comments from male participants above may be influenced, in part, by men's perceptions of what it is to be 'masculine' or 'manly' in modern Irish society. Any perceived failing on their part (i.e., being unable to participate or succeed in a task which requires literacy) in terms of this concept of masculinity may lead to feelings of anxiety and stress, which in turn can impact negatively on their health.

The personal impact which literacy difficulties have on an individual include stunting or eroding feelings of self worth and self-confidence, limiting or obstructing participation in social and community activities and increasing anxiety and stress levels, which is

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<sup>16</sup> Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir

detrimental to good health. However, literacy difficulties can also have a professional impact, in terms of the men's experiences and achievements in the workplace. The following section examines literacy in the workplace in further detail.

## Literacy in the workplace

Changes in the workplace, including an increased emphasis on certification, accreditation, regulation and the proliferation of new technologies has meant an increased need for literacy skills in all categories of jobs and all aspects of work in the workplace.<sup>17</sup>

Sure most jobs now you have to do reading and writing. It's not like before when it was all labour. You could get away with it before. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

Even here like if you were going to a new building now you have to fill out a form. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

Men participating in this research study also understood that the need for literacy skills would be even greater in the future.

Each canteen is being issued with a computer, for all the staff to use.....it's going to be used that if you are looking for stuff and also say annual leave, everything will be applied for by computer. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

Earlier research studies on the topic of men and masculinities<sup>18</sup> suggest that men in particular, define themselves in terms of their professional working life and that masculinity is tied up in traditional notions of man as bread winner and provider. It is not surprising therefore that the male participants in this study identified literacy difficulties in the workplace as a specific area of concern and source of anxiety.

You know doing this, what do you call it, a safety course. Everyone is quite comfortable bar the person that has the problem. I was even at one once and we had a break, I couldn't even eat when I went out to have my dinner. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

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<sup>17</sup> Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007), *Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy*,

<sup>18</sup> See Owens, T. (2000): *Men on the Move*. Dublin: AONTAS.



You'd be sick more than embarrassed. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

These men were aware of many other men in their places of work, who also had literacy difficulties.

Yeah we know of men who can't read and write, period. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

They can hardly sign their name and good men, and very knowledgeable men in other aspects of their job. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

In spite of this, the participants claimed that their colleagues are reluctant to access literacy services. They believe this is due primarily to feelings of shame and fear.

But they don't realise there is one to one tuition available but they won't.....won't or can't or just ashamed. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

### **Attitudes of colleagues and workers**

Some of the men participating in the research had returned to literacy as part of a workplace initiative. These men explained that they initially faced negative feedback from their co-workers.

They all started speaking...ridiculing the five that had volunteered to do it [return to education]. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

They are the ones saying 'ah, you have to go back to school'.... 'You are stupid'. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

The men also made the point that part of the negative feedback was driven by co-workers' and supervisors' resentment of their taking time off work to participate in the education programmes. This suggests that the commitment to facilitating 'return to education' initiatives at senior levels of the organisation may not be reflected at supervisory and at shop floor level, causing difficulties for workers who wish to participate. This was articulated by one man.

In actual fact, they don't care about you going back to school...all they care about is 'I won't get the job done.' (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

These comments reiterate the importance of securing commitment to returning to education throughout the organisation and at all levels. These men also suggest that their participation in 'returning to education' programmes positively influenced their co-workers' views which led to a change in their attitudes toward learning.

The ones in our group when they found out, they were asking what way the course was, what way was the course going and by explaining to them some of the lads said 'Jesus, I'm sorry now I didn't go'. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

They were slagging us but I'm delighted now because now they are waiting for the next one to come up, to come in on it. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

The men in this research understood that their colleagues' jibes and comments arose out of fear of the unknown, but now a desire to keep up with, and contribute to, topics of conversation has made them re-evaluate their opinions on workplace learning initiatives.

All that was in our canteen was fear, that's all it was. But when they see that we went out and done it and were able to come back and speak to one another about computers it's then they found themselves lost. We could sit at the table and discuss this thing about the computer, and they had no input, they felt then that they were being left out. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

## Coping strategies

In order to deal with the difficulties which literacy problems regularly presented in work, at home and in social situations, the men developed strategies for coping which helped to alleviate the problems.

### Reliance on spouses and partners

The primary means of coping referred to by men was reliance on their wives or partners.

I would stand back and let the wife fill up the thing, any kind of a form.....If I had to go into the bank the wife would have to be with me to do it. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

I used to leave all the writing and everything to my wife like. Doesn't matter what it was, it was always left to her like. And I just stood back, she filled up

everything, she looked after everything like. I'd never think of filling in, never go into the bank or nothing like. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

Some of the male participants explained that having learned to cope with all manner of situations over the years, it becomes almost second nature.

Yeah, we are doing it all our lives. You've to have an excuse straight away to get away from it. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

Yeah exactly, you'd learn all the tricks like, tricks of the trade, we are first class at it. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

Examples of some of the coping strategies used by the men in social and community settings are detailed below.

Don't feel well tonight, I won't be down. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

I play a lot of golf and you know you have to fill in your card and swipe into the computer and all that, I've no problem doing it now but before I couldn't do it.....if you were playing with somebody you'd give them the money going in you know, 'put me in', you know what I mean that was a way of doing it [getting fellow player to complete the card]. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

### **Coping in the workplace**

Some of the participants in this research, particularly those tackling their literacy problems as part of a workplace learning initiative spoke about coping mechanisms which they use in the workplace. These men spoke of their reliance on colleagues when it came to reading, writing and numeracy and were conscious of how this reliance on colleagues could sometimes lead to a strain in workplace relations.

Well you see with the signage course we are going on now, we can't do signs. We can't touch a sign. You see it's only putting pressure on the guys working with you. They are going to have to go, you are going to be standing there and they are going to start cribbing. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

One man in speaking about coping strategies employed in the workplace indicated how commonplace literacy difficulties may be in the workplace.

I was lucky enough because there was a row of us and the fella sitting alongside me was a foreman but the fella the other side he was a genius. So your man beside me who was a foreman he was copying him, I was copying him you know and the other fella was copying me and the other fella was copying him so if he was wrong the whole lot of us was wrong. But we were all doing it. I noticed around me they were all doing it. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

I was a genius at copying because when you have the problem you'd be very good at it. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

Unfortunately some coping strategies are not always successful. A man, who attended a medical examination at the request of his employer, was asked to complete a form outlining his medical history.

I remember I weren't that good back then and I decided to just tick every box and she read it back to me and I had heart problems... (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

## Views and experiences of returning to literacy engagement

### Challenges in returning to literacy engagement

These men were very aware of the difficulties faced by service providers wishing to encourage greater numbers of men into informal learning opportunities in general, and literacy engagement in particular. They also articulated very clearly the challenges inherent in returning to learning. One of the simplest and most common challenges to overcome is fear. For example, some of the men may have an interest in availing of literacy tuition but are afraid to take the first steps. This can be direct result of negative experiences of education, the first time around.

[A] lot of people coming back to school, they are afraid of the unknown. They are afraid of failure. They are afraid...because of going to school and being told you were stupid and a fool and in the finish you don't want to hear that. I think a lot of people are like that. A lot of people don't want to come back in case that would be confirmed you know, and in saying that it has held back a lot of people. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

This fear creates another challenge for service providers as potential participants who are fearful are unlikely to respond well to any external encouragement or coercion. The decision has to be made by the man himself. Once this decision has been reached, focus group participants argue that the experience is a very positive one.

But it's only enjoyable if you want to go back and do it yourself, [if] you are not forced. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

Take learning here in the Centre, you find it's something you want to do. You're not forced to do it. You're looking forward to going in. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

This was also the case for men who were initially embarrassed about attending 'return to education' programmes due to bad experiences on other courses previously.

I was on another course there are few years ago and ...I was in with the younger lads and I was really embarrassed because I could barely read stuff. What happens here she would break us up into groups, and I felt 'Jesus I could walk into that classroom proud' because I wasn't nervous because the other lads [on the first course, several years before] were sniggering and laughing at me. These boys [on his current course] were sound. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

Participants also recognised the heterogeneity of the group being targeted. Men's literacy levels, skills, abilities and interests will vary greatly among and between groups. The following quotes effectively illustrate the specific challenges which exist in catering for the literacy needs of men with differing comprehensions of technology. These examples can be applied broadly to all courses and learning activities undertaken by men.

Going for the coffee, [men ask me] 'could you get me a coffee', 'go and get it yourself', 'I don't know how to work the machine.' This is grown men, this is lads, people are afraid of a ... coffee machine. Now what would they be like in front of a computer? Now I'm just giving you an example ... it's important that we all know what's simple to some people out there. We didn't grow up in the world of computers or buttons or whatever but it's very important to get it out, get the back to school or what you are doing here learning, to get it into the work course and help people in simple tasks that they don't know. People who stand at the back and deprive themselves of something as simple

even as a coffee because they are afraid of the machine? (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

I'm afraid of even using the mobile; the fear of technology. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

A further challenge identified by a small number of the older male participants is the impact of getting older. However two men raised two different approaches and attitudes.

As you get older, it gets harder. Your brain is not as quick as it was, because when I was younger I could take all these things on, but now... (Focus Group B, Ballymun)

I found it great, I found it a challenge, now when we get to our age we like a challenge. (Focus Group A, Ballymun)

In spite of these challenges men who participated in the research would strongly recommend engaging with literacy services. These men are adamant that participation is a positive experience.

Go for it. Like I'd have no problem telling them, saying to anybody to go and do the course like. Because it does improve you and it's up to yourself too, but it will help you improve. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

Come here, and you're among friends, and there's no one going to look down on you. We're all equal. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

The overwhelming response from among these focus group participants is that they hope to continue with literacy engagement and to progress in the future.

Progression on. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

We want to advance on it. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

### **Motivation for returning to literacy engagement**

The focus group discussions revealed a variety of reasons which motivated these men to tackle their literacy difficulties in adulthood. These reasons can be grouped as follows:

- Motives relating to the individual
- Motives relating to the community
- Motives relating to the family

### **Motives relating to the individual**

Some men want a second chance to improve their literacy because they feel their first chance had been missed or lost.

I had no hesitation whatsoever in coming on this course because I wanted to do it. I felt that my education had been robbed years ago. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

I've one son and three daughters and touch wood they are all doing very well. I believe myself I could have done as good given the chance. But circumstances dictated that I wasn't going to be doing it and that was it. So I will take every opportunity to come back to education. And I'll never be ashamed of it. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

### **Motives relating to the community**

Men from Focus Group B in particular believed that improving their literacy by returning to learning would provide them with opportunities to become better equipped to serve their communities.

I represent the community and when people do come up to our forum office, I can say 'well you can go to the Social Welfare' if it's a social welfare problem, if I can give them a contact name, or maybe give them some advice on where to go, and what to do whether it be a legal point of view, whether it be someone being abused, partners being abused, or someone with, who has other problems in their life, this is what community centres are about, and this is what the courses are about. (Focus Group B, Ballymun)

It's about making a difference. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

A number of the men interviewed acknowledged that their literacy difficulties were the main cause, if not the sole reason, for their withdrawal from or lack of engagement in community affairs. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to deduce that improved literacy

skills and the confidence which often accompanies this improvement might lead many of these men to increase their involvement in community and social activities.

### **Motives relating to the family**

A number of men wanted to improve their literacy, while also increasing their understanding of mathematics and computers, in order to meet the demands of their children's education, including support with homework.

To keep up with me own children, you've got to learn. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

My youngest fellow is delighted, he's 6 and I do the home work. I just help him but I learn a lot from it now to be honest. Because my spellings are still not at all great, my writing is not, I can read everything, but it has benefits all over yeah. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

In my case anyway at least I can help my younger kids with stuff, you know, that I learn here; stuff that I normally wouldn't have known. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

Some of the men recognised that their early experiences of education shaped their approach to their children's education. They wanted better for their children. When a second chance came along, some of the men had mixed emotions and were unsure how their (grown up) children would react.

I've kids now grown up and thank god I think the fact that I didn't have a proper education, I put emphasis for my kids on education because I realized what we have missed and I feel proud that I came here now to the course. I do actually. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

One man was apprehensive about the attitude his children might have to him returning to learning. However, all his family members were clearly very supportive of the decision.

When I went home and I have four, my youngest kid is 28 and when I went home I was afraid that they were going to start laughing at me. 'What you are going back to school for?' you know. But they were delighted I went back. They were delighted because I used to always help them with their education,



I helped them as much as I could with their exercises, its only when they went to a higher education bracket I was lost then. But to this day they always appreciated what I used to do for them. I always insisted on them no matter what it was and the homework and everything else would be done. As a matter of fact I think I was a bit cruel to them over it. I'll tell you now, I pushed them but I'm glad I pushed them now. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

But she [his daughter] was thrilled for me. Like the young fella [his son] he was amazed, and... I benefited from it and I think they benefited by getting enjoyment out of me doing it. You know and as you said I was able to speak to her [his daughter] about things and half understand it then. But I'm hopeful there will be more. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

Now that these men are involved in literacy tuition, some have become motivated to encourage their own children to participate, for example the Traveller men involved in the barrel-top wagon building project. For these men, they also felt that while the literacy and numeracy elements are important, the practical and cultural aspect of the project would draw others to it also.

I'd like to learn my son. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

I would, I'd say everyone here would like to learn their sons. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

When they see something like that being made, I know a lot of them will want to get involved. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

## **Benefits to the individual, families and communities**

A major theme identified by the men is the benefits which literacy engagement can provide for individuals and their families and the knock on effects which these benefits can have on communities.

The benefits include:

- Improved literacy and numeracy
- Self respect, self-confidence and pride

- Computer literacy
- Rising to the challenge
- Social interaction
- Cultural knowledge
- Supports
- Unforeseen/unanticipated benefits

### **Improved literacy and numeracy**

One of the more obvious benefits of participation is the marked improvement which these men notice in their literacy and numeracy skills. These new found skills are then put to practical use.

The spelling is improving; well they keep telling me it's improving. But, and like before I'd never think of filling up a form. Problems with the spelling, problems with the writing just wouldn't, like I would stand back and let the wife fill up the thing, any kind of a form. But I was here one day and we went through a thing about filling up forms and I actually had to go that evening and go up and fill up a form, to join Sky to connect with Sky but I was able to go up and fill up that form without thinking about it. Yeah like I'd be dreading having to go in and do it. But we just happened to be doing forms soon enough to it like I'd never think about filling up a bank draft or anything like that. I wouldn't just do it, just wouldn't do it. If I had to go into the bank the wife would have to be with me to do it like but I think now I wouldn't have any problem doing it. It's given me an awful lot of confidence yeah. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

For the men involved in the barrel-top wagon building project, there was equality in the group which meant that in spite of different literacy and numeracy abilities, the men were not embarrassed. The setting allowed the men to be open about any literacy difficulties they may have.

I mean you didn't learn in school, you were sitting beside someone who could read and write you were more embarrassed than anything else. But we are all equal here, none of us could read or write, and there's one better than the

other obviously here but this man never went to school, I went to school but he knows as much as me. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

In fact, the practical nature of the project provided a good basis for developing literacy and numeracy skills in an unthreatening manner. One man spoke about learning through practice.

The most amazing thing about it is, it's not just about making stuff like for you to cut a piece of timber or whatever you are involving, you have to measure, so you learn about the metrics system and you are reading stuff, reading stuff on the plans so that's coming into it, you are communicating with one another. It's amazing we are getting educated, it's introducing us to education really in a better way. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

For one man, improved numeracy skills benefited him in his work.

It does [benefit] my job, I'm a tradesman and I have to order concrete... I can tell them, you know, it's not 6 metres when its 1½ metre of concrete. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

For those who are involved in computer classes, there was varying views as to whether computers could be used as a basis for engaging in literacy support. One view held that some initial work elsewhere was required for those with literacy difficulties. However, the opposing view was expressed in the group.

If you come in and just learn how to turn on the computer and just do the bit of reading and have the text aloud on it its helpful too because its reading to you..if you weren't able to read it. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

The computer will read it, you press the computer and she'll say whatever the word is. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

### **Self respect, self-confidence and pride**

A universal benefit identified by all the participants from each of the focus groups was the improvement to their confidence levels and the increase to their self-esteem as well as a sense of pride in their accomplishments.

I'm more confident now. This course has been great for us. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

I was always told I wasn't assertive. I'm more assertive now. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

I got a bit of self respect back, that's what I'm getting back anyway. The biggest thing I have now at the moment my little bit of self-esteem has gone up and my respect is coming up again. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

The sense of achievement contributed to building self-confidence and pride.

Just like yourself now if you painted your house, you paint it yourself and it might take you a fortnight right but you look back when you have the house done and you say to yourself I did it just as good, that's the way I feel about it like. We finished this and we've done it and we're proud of it. That's my thing now, that's my feeling at the moment. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

One man spoke about the benefits of his group for younger people, in the context of these increased confidence levels

Even at my age, I'm gone 62 years but it's the best thing that ever happened. It means a lot. And the young people should be in a place like this, that's my opinion. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

### **Computer literacy**

Most of the men participating in the research were at the time or had at some point in the past attended a computer course. For many of these men the increased confidence they experienced was also accompanied by a very welcome understanding of the benefits of becoming computer literate.

I had a computer for the kids and when they went away to school I never turned it on, I was afraid to turn it on. And now I feel that it opens up information to me you know. And it gave me the confidence to go at it. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

I can look up a car now, or a tractor. Look up the prices. Just using the internet and using a digital camera. And just general stuff like that, it's all beneficial. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

And benefit wise, the benefit for me is to be able to go back to my house and use a machine that was in the house for ages, but now I can use a computer at home. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

With the children, with the computers, like, and before we done this course like say one of the kids came to us and say 'can you fix that?' Sure we wouldn't have a clue how to do it, so now if they come to us, we know like what's wrong. (Focus Group B, Ballymun)

### **Rising to a challenge**

Another benefit of returning to literacy engagement which some of the men identified was the satisfaction inherent in challenging themselves to overcome difficulties on a course and succeed. In a number of cases this spurred some of the men to think about engaging further in learning opportunities.

I was delighted I came back. I was actually delighted...gave my brain a kick in the ass and it started moving again. As I said the first few days with the fractions good Jesus I was all over the place but by the time that chap was finished with me they are not such a big deal. And I learnt like in the few weeks that I was here I learnt a lot from him about fractions and I was delighted to learn it. Even though I know I will never use them again, but it was nice to know you could do them. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

To go on, [to do more courses] lead me to go on, and I'm delighted to be given the chance to go on. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

### **Social interaction**

For others, there are more commonplace benefits to be taken from participation in literacy courses, including a break from the mundane and monotonous and the opportunity to simply interact with other men with similar interests.

It's a social aspect. Have a cup of tea in the mornings. You get to know the lads. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

The opportunity to have a space out of the house also arose as important.

What I like about it I get up in the morning I look forward to coming in here. Even though its only 3 hours, but it breaks the day. I get up in the morning you know; otherwise I'd be stuck in the house all the time. And I'd like to keep going, I'd like to keep going for the next 10 years, please god. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

### **Cultural knowledge**

For the Traveller men participating in the research there is an additional and unique benefit to participation in a specific informal learning opportunity, namely the building of a traditional Traveller wagon. This learning activity cultivates reading, writing and numeracy skills while also connecting them with important aspects of their culture and history.

A few of us have, we never lived or slept in the wagon, and its good experience for us. It is an experience for all of us. We are learning things but we are working. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

Well it's a dying trade like. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

By learning how to build a wagon they are reviving a very important skill, which is under threat of being forgotten and lost from Traveller culture.

### **Supports**

Another benefit identified by most of the groups consulted was the peer support each member of the class received from other members. This proved a source of strength for some members who were struggling with courses.

After a week I was going to quit, I thought I wasn't able; but a few of the fellows here had a word with me, were talking to me, and said I was foolish; 'keep at it', that I would get it eventually. (Focus Group B, Ballymun)

We're all ready to help one another, and encourage, you know if we're struggling with something, sometimes. We help each other out. Comrades! (Focus Group D, Tuam)

The opportunity for peer support arose from the sense of equality in the group and the opportunities for all to contribute, regardless of their skills. There was a strong sense that the practical nature of the learning meant that all could contribute.

There's no one special, we are all you know working together and as he said the wagon will be done together, we'll put a new floor in, when the wagon is finished we should do something else again. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

We are all equal here. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

### **Unforeseen/unanticipated benefits**

Even though one of the participants has not taken a literacy course, he finds that the computer course he is participating in has improved his spelling.

My spelling... I've got a problem with spelling. But on the computer, you can spell check and it helps you...I've come on a lot since. The blockage that was there seems to be clearing! (Focus Group B, Ballymun).

Others never imagined, when they signed up to build a wagon, that such an exercise would incorporate a mathematical learning element.

The other thing with the hands-on work was say the angle, say we learnt angles because we had to, they were things we probably didn't know. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

Other courses helped participants with aspects of personal development including improved communication skills.

We might have known a bit about numeracy and we might know a bit about the reading skills or whatever but the communication skills as well. The way we can communicate with each other and value each other's opinions and stuff you know what I mean, whether we agree or disagree. That's a great thing that we all learn. Probably a thing we were weak at, the weakest thing. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

Following on from this, one participant from Focus Group A believes that returning to literacy classes has also taught him to engage in conversations and debates with people and discuss issues and differences without getting angry or frustrated as he used to do

(which he believes is a direct result of the Christian Brothers methods of discipline, which were, he says, often verbally aggressive and physically violent). This impacted on how he relates to others, including colleagues in the work place. Becoming involved in the 'return to education' programme helped him to 'relearn' how to deal with other people and he believes this has benefited both him and his employer/colleagues.

## Supports needed

The men's more recent experiences of literacy engagement are starkly contrasted with their earlier experiences of the formal education system. While negative experiences in childhood were common, the men's experiences the second time around have largely been very positive.

### A different approach to school

By contrasting their earlier experiences of learning - which were poor - with their current experience of engaging in literacy programmes - which have been more successful - we can identify the types of supports which are working for these men.

Many of the participants also came forward with other suggestions on how to improve existing supports in order to increase the numbers of men engaging with literacy services.

I mean you didn't learn in school, you were sitting beside someone who could read and write you were more embarrassed than anything else. But we are all equal here, none of us could read or write. (Focus Group D, Tuam)

If it was a test, say in maths ...he [tutor] would make sure that we had the knowledge of what it was about and he simplified it so that at the end it wasn't just an exercise to do. But he explained until you could understand and do it yourself. So you felt you came out with something, it wasn't just an exercise in itself. Yeah, well it made you feel that you understood whereas before back in school people wouldn't have the patience for that. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

What I found about him [tutor] was when we were doing the maths, I liked the maths you know, but fractions were a boogie to me, but the first day he



handed me a page with fractions on it I just, I didn't want to know because I never got a chance years ago right. But I turned around and said to 'excuse me I haven't a clue about this'. 'Don't worry at all about it' he said. Let me show you how to break it down first. And after a few times of doing that, fractions were not a problem for me. I didn't enjoy maths in school, I didn't enjoy anything in school but what I didn't get was a chance. He understood that, I explained it to him. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

### **The importance of supportive tutors**

The style and approach of the tutors are very important for the men.

Approachability, patience and understanding were by far the most sought after characteristics in a tutor, according to the research participants. The men also value a tutor who is intelligent and knowledgeable on the subjects they teach and is equally capable of imparting that knowledge to their students.

I always say you have educated people and then you have teachers. You can have an academic and a person could be very bright and have a lot of knowledge but he mightn't make a good teacher. A teacher is somebody who has the ability to give you knowledge and he's [tutor] got that ability. He's a natural educator really. And I mean there's a lot of people out there who are very bright but they can't pass that knowledge on or have the ability to pass that knowledge on. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

The men value a tutor who can put the members of the class at ease and explain a subject in a way that is accessible.

I think we are very fortunate to have it here with the tutor that we had. Because he certainly makes it, he makes you comfortable no matter what you are faced with he's, you know, he's got the ability to teach which is an asset to have. As the individual we have we were very fortunate to have him. And he simplified stuff for us basically and was very patient in bringing us on to make sure we had the knowledge of what it was. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

The research participants also value a tutor who is respectful and not condescending.

He had respect for us. When he was speaking to us he was actually speaking to us, not down to us. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

The men also referred to other staff in the centres they attend, and mentioned the importance of being made feel comfortable and put at ease.

At the start you are kind of paranoid somebody is going to laugh at you, so you just need a bit of confidence. Once you come in the door, the first step and they are very nice when you come in the door here. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

### **One-to-one attention**

Each of the focus group participants agreed that individual tuition and one-to-one attention from the tutor is one of the most beneficial elements of returning to learning.

No matter what I called him for, whether it was the computer or the maths he would always give time to come over and do it. He done the same with every pupil that was in it, he actually went in with you to do it. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

And no matter what question we had he would do his best to answer everybody and he moved around the class to everybody that was using a computer. He didn't just stay; he didn't pick a chair to sit in...he stayed with us which we found very helpful. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

And it sticks in your head, because I done computers in school, and nothing ever stuck in me head. Where here, it's completely different, it's sticking there, staying there. Just everybody messing in school, and then the teachers have too many people around, it's not one-on-one sort of thing, where that's what you have in here. (Focus Group C, Clonmel)

### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality is also an important component in making some men feel comfortable and supported.

You don't want to go to a class where you know somebody. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

It's confidential and no mates around you...the [confidentiality] of it is a big thing. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

They only become agitated when there are others around. But yet they would sit down and speak to you and pour their heart out on a one to one. But anyone else even comes into the yard they turn straight away. (Focus Group E, Clonmel 2)

### **Workplace support**

Some of the men involved in workplace learning programmes spoke of how they encouraged their co-workers to engage in literacy education and supported them in taking the first step.

My way is to speak to them on a personal basis and tell them there are people available. And don't be ashamed to do something about it. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

Yes, yeah, I've no problem speaking to them and I never make them feel embarrassed. I've been through it with a lot of people. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

It's a good way of recruiting people, to get people in, if you are coming around and you have a program it would be a good idea to have someone who is in there from their work place who went through it. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

In terms of workplace initiatives, it was considered very important that supervisory staff were supportive of a return to education, in addition to senior management.

The VEC should take it upon themselves to contact the head people in the council and tell them to tell their supervisors to be more encouraging, not to be putting obstacles in their way or saying that they don't need it and if anything they should be reprimanded for it because they are giving us stick for it. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

But if they [the supervisors] don't stop you, they just make it difficult....make it hard for you.(Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

Without the support and understanding of co-workers and management level staff in particular, many men will not take the first step in addressing their literacy difficulties or if they do, they may not succeed in completing the course, if supervisors or foremen are

creating problems. For some workers this type of behaviour had led to withdrawal from courses.

I know they have talked fellas out of it. I know men who gave it up because they were, they ate them, the more they'd eat me the more I'd come to spite them but I know men who backed off and wouldn't go anymore. And I said 'why aren't you going?' 'Because they gave me a hard time' (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

Afraid of being on the wrong side of the overseers, you know what I'm talking about. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

The employer's role was also cited by the men as important in supporting people to engage in literacy programmes. The men felt that people within the council should be charged with dealing with literacy difficulties and supporting employees to address these difficulties.

## Chapter Four - Lessons for good practice and conclusions

### Introduction

This chapter presents the lessons gleaned from critically evaluating this research process and its findings. It is hoped that the lessons learned here can be used to encourage greater numbers of men into literacy programmes and to improve the experiences of men already participating in literacy services through the further development and tailoring of such services. The lessons for good practice are based on suggestions from the authors, considering previous relevant research findings and recommendations and in light of current policy governing literacy provision in informal learning settings; and are based on suggestions made by focus group participants during the research process. The lessons are illustrated by relevant quotes (in italics) which reflect the experiences of men already engaging in literacy programmes.

Lessons are divided into categories relevant to policy makers, practitioners/service providers, and researchers.

### How to promote literacy programmes among greater numbers of men

#### Offering multiple options for learning

Some of the council workers (colleagues of the men attending one of the focus groups) would not attend classes in their home town, for fear of being 'discovered' by others. Instead they opted for classes in the next major town where they are not known. Having the option of attending classes in locations outside of their home town spurred some of the men interviewed to engage with literacy services.

Providing alternative learning options may further increase participation by men who are reluctant to engage with literacy services, e.g. distance or web-based learning.

## LESSONS FOR GOOD PRACTICE

**Policy Makers:** Developing less traditional literacy interventions can prove successful in attracting 'hard to reach' groups, such as men. A 2008 evaluation of the NALA Distance Learning Service (DLS) (literacy learning on line and over the phone) reported it to be an effective way of engaging male learners. The nature of the service (it can be done from the comfort of the learner's home) means that it easily fulfils any need for privacy and confidentiality, which may be seen as an influencing factor by greater numbers of men than women.

The 2008 evaluation also identified an unexpected function of the DLS to act as a 'bridging' mechanism, linking learners to more traditional adult education settings. The policy recommendation therefore is to continue to fund initiatives such as the DLS and facilitate its expansion through supportive policy.

**Service providers and practitioners:** By partnering with local agencies and organisations already engaging with disadvantaged men, service providers are developing literacy modules to be integrated into other forms of learning, for example horticulture, carpentry or IT. This blending of literacy services means men can access literacy supports within non-literacy related settings.

### **Information/promotion**

The men who participated in the research identified the importance of readily available, easily accessible, quality information on the literacy services which potential learners can access. This information, they suggest, should be provided using a variety of methods and materials.

You know the booklet, when you are printing booklets it's always about the courses that are available for say the literate (sic). But in some part of that little booklet there should be a little message right, okay if they can't read and write it's a waste of time having it in it but they should be in it for other people that might have an idea and read it out not too loudly and not when the place is full, when you are in their company. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

And you can also point it out that there's phone numbers and whatever so they can make a contact. There are easy ways without embarrassing people. I think people become a bit bothered when they think you are trying to make a set of them when there's other people present. It mightn't be a bad approach when you come in to have a card even and say look if you don't want to say it in front of people, because people become agitated when you are there. You can phone it in or whatever. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

Following on from the point above, this research highlighted that the first step in deciding to return to literacy engagement may be the most difficult. However, those who are courageous enough to take up the challenge lead by example and pave the way for others to follow suit. One of the most powerful promotional tools, as identified in the findings, is word of mouth, especially when put forward by a 'champion' for the service, an advocate who has come through it and has had positive experiences.

This corresponds to Corridan's recommendations around recruitment on an informal basis by students in programmes. This was undertaken on an ad hoc basis by some of the men interviewed and has proven successful. The following quotes from learners illustrate this point.

When a fellow worker said to me, he asked me about the course. He didn't get in but he said to me 'Jesus I'm sorry now I didn't go', and the fact that you are going you are actually encouraging other people to go, there's other people who want to go now. Because I think they are all, they are sceptical coming in the first place because they don't know what the feedback will be and fellow workers would jeer on another anyway. But once one goes through it, it will help other people to go through it. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

The ones I saw in our group when they found out, they were asking what way the course was, what way was the course going and by explaining to them some of the lads said 'Jesus I'm sorry now I didn't go'. They were slagging us but I'm delighted now because now they are waiting for the next one to come up, to come in on it. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

## LESSONS FOR GOOD PRACTICE

**Service providers and practitioners:** Increase opportunities, including training for men who have successfully completed literacy programmes to share their experiences with

other potential learners. Incentives for men undertaking this role might include support and guidance in relation to career development if the promotional activity is undertaken in the workplace.

This could be developed further to incorporate a peer support and mentoring programme, which were highly valued in the focus groups.

Continue to host 'open days' which incorporate inputs from current participants to attract new participants to literacy interventions. Alternatively, opportunities for interested individuals to 'drop-in' to literacy classes (with the consent of the men already participating) could also be explored.

It is good practice to invite community based men's groups and men who have engaged in literacy interventions to participate and engage on an advisory basis in structures at local level.

Continued emphasis on promotional activities targeting men and organisations supporting men (for example, community groups and local area partnerships in rural areas) is important.

It's a good way of recruiting people, to get people in, if you are coming around and you have a program it would be a good idea to have someone who is in there from their work place who went through it. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

**Further research:** A review of existing initiatives including examples of best practice could be undertaken, and the experiences of particularly successful initiatives should be disseminated and replicated. NALA could explore this option with other organisations (e.g. Traveller organisations).

## Workplace learning

A number of the focus groups held were with men involved in workplace learning initiatives. These men had suggestions for improving the learning opportunities of employees with literacy difficulties and encouraging those interested in returning to learning. They suggested that service providers liaise with senior management in each



workplace, when promoting workplace learning initiatives, to ensure that managers at all levels encourage and support employees' participation while at the same time participation remains confidential and is discreetly facilitated.

To have an understanding employer, the VEC should take it upon themselves to contact the head people in the council and tell them to tell their supervisors to be more encouraging, not to be putting obstacles in their way that they don't need it and if anything they should be reprimanded for it because they are giving us stick for it. Ah I know they have talked fellas out of it. I know men who gave it up because they were, they ate them, the more they'd eat me the more I'd come to despite them but I know men who backed off and wouldn't go anymore. And I said 'why aren't you going?' 'Because they gave me a hard time'. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

I'll give you an example of that now, exactly an example of that. We are called out to an accident, fatal accident and we have to shut down a road. You'll get a sign 'road closed' some of the guys bring out 'road flooded'. They can't read or write the signs, this is sad. And that is a fact, and men will give you their heart but the poor misfortunate can't even read a sign, and they put it up. And everything is quite confidential and nobody knows nothing. And that's what puts a lot of them off. They are afraid of their life of the whole ... place is going to be talking about them. (Focus Group A, Carrick on Suir)

#### LESSONS FOR GOOD PRACTICE

**Policy makers:** The model of workplace literacy initiatives such as those undertaken under the Workplace Basic Education Fund should be continued, in partnership with employers (both public and private), particularly with local authorities.

Incentives, including financial incentives such as paid leave for employees, could encourage greater numbers to participate in the scheme.

**Service providers and practitioners:** The nature of workplace learning initiatives may require that people with mixed literacy and learning abilities attend the same intervention. The design of such programmes should continue to reflect differing levels of literacy among men by incorporating literacy supports into every programme since

‘participants in programmes at any level, in any setting, may have difficulties with some of the literacy requirements of their course’.<sup>19</sup>

In some cases, additional supports may be required in order to fully address these differences. The role of tutors is vital in such situations and support needs for tutors that arise in this context must remain a priority.

Access to Literacy Awareness Training (LAT) for all supervisors working with literacy participants will ensure middle managers and supervisors of potential participants are aware of the benefits of workplace literacy initiatives and are fully supportive of the process.

The network approach adopted by Skillnets<sup>20</sup> allows micro-enterprises to work together to access training, including workplace literacy interventions, and the model should continue to be rolled out for micro-enterprises.

**Further research:** approaches could be made to employers’ bodies and the trade union movement to collaborate on research and document the benefits to employers (as well as employees) of engaging in literacy based workplace learning initiatives.<sup>21</sup>

## Opportunities to progress learning/additional resources

The men involved in the research were adamant that their involvement in literacy programmes had been extremely positive, providing benefits for them as individuals, for their families and communities and in the workplace. The men also felt strongly that for those interested in continuing with their literacy development, viable opportunities should be available.

Where does the likes of us go when this course is finished, we go back to where we were 2 years ago, or should we get another go at it? (Focus Group D, Tuam)

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<sup>19</sup> Integrating Literacy: NALA Guidelines for Further Education and Training Centres (no year given), Pp. 6

<sup>20</sup> Skillnets is an enterprise-led support body whose mission is to enhance the skills of people in employment in Irish industry to support competitiveness and employability. [www.skillnets.com](http://www.skillnets.com)

<sup>21</sup> As literacy is a core skill which can contribute to increased productivity and competitiveness.

## LESSONS FOR GOOD PRACTICE

**Service providers and practitioners:** The Adult Education Guidance Service (AEGI) offers support and assistance in identifying the next steps, to men wishing to continue their learning. The NALA distance learning service (as mentioned above) and other resources such as the writeon.ie interactive learning website offer further opportunities for literacy learning (for example learning on the website can go towards achieving a FETAC accredited award).<sup>22</sup>

Links to the NALA website from VEC websites would promote ease of navigation towards potential progression routes.

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<sup>22</sup> [www.writeon.ie](http://www.writeon.ie)

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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.

## **Case study**

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

## **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.

## **Focus group discussion**

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

## **Labour market**

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

## **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.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1 – Focus group questions

- Tell me about the group and what you do when you come here
- Name some reasons that men get involved in groups like this. [examples could include: to improve my skills in reading, writing and/or numbers; to complete my education; to learn new things in general; to increase my self-confidence; to improve my skills in English; for enjoyment; for myself; to meet new people; to help me do something useful in my spare time; to help me be more involved in community activities]
- What do you learn through coming here and being involved in the group's activities?
- What are the benefits for you as a) individuals, b) for your families, c) for your job/work, d) your communities?
- Do you think having problems with reading or writing might affect participation?
- If so, in what way? Can you give examples? Do you know of men who have not participated or have dropped out because of difficulties with reading or writing or working with numbers?
- Name some other reasons that men might drop out of groups/activities like this
- What supports are needed to help men stay involved with groups like this?
- Are there any particular supports needed for men with literacy difficulties?
- What advice would you give to men with literacy difficulties about the group?