

Men and Literacy:

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



NALA

National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

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

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Executive Summary

Introduction

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 (Clonmel¹ 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 wagon² 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.³
- A men's group operating within a local, community based men's centre.

¹ Focus groups with two men's groups took place in Clonmel.

² 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.

³ 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 Skillnets⁴ allows micro-enterprises⁵ 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.⁶

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).⁷

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

⁴ 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

⁵ Enterprises with less than ten employees

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

⁷ www.writeon.ie