NALA 1980 – 2010
A Living History

NALA
National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

1973 Murphy report: recognises adult literacy difficulties.

1977 NALA set up by AONTAS.

1979 First NALA conference widens interest and support for the agency.

1980 NALA launched as a membership organisation. Desmond Swan elected as chair.

1984 First government grant to NALA.

1985 First Community and Adult Education Budget to VECs.
Increase in NALA grant, leading to appointment of first NALA staff team: Jenny Derbyshire, Pauline Hensey, Mairin Kelly.

1987 NALA office and resource room set up. NALA's first policy document: *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* published.

Grant cut by 33%.

1989 NALA staff team is now: Geraldine Mernagh, Rosamond Phillips and Mairin Kelly.

1990 International Literacy Year.
President Patrick Hillery becomes patron of NALA, succeeded later in the year by President Mary Robinson.

1992 Green paper: 'Education for a Changing World' includes adult literacy.

1995 NALA accesses first EU-funded project to run from 1996 -1998.

1996 European Year of Lifelong Learning.

1997 Inez Bailey takes over as Director of NALA.

OECD International Adult Literacy Survey shows 1 in 4 adults in Ireland have literacy difficulties.

President Mary McAleese becomes patron of NALA.

NALA / WIT Accreditation Project formalised.

1998 NALA publishes research into access and participation in adult literacy services.

Major increase in government funding to NALA and VEC adult literacy services.

1999 National Adult Literacy Coordinator recruited by the Department of Education and NALA.

2000 White Paper on adult education 'Learning for Life' cites adult literacy as major priority.

TV series *Read, Write, Now* broadcast by RTÉ.

2010 NALA celebrates 30th anniversary and tenth TV series *Stuck for Words.*

Timeline 1980 – 2000

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Carol Daultrey,
NALA Chairperson,
1987-1988.

Angela Crowley,
NALA Chairperson
1993-1996

Tony Downes,
NALA Chairperson
1990-1993

Noel Dalton, NALA Chairperson 1988-1990, Mary O'Rourke, Geraldine Mernagh and Sean Haughey at International Literacy Day 1990.

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Ann Boyd, student participant in 'Written off?' (left) and Michael Power, former chairperson of NALA talk to Dr Martin McAleese and President McAleese at NALA's 30th birthday reception at Áras an Uachtaráin in 2010.

Message from President McAleese

As patron of the National Adult Literacy Agency, I am delighted to congratulate Liza Costello and John Gibney and the many contributors on the publication of this wonderful history, *'NALA 1980 – 2010:* a living history *'*.

Successful societies create the conditions whereby its citizens can develop their skills and potential but when the basic skills of reading and writing that most of us take for granted are lacking, then the potential to make life choices is limited and the opportunities for learning and social interaction curtailed. NALA's story for the last thirty and more years has been one of empowering adults to learn those basic skills and to realise their potential; it is a story of people who believe that literacy and numeracy are basic social rights for everyone; it is a story of volunteers, professional tutors, educators, campaigners, organisers and fund-raisers; it is a story of agencies working together. Most of all, NALA's story is about the thousands of adults who have been instilled with the confidence and self-esteem to discover their own latent talents and gifts.

I would like to thank all the people who have contributed to NALA's living history; from the early volunteers whose pioneering vision led to the professional and vital establishment that is NALA today – a movement of unstoppable force for social inclusion. Most of all, I would like to thank the adults who had the courage and determination to seize the opportunities that NALA provided.

Mary McAleese
President Of Ireland

Gretta Vaughan, Chairperson, NALA at the 2011 AGM.

Foreword

It is with a strong sense of privilege, not a little awe and with a backward glance over my shoulder at all those honourable people who have occupied the position before me that, as current chairperson of NALA, it falls within my tenure to present a document as important as the History of NALA.

The publication of its history at this point in the evolution of the National Adult Literacy Agency is a welcome and timely event. It comes at a stage in the history of the literacy movement in this country where what might be termed a "changing of the guard" is quietly taking place. Many of those unsung heroes – who were pioneers in the setting up of the Agency and in so doing were instrumental in determining the direction of literacy provision for decades to come – are gradually exiting the stage. This has posed the danger that the valuable source material which their personal testimonies could provide might not be recorded and an integral part of the educational and social landscape of the period could remain undocumented. The approach adopted by the researchers is to be commended in that it marries the recorded testimony of some of the major players of the time with the documentary evidence available and draws on a thematic approach to give a very readable and comprehensive account of the many struggles and prodigious achievements of those working in the field of literacy over the years.

As someone who had worked in the formality of the second-level sector in the seventies and early eighties and had written and articulated a philosophy of social justice in education during that time, moving into the adult literacy sector of the VEC seemed to me a natural progression. Finding within adult education an agency – NALA - which supported and mirrored my views on education seemed like coming home. Having been appointed Adult Literacy Organiser (ALO) in 1985, with the allocation to the VECs of the Adult Literacy and Community Education budget, the relationship which developed thereafter with NALA could only be described as a symbiotic one, in which practitioners and NALA mutually drew on each other's resources and expertise to advance the literacy

agenda. It was not an easy task. We were dealing with a society and an education system which were in denial of their shortcomings in relation to a large cohort of its people and the approach up to the mid eighties had been to let the community and voluntary sector provide the solution as part of its charitable function. It is a testimony to the clarity of vision and the enduring idealism and commitment of the founders and early workers with NALA that they argued so cogently and effectively for an approach based on social justice and empowerment of learners stemming from the philosophy of Paulo Freire.

The significance of achieving a change in approach to literacy, from being a charitable issue to one of social justice, cannot be underestimated with regard to its implications at the time. It changed the way learners were perceived, both by themselves and others, and was fundamental to tackling the hidden nature of the issue and the sense of stigma felt by the learner. Viewing literacy as a right placed the responsibility squarely at the feet of the state and made failure in educational achievement a failure of the system, rather than a failure by the individual learner. It stands as a monument to the ideology and commitment of those early leaders in the adult literacy movement that the liberal and social justice agenda was the one which prevailed in the ethos of NALA; an ethos which was so eloquently captured in the *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work*, first published in 1985, and which remains the bible of all good adult literacy practitioners to this day.

As the work progressed in advancing the cause of literacy through the 80s, 90s and beyond, the pioneering and groundbreaking efforts of NALA and practitioners working together led to many exciting developments. Some of the highlights which stand out in my mind are:

» the ALOs' Conference organised by NALA in the early 90s at Killaloe, where the painstaking journey of having the Adult Literacy Organisers' position formally recognised was begun.
» the publication of the Tutor-training pack, which acknowledged and drew on the expertise of those workers who had delivered such training on the ground for many years and which recognised the central role of learners in their own learning through the Language Experience Approach.

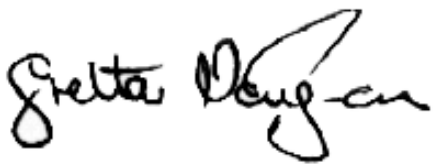
» the *Evolving Quality Framework,* which gave a voice to learners and tutors in continuously appraising the quality and value of the local provision.
» the piloting of the NALA-WIT accreditation project as efforts intensified to professionalise the sector and bring it in from the cold.
» the setting up of the Regional network of Organisers which led to the development of the ALOs' Association.

The list is endless and all of it is captured vividly in the pages ahead along with the excitement and sheer intensity of the period.

Crucial to all of those developments was the central role which was played by the inclusive, democratic structure of NALA which allowed for all players - be they students, practitioners or general members of the public - to have their voices heard and their influence felt through the AGM and the composition of the Executive Board.

It is appropriate that the history of NALA be recorded now 30 years after its foundation. The road travelled has been long, intensive but extremely productive. The literacy sector is emerging from ten years of unprecedented expansion and change where, arguably, some of the values and ideals relating to social justice have been threatened. I hope that this comprehensive view of NALA's role in the development of adult literacy will encourage our members to take a fresh look at where the literacy sector in its entirety has arrived and to engage fully with NALA in meeting the challenges ahead.

I trust that you will enjoy reading the document and recognising those pieces of your own soul embedded in it as much as I did.



Gretta Vaughan
Chairperson NALA
2011

Chapter 1

Nothing comes from nothing: the origins of NALA

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The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) was established in 1980 in order to tackle the literacy difficulties experienced by a significant proportion of the adult population in Ireland. This was the product of a number of factors and this chapter will provide an overview of these and how they influenced the formation of NALA. It first offers a brief overview of the growth of mass literacy in Ireland from the late eighteenth century onwards. It then traces the grassroots evolution of the literacy services in the 1970s, and explores how these services grew into a movement, leading to the establishment of NALA in 1980.

Literacy in nineteenth century Ireland

The growth of mass literacy amongst the Irish population dates from the second half of the eighteenth-century.[1] There were a number of reasons for this. During a time of relative stability, Ireland's commercial economy began to expand rapidly; the records of commerce were usually written down, and therefore had to be read. The same was true with regards to politics: the turbulence of the 1790s saw both urban and rural Ireland being flooded with tracts, posters, handbills, books, and newspapers. Organisations such as the United Irishmen used words as a key tool in their attempts to turn the world upside down, but their opponents did likewise in order to maintain the status quo.

In addition to such earthly conflicts, words had a role to play in spreading messages about worlds to come. The 'second reformation' of the 1820s saw both Catholic and Protestant churches use the printed word as a tool to win converts to their creeds. And the increasing bureaucracy of the British state in Ireland, which was expanding rapidly during the same period, also depended on the written word for its administration.

It can be debated whether these developments reflected a literate population that already existed, or whether they created one. The statistics for literacy that we have for this period need to be treated

with caution, and the very notion of literacy can have a wide range of meanings. But the fact remains that by the middle of the nineteenth-century the printed word had assumed a role in Irish society that it had never possessed before. Literacy had become more and more necessary in practical terms. By this time Ireland was well on the way to becoming a predominantly English speaking country, so the ability to read and write increasingly took the form of being able to do so in English.

The relationship between literacy in English and the decline of Irish is also open to debate: for example, in west Galway literacy went hand in hand with the spread of English, whereas in north-west Donegal it did not.[2] What is less contentious is the fact that literacy in English very obviously went hand in hand with education. In 1824, there were as many as 560,000 out of a population of 6,800,000 attending a wide range of primary schools (mostly locally based 'pay' or 'hedge' schools), but in 1831, the national school system was created, complete with a set curriculum.

The creation of these schools was followed by an observable increase in literacy levels over the latter half of the nineteenth century. The ability to read and write was first quantified in the census of 1841. In that year, 47% of the Irish population over the age of five could read. In 1911, the figure was 88%. Such figures could conceal as much as they reveal; literacy levels varied according to region, class, gender and occupation. And what was meant by literacy? Was it the ability to read, or to write, or both? Nonetheless, there can be no denying the general trend: throughout the nineteenth-century and into the twentieth, more Irish people were increasingly gaining the ability to read and to write.

Education and literacy in Ireland 1922 - 1970

The early decades of Irish independence are often seen as a deeply conservative era, and this is certainly true of the Irish educational system, which placed relatively little emphasis on innovation. In part, this was due to the fact that independent Ireland was so poor: a lack of money guaranteed that the level of investment in the educational infrastructure following independence would be low. But equally, the state did not seem to attach much importance either to getting more children into the educational system, or keeping them in it for lengthy periods. For

example, in 1929, 62% of children aged between 14 and 16 were not in any kind of school; in 1962, the number was 49%.[3] Figures such as this told their own story.

The deep social conservatism of Irish society meant that education was viewed in purely functional terms. There was a very strong sense, even prior to 1922, that 'a limited education in literacy and numeracy was deemed sufficient' for the 'poor and working classes'.[4] The existing order of Irish society was to be the natural order; consequently, adult education and literacy issues tended to get short shrift. Vocational Educational Committees (VECs) were established in 1930 to provide vocational education and training to young people and adults. However, their main focus was on those under the age of 18 and there was virtually no provision made for the education of adults.

This meant that the many adults who were not fully literate received little attention. The official view was that the Irish education system was without fault: for example, in the 1950s Sean Moylan, the then Minister for Education, stated that 'It is my opinion that this system of ours, of which there is no comparable system on earth, is very appropriate to this country'.[5] And in 1960, Charles McCarthy, the General Secretary of the Vocational Teachers Association of Ireland, claimed that the population of Ireland was 'almost universally literate; or more accurately … only the unteachable are illiterate'. That seemed to be the end of the matter for McCarthy, who had 'nothing more to say on illiteracy'.[6] Many of those interviewed for this history had strong recollections of the persistence of such casually condescending attitudes at an official level. As one past staff member recalled:

> **Oh yes, they were very slow to accept that [literacy difficulties] could possibly exist amongst the adult population because there had been no studies done really. And it didn't suit them to accept it because it would mean money.**

In this light, it is ironic that as early as 1958, education had been recognised as being necessary for Ireland's economic development.[7] As a result, the period of economic growth in the 1960s also became a period of considerable educational reform, with a great emphasis on modernising an outdated educational system and making it as widely

accessible as possible. The most well-known consequence was the provision of free secondary education from 1967 onwards. But another important initiative came two years later, in 1969, when a commission was set up by the incumbent government to advise on the development of adult education. Its findings were published in 1973, in a report entitled *Adult Education in Ireland*, better known as the Murphy Report.[8]

The Murphy Report outlined 22 points required to develop the adult education system in Ireland. These included the need for research into literacy difficulties among adults. Here was the first official recognition that a significant number of adults in Ireland experienced difficulty with reading and writing, but this led to no real change in terms of funding or education policy. There was, however, an alternative framework within which the issue could be addressed: that provided by what could broadly be termed the 'voluntary sector'.

A grassroots movement

During the 1950s and 1960s numerous organisations were founded that seemed to be trying to plug gaps in social services, especially with regards to vulnerable and marginalised people. Against the activist backdrop of the 1960s, some of these organisations had quite radical approaches and attracted a good deal of grassroots support on this basis: Cherish, the Simon Community, the Association for Deserted and Alone Women, to name but three. Indeed, even traditionally conservative Catholic social organisations experienced a leftward shift from the late 1960s onwards, as missionaries influenced by the emerging currents of liberation theology returned to Ireland.[9]

On the specific issue of adult literacy, an influential perspective emerged from the colonial struggles of the Third World. In the 1960s, the radical Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire defined education in terms of power, and literacy in terms of a human right. He argued for an educational system in which education should raise the awareness of students, thus emancipating them and enabling them to become active participants in society on an equal basis.[10] For Freire, education was to be the precondition to emancipation. His ideas had a resonance in Ireland and proved to be a major influence on many of those who became involved in NALA in the 1970s and 1980s.

An emphasis on adult education had already been evident in some local community development organisations formed in the 1970s. And despite the state's low level of interest in adult literacy (or perhaps because of it) voluntary literacy services began to emerge in this period. In 1974 the first adult literacy service in Ireland was set up: the Dublin Literacy Scheme, in the Dublin Institute of Adult Education, Mountjoy Square. The Institute's Director, Father Liam Carey, had also been instrumental in the establishment of AONTAS, the National Association of Adult Education, in 1969.

Many of those involved in this burgeoning voluntary sector were coming from very different perspectives. Catholic social teaching was an obvious influence on many. Others had been deeply influenced by social theories, such as those of Freire, that could be described as radical in any context, let alone an Irish one. These differences were reflected in the manner in which they approached adult education. While some local services and individual practitioners adhered to what could be described as a charitable model of provision, others were guided by a more egalitarian approach, sharing a commitment to promoting social justice and equality and to tackling social disadvantage. And in the field of adult literacy, the latter had a natural resonance: literacy issues were most likely to be prevalent in deprived and marginalised communities. As a result, many adult literacy practitioners perceived the issue of adult literacy as a result of inequities within society: a very significant break with a traditionally paternalistic and charitable approach.

These differences in how to address the problem would be debated in the future, but in the mid-1970s the immediate priority was to identify the problem that was to be addressed. In June 1975 AONTAS, in line with what the Murphy Report had recommended, commissioned a report into the broad issue of adult literacy. It did so for a number of reasons: the findings of the Murphy report, which had been corroborated by census data; increasing requests for the means to tackle literacy issues among adults; at least one (unspecified) request for a seminar dealing with 'adult illiteracy'; and, last but not least, the prospect of a BBC adult literacy programme being received on the east coast of Ireland, and a resulting interest in monitoring such programmes with an eye to developing Irish equivalents.[11]

These developments did not happen in a vacuum: at a community level, people were already presenting themselves to local voluntary services seeking help with improving their literacy. This was partly due to the BBC television series *On the Move,* which was then being received on the east coast of Ireland.[12] *On the Move* was part of the *Right to Read* campaign in the UK which aimed both to support literacy learning for adults and to address the stigma associated with literacy problems. RTÉ subsequently produced a radio programme and handbook on adult literacy entitled *Helping Adults to Read,* which also gave both support and guidance on literacy learning and was used by many volunteer adult literacy tutors as a teaching tool. RTÉ has continued to be a significant player in adult literacy development in Ireland.

The fact that *On the Move* was being watched in Ireland meant that adult literacy was effectively being discussed publicly. According to one former adult literacy practitioner and NALA board member, who was working as a remedial teacher at this time, 'people started coming in and saying, "Are there any classes for me? I have a difficulty with reading and writing."' In his view, 'people were seeing that [*On the Move*] and they were saying, "Oh there are other adults who have [literacy problems]". And all of a sudden, they literally came in because they knew there were night classes here for sewing and all sorts of things'. Surely there might be classes for those who wanted to read and write? So 'two other remedial teachers … approached me and said, "Look, this thing is happening, could we set up something?" So we set up classes'.

This is a good example of how many voluntary adult literacy projects were founded in Ireland in the 1970s: it was in response to a demand. And unknown to this tutor at the time, similar occurrences were taking place all over the country. Some of those who volunteered to address these needs had careers as teachers; others had no teaching background at all. They set up free literacy classes on an ad hoc basis. Due to both the social stigma associated with literacy problems, and the lack of funding, most tuition was on a one to one basis, often in the home of either the tutor or the student. The tutors received varying levels of training: as the services developed organically, in this ad hoc manner, their level and standard varied considerably throughout the country. As the issue of adult literacy had not yet been addressed by the state, neither teaching methodology nor materials existed. Training materials might be drawn up on a local

basis, using the experience of educators, but there was little in the way of co-ordination: as one former adult literacy practitioner noted, 'ads for volunteer tutors were put in the local paper and read out at mass.'

Even aside from these technical issues, people involved in the provision of adult literacy services were faced with the stigma associated with literacy problems. One student recalled how it took him two years to pluck up the courage to approach a former teacher with the words, 'The library to me is like a foreign embassy. Could you help me?' Adult literacy was, and would remain, a deeply sensitive issue. This was relevant to the on-going differences about the appropriate philosophy and ethos to be adopted in the course of teaching adult learners.

In any event, there was a strong case for co-ordinating these disparate activities. The first steps in doing so were taken by AONTAS, which set up a sub-committee to deal with the issues that had been highlighted in its report. Its members were drawn from the non-state sector: religious bodies, trades unions, and other interested organisations such as RTÉ and groups working with Travellers. In the same year, AONTAS conducted a postal survey on adult literacy. It found that 'stigma and embarrassment' were the main problems faced by potential learners. But it also found that another huge problem was a lack of resources: there simply were not enough teachers, and there was no adequate framework for training them. It also found that, 'at least one literacy scheme is being operated in each of the twenty-six counties'.[13] However, all were deemed inadequate to the task at hand. AONTAS also noted the lack of research into literacy issues in Ireland, though studies were on-going in UCD and St Patrick's College, Maynooth.

The AONTAS report advocated a holistic, integrated approach to literacy difficulties and their root causes. It stated, 'There is an obvious need not only to eradicate illiteracy but also those socio-economic and cultural factors, which cause, condition or in any way sustain the problem of illiteracy'.[14] This had implications beyond the purely educational sphere, and the means by which the issue of adult literacy was to be addressed were also wide-ranging. Firstly, the extent of the problem was to be identified. Local and national structures that could provide appropriate solutions for specific localities were to be created. Another key suggestion was for publicity campaigns aimed at raising public awareness, to

convince a wider audience that 'illiteracy dehumanises and domesticates the individual, the family and the community, and that it hinders real economic, social and cultural growth in our country'. There was an emphasis on planning ahead, mainly by convincing 'economic, social and cultural planning organisations' to incorporate measures into future projects 'which will prevent the emergence of this inhuman and anti-social problem'.[15] It concluded with a draft plan for a three year pilot project.

In 1975, the sub-committee recommended that a separate body be established to focus solely on the subject of adult literacy: AONTAS had realised that the scale of the adult literacy issue was too big for it to be addressed as part of its own work. The inaugural meeting of the National Literacy Agency (NLA) took place on 29 April 1977 and AONTAS gave a commitment to make a one-off contribution of £5,000 to its establishment. The primary objective of the first meeting was to define the scope of the NLA: those present settled on providing an educational service, in collaboration with other relevant bodies, and providing research and publicity services. At this point, 'no definition of illiteracy was agreed', though it was acknowledged that, 'a pressing problem did exist and that in the first instance research was not essential to establish that fact'.[16] Collaboration with other bodies was seen as necessary to the new agency's work from the outset.

By May, the drafting of the aims and objectives of the new organisation was well underway, and these were officially adopted on 28 June 1977. The overall aim was to 'promote literacy as a common good in Ireland'.[17] A wide range of secondary objectives were also identified. The agency would seek to:

» create an informed public awareness of the problems of illiteracy;
» influence public policies and stimulate a public commitment to the alleviation of problems of illiteracy;
» engage in research and activities, independently or in association with other agencies that will be relevant to literacy;
» co-operate with national and international bodies concerned with the problems of illiteracy;
» be an advisory and consultative body for the development of adult literacy schemes in Ireland;

» be a clearing house for ideas and information concerning literacy schemes and projects in Ireland and in other countries;
» provide a resource centre for all those who seek help with problems of illiteracy;
» encourage organisers, trainees and tutors to develop their skills in combating illiteracy;
» obtain resources from both public and private organisations towards accomplishing the objectives of the NLA; and
» co-ordinate all adult literacy schemes on a national basis.

As this history will show, these objectives remained at the core of the organisation's work over the next three decades. And having decided upon its purpose, on 25 October 1977 the NLA decided upon its name, and it officially became the National Adult Literacy Agency. It was not until 1980 however when the body was formally constituted.

Chapter 2

A literacy movement: NALA 1980 to 1987

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Coming together

In October 1979 the fledgling NALA organised a conference to bring together a broad range of people involved or interested in the field of adult literacy, to tell them about the organisation and to find out precisely how NALA could 'answer their needs'.[18] NALA also required a constitution, and the conference would be a concrete expression of its independence and identity.[19]

The conference took place in the Tara Towers Hotel, Dublin, on 13 October 1979 and was a key milestone in the development of the organisation: many of the issues raised would be defining characteristics of the agency's work.[20] 61 people attended, from a wide range of areas and projects, and agreed a number of key points:

- NALA was to be a national organisation that would act as a pressure group to generate funds for adult literacy work by publicising the issue.
- In the longer term, it was expected that it would adopt a training role, with a resource centre and staff.
- It was to be a membership organisation, based upon literacy students as much as on organisers or tutors.
- NALA would emphasise the importance of consulting with literacy schemes and others involved in adult literacy provision.

It should be noted that the agency had now consciously stopped using the term 'illiteracy' which appeared in its earlier writings. Literacy students, in particular, emphasised that this term was degrading, often associated with 'ignorance' in the public mind, and should not be used.

In the early phases of NALA's existence, especially during the years leading up to this conference, there had been concerns about its autonomy and the scope of its role, together with the major issue of funding. It had been agreed that NALA would have to develop a

concrete profile and purpose, in order for the Department of Education (and possibly other bodies) to commit funds to it. Consequently, the generation of publicity to this end was a priority.

The lack of funds was potentially a terminal issue; indeed at an early stage serious discussions took place about the possibility of NALA disbanding.[21] In November 1978, the executive had noted that 'the agency seemed to have no future, yet its potential was immense and the need which brought into existence was still pressing'; 'there was no Department of Education policy with regards to adult education, or towards adult literacy', despite the fact that other departments (such as Justice and Health) were now taking an interest in its activities.[22] Other institutions and organisations had indicated a willingness to collaborate with NALA: for example, RTÉ, the Health Education Bureau, and Maynooth College.

The prospect of European funding was also explored, but, first and foremost, it was suggested that some funds be used for a workshop, 'to get the agency back to grassroots'.[23] The possibility of doing this in conjunction with AONTAS was rejected; after all, a conscious decision had been made to give NALA its own distinct identity, preferably with its own staff. Hence the decision to assemble a conference of those involved in adult literacy.

At this stage, the majority of NALA members were adult literacy organisers and tutors. Many were working in a voluntary capacity throughout the country; others were paid tutors based in prison education units, training centres run in conjunction with the national training body AnCO (later FÁS), and organisations working with people with disabilities. Most were based in Dublin, with a substantial minority from rural areas, and a small number were adult literacy students.

NALA was intended to provide an umbrella under which these diverse strands could meet and find a degree of common cause. It would do so in a broadly democratic manner: decisions ranging from the election of the executive committee to broader matters of strategy were to be voted on at the AGMs. Furthermore, from the outset it had been decided that all places on the executive were to be filled by elections, which were to take place by proportional representation (PR: single transferrable vote), thus ensuring a representative leadership. This would protect the grassroots,

representative character of NALA, while at the same time avoiding any potential difficulties that might arise from having an official hierarchy in a voluntary organisation.

As one former staff member observed, those involved in NALA 'would have seen themselves as a movement, as people who were dedicated to their goal of bringing tuition to people who need it. … and [who] gave a huge amount of their time to that cause, you may say'. The zeal of those involved in the organisation at this time cannot be underestimated: as one former board member put it,

> **There was an idealism, a camaraderie, the feeling [we] would change the system. In those early days, I think what everybody had in common was that NALA was throwing out a lifeline in terms of support, that you could talk about what we all had in common, [which] is we all wanted to help people to be able to participate more fully in society and to be able to read and write.**

Adult literacy provision in the 1970s was very much a grassroots initiative; many local schemes had been set up by women's groups, or by organisations working in the field of community development. This was an inevitable reaction to the lack of any centralised policy or approach to adult literacy on the part of the government. Arguably, the organisation's strength came from the momentum prompted by the lack of literacy services. Most of the voluntary tutors who joined NALA came from a nonprofessional background, with no prior experience of teaching in the formal education system.

This idealism and commitment was essential for the organisation to survive: NALA received no significant government funding during its first five years. All of its work was conducted on a purely voluntary basis by the members of its newly elected Executive Committee who, according to one interviewee, 'did everything'. It was also extremely 'hands on'; as one former board member put it, NALA was a 'very doing organisation'. Their meetings were held in offices that other companies and organisations offered to them free of charge. And while such assistance was necessary, it also highlighted the stark reality that funding was, and would continue to be, of fundamental importance.

1980 –2010

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Mary Kett,
NALA chairperson
1985-1986

A growing service, a growing membership

It was obvious that during the early 1980s, the number of both adult literacy tutors and students was increasing. Vocational Educational Committees (VECs) were officially responsible for the provision of adult literacy education. The allocation of limited funding to such projects in the early 1980s had allowed for improved training facilities, which in turn allowed for the emergence of tuition based in designated centres: an environment in which students and tutors could meet and exchange both materials and ideas. This also facilitated group-based tuition, a model NALA advocated as a means of addressing the stigma associated with adult literacy.

Thus, a structure for community-based adult literacy education began to take shape and, as the level of provision grew, so too did the number of NALA members. The membership included literacy students, Adult Education Organisers (AEOs), voluntary literacy organisers, tutors and other VEC representatives. Many tutors came from the community and voluntary sector, in which adult education was a burgeoning field. As early as October 1980 there was a firm focus on concrete possibilities for expanding NALA's activities: for example, local training workshops, a newsletter (the first of these was published in Autumn 1981), a publicity officer, and liaison officers in each county.

But funding remained the issue that took precedence over all else, and this ensured that NALA would have to force its concerns onto the agenda of the educational system. 'The future of NALA was getting literacy work established as [a] state responsibility'.[24] Adult literacy was, after all, a national issue, and one that suffered from a lack of coherence and coordination. Hence the need for some kind of national body, to coordinate these scattered initiatives. This naturally implied that NALA would have to engage with the state and its representatives.

The AGM of November 1982 saw resolutions passed to give financial support to facilitate links between literacy groups; to use International Literacy Day to 'highlight the glaring deficiencies in adult literacy provision in Ireland', to 'expose the grossly inadequate state financing of adult literacy' and ultimately, to 'mobilise public support to remedy the situation'.

In February 1983 the possibility of issuing a statement on cutbacks in education and their 'long-term implications for the literacy problem in Ireland', was discussed, together with the possibility of conducting a survey into 'the extent of functional literacy in Ireland'[25]. Extensive lobbying of TDs had taken place during 1983 to 1984, resulting in requests for meetings by Seamus Pattison of Labour and Tomas MacGiolla of the Workers' Party.[26]

Literacy as a right

NALA, by its nature, placed a great emphasis on training. How should a literacy scheme be set up? How should it be tailored towards those it sought to serve? What personal sensitivities would have to be taken into consideration? What training should be carried out, and what material should be used? What type of tuition was appropriate? In answering such questions, a great emphasis was placed on avoiding embarrassment to adult learners, and on undoing the fact that their experience of the traditional educational system had alienated many learners from education in general. This presented a set of issues that would come to define NALA's approach to literacy work in the 1980s.

One critical history of adult literacy in the UK identifies two main approaches to adult education; one liberal, one radical. They suggest that 'liberal education argues for education for its own sake … and radical approaches seek to address the imbalances in power by empowering individuals through the process of education'.[27] The attitudes of NALA members to the issue of adult literacy ranged between these two poles. These differing approaches had existed within the organisation from its inception, but as NALA evolved in the 1980s, the tensions that they produced came more to the surface. One past staff member described her own gradual realisation, at a very early NALA meeting, of the wide divergences among its early members. Her account is worth quoting at length:

> **In that room, I suddenly identified with a whole group of people. Now, as the years went on, I realised that there was the full spectrum there. And that the next few decades would be [about] sorting out where NALA was going to position itself on that spectrum of opinions. … You would**

have had extremely radical people who were interested in literacy as a tool to overthrow and change, you know, mainstream society. A very left wing approach.

But the other end of the spectrum, you would have had very comfortable middle-class people who would have been approaching literacy from a kind of a charity perspective. A very well intentioned but very much a charity model of benevolence towards people who were less fortunate than them. But no conception that this was a systemic failure, or that this was something that was perpetuated throughout society … People were talking about injustice and about how the institutions were there refusing to acknowledge this problem or to meet the needs of these students. And a sense of anger about how this group of people were being totally ignored and dismissed by this system that had created this problem. And the lack of responsibility from the Department of Education.

In this context, some NALA members were developing innovative responses: instead of simply providing a service to passive recipients, they were actively empowering adult learners through their literacy teaching. After all, as the then chairman, John Kennedy, told NALA's third AGM in November 1982, 'there is a hidden politics of knowledge operating in our society'; consequently, he argued, 'to be literate is to be fully human. Surely we are not asking too much when we ask that everyone be given the opportunity to acquire the tools of control and expression which society expects of them'.[28]

This was a radical perspective; one that, on the face of it, might not be expected to be relevant to an organisation tasked with tackling adult literacy problems. But at this juncture NALA was, as one past board member noted, 'perceived as a movement, part of an international one'. The influence of figures such as Freire was obvious, and from a very early stage NALA forged links with similar organisations throughout Europe, many of which faced similar problems and were also 'unstructured and underfunded'.[29]

Many members, most of whom were involved in adult literacy education at a local level (both as tutors and as students), interpreted it as an issue of social justice: adults with literacy problems were seen as victims of an unjust educational system and, by extension, an unjust society. This radical analysis pointed the blame directly at the state and emphasised that literacy problems were nothing for a potential student to feel ashamed of. One literacy student, who later became a tutor and was involved in NALA at board level, described the difficulties in overcoming his own sense of shame, even after his realisation of the injustices in the education system:

> **Now you must remember, I came up at a time inside in school where corporal punishment would have been the mild option. Where bullying, physical and mental … beatings was a daily occurrence. Going to school was a fear. [It was] a normal thing to happen. So you still had that feeling of authority if anything else. … But then you realise very quickly, you didn't fail, you didn't fail. It was the system. But you were still embarrassed. You were ashamed.**

Within this recollection are a range of issues that might not be obviously associated with literacy difficulties, but which cannot be divorced from them. Hence the importance of the egalitarian attitudes held by many early members of NALA. These were especially relevant given that some adult learners had encountered very different attitudes within the field of adult literacy provision. In the testimony of one student in 1987 the 'charitable' approach to adult literacy was an unwelcome reality:

> **Some tutors humiliate students by treating them like children. But because most tutors are volunteers, it is more difficult to approach them on this issue. Adult literacy work is still seen as a charity, and most students don't feel that they can criticise what they are getting. Tutors may also be from a different social class and may not be sensitive to the day-to-day realities of life in a working class area. Tutors seem to form cliques among themselves, which shuts them off from any criticism of their work.**[30]

NALA's establishment seemed to mark a departure from this, and involved an ideological shift that reflected developments on an international level. As one former staff member noted:

> **In NALA there was this feeling of moving it away from 'poor people haven't got literacy, we'll teach them' to where people should have their own voice, and that it was an injustice.**

As time passed, those who did not share a more holistic and egalitarian view of adult literacy became less involved in the organisation; sometimes very deliberately: 'In the early days there were some people who weren't in favour of seeing [adult literacy] as a right. But I think early on, they were kind of pushed to the side.'

The wider and more ideologically driven approach to literacy was forcefully restated on International Literacy Day in 1984 by Noel Dalton, the then chairperson. He stressed that the problem needed to be defined as more than simply a lack of skills, which was the symptom rather than the cause:

> **[The] present philosophy of education which underpins our literacy provision is one where education is seen as a privilege and not a right, the student is seen as a passive participant with narrow specific needs, the right of continuing education is very limited and, the teaching approach reflects the methods of the formal school.**[31]

Dalton was fiercely critical of the educational system: an international literacy conference to be held in Dublin in 1985 was slammed as 'a conference of teachers for teachers which does not address itself to the fundamental issue of the failure of school as an institution'.[32] An approach to adult literacy that viewed it as a social problem, rooted in the social disadvantage that continued to permeate Irish society, would be a fundamental plank of NALA's position throughout the 1980s.

Not all NALA members would have shared this view, but the broadly egalitarian impulse was strongly present, and manifested itself in the organisation's work. And NALA was not alone in recognising the broader implications of what it was doing. In September 1987, on International Literacy Day, a presentation by Hugh Frazer, the director of the Combat

Poverty Agency made a similar case for poverty and literacy being 'two sides to the same coin'. He argued that they had similar impacts on people: powerlessness; inequality and injustice; feelings of rejection and inadequacy; a sense of hopelessness and failure; social stigma; marginalisation, low health and low self-esteem.[33] Such deprivations went hand in hand.

'To be literate is to be fully human': a student-centred approach

The obvious consequence of this analysis was the view that literacy could transform the personal lives of learners. It was not just about the acquisition of technical skills such as reading, writing and numeracy: literacy had emotional and personal dimensions. This approach acknowledged the devastating effect that the formal education system had on adult literacy students in the past.[34] It also reflected an awareness that literacy could open up emotional and personal potential: learning the skills of reading and writing had significant consequences for students' lives. A board member noted, 'It's not only literacy, it's confidence, your self-esteem. There's a huge combination, they're all linked together'. And an adult literacy tutor recalled that before literacy could be addressed, there were often other issues to contend with:

> **Our scheme and quite a few others used to run Personal Development classes either alongside literacy or before people ever went to literacy … Because quite often people came with such negatives … which actually stopped them learning.**

Another key point was the equal status of students and tutors: as one early board member noted, 'the radical aspect of adult literacy teaching was that the teacher was a learner and changer as well [as the student]'.

This broad approach was reflected in the NALA constitution, as revised in 1984. Now, the aim of the organisation was: 'To advance the means of promoting adult literacy in Ireland, where literacy is taken as an integral part of adult basic education and adult continuing education.'

Its specific objectives were to:

» promote the interests of all participants in adult literacy activities;
» promote research into the nature and extent of adult literacy in Ireland;
» create an awareness of the literacy problems faced by adults, and of the literacy services available locally, nationally, and internationally;
» counter prejudice against adults with literacy difficulties;
» establish a full-time secretariat to act as a National Referral Centre and a clearing house of ideas and information;
» encourage and facilitate co-operation between literacy schemes in Ireland;
» provide a forum for literacy workers and students;
» represent the views and interests of literacy students and workers to government departments and other official agencies;
» advise on acceptable standards of organisation and practice in literacy work in Ireland;
» remove attitudes and practices that demean the learner in recruitment, publicity, assessment or teaching related to adult literacy.[35]

The holistic approach suggested by this received concrete expression in 1985, with the publication of the first NALA policy document: *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work*. This publication was perhaps the most important step taken by the agency in this period. For the first time, it set out NALA's ethos and its supporting philosophy in considerable depth, while at the same time showing how these principles should be put into action.

As noted earlier, the voluntary literacy movement brought with it a wide range of skills and experience. This was the basis for the guidelines, which were effectively NALA's literacy methodology; as such, it also represented the first attempt of the agency to articulate in writing its ethos and aims. It rested on the core assumptions that 'adult learners are active participants'; that they were 'contributors as well as beneficiaries who have skills, knowledge and services to offer in the work of adult literacy generally and in other areas'; that adult literacy learning was 'an active and not a passive experience, expressive as well as receptive' and, crucially, that it 'relates to the development of the whole person and is not restricted solely to the improving of reading and writing skills'.[36]

Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work represented a philosophy of education that had its roots in the Freirean approach to literacy as a question of social justice. While this approach was already clear from the work and focus of NALA, for the first time it was embodied in an official policy document. As one former staff member pointed out, 'in terms of philosophy, it's all there'; while a former board member described it as, 'quite a radical document for its time and even now, because it defined literacy not as a skills problem, it defined it as a holistic problem that affected the whole person.'

The guidelines also outlined a practical set of approaches to facilitating this:

> **Adult literacy provision is based on an adult philosophy of education, which has fundamental implications for the modes of organisation developed, the range of services offered, the qualities demanded of tutors, the materials and facilities used, and the nature of the learning practices employed.[37]**

The publication of the guidelines represented a significant step in a long journey towards creating quality standards for adult literacy provision throughout the country. Tutors and learners could identify principles of learning from the guidelines, where NALA encouraged tutors to base their work on the adult learners' experiences. They highlighted that school textbooks were inappropriate when working with adults, both because they were childish and because learners had often had very negative school experiences. Instead, they encouraged tutors to use the students' own words as texts, a radical departure from the methods used within the formal education system and much more relevant to the needs, knowledge and experience of adult learners. One adult literacy practitioner described it as follows:

> **For example, in the language experience approach, the person spoke and you wrote down their words exactly as they said it … So that was all the social justice approach to hearing people, letting them say, have their voice, publishing their material.**

The right to be read was increasingly seen as being just as important as the right to read; this would remain a fundamental component of NALA's approach. Student writings had always been incorporated into NALA's newsletters, but the publication of Ernie Sweeney's *Did you know?* (1984) was, in hindsight, a landmark. Sweeney was heavily involved in literacy schemes in Co. Mayo and he later became formally involved in NALA. His book was an account of his own efforts to learn to read and write, and marked the beginning of an extensive programme to publish writings by students that NALA took on in the years ahead.

When NALA was first established, almost all literacy tuition in Ireland was organised on a one-to-one basis. This did little to overcome the considerable social stigma associated with literacy difficulties. NALA began to tackle this during the 1980s by organising residential writing weekends for students, at which resource materials based on the work of the students themselves could be developed in a collaborative environment (many of these texts were later used in adult literacy resource books). Former staff members spoke how important this work was in addressing the stigma associated with literacy difficulties; it helped to break down a very significant barrier.

> **We organised the first writing weekend, for adults to learn together. That doesn't sound like much now but at the time it was very much done one-to-one, in secret, you know …**
>
> **This was a big push to encourage students to come away for a weekend, and during that to do some writing … It brought people together … breaking down the stigma and the barriers by getting together. You could meet each other from different parts of the country. The end product of it all would be Irish materials. Because we still had almost no Irish materials … Sometimes the students would get the confidence to come onto a committee, to speak their opinions, where beforehand they would have felt their feelings didn't count. So there was all sorts of confidence building going on as well.**

These were concrete examples of a student-centred approach. Not only did NALA advocate this in learning contexts, it also proactively sought out students to become directly involved in the development and operation of NALA itself; the progression was a logical one. As early as 1980 literacy students had been represented on the executive committee and the democratic nature of the organisation ensured that the annual meetings became places where students and other members could, and did, voice concerns regarding adult literacy provision throughout the country. As one former student who sat on NALA's executive committee in the 1980s pointed out, 'Fair dues to NALA, I wasn't put there as a token. I was given an equal voice.'

'The Cinderella of education': a solution-focused approach

> **'Literacy was the Cinderella of education so you got the last, small room with the beastly old gas heater.'**

The theoretical perspectives that underpinned NALA's approach to its role were meant to have practical outcomes. A past board member recalled that:

> **Though there were tensions about the underlying 'philosophy' of adult literacy, there was always a strong focus on the practicalities and difficulties of tuition, training and resources. The development of an approach to literacy work was necessary because none existed at the time in Ireland.**

Campaigning and lobbying for recognition and funding were the most obvious official manifestations of NALA's existence, but the organisation also sought to train and support tutors throughout the country. This support was welcome, as tutors were often struggling in an isolated working environment:

> **There's a sort of survival element as well in that when you're working by yourself in freelance, you know, in isolation, I did also cling to NALA very much as a place to help me, to support me in the work.**

The other vital aspect of NALA's practical work was to seek increased funding for local VEC adult literacy services, through campaigning and lobbying. Thus, campaigning and training were ultimately two sides of the same coin; one could not exist without the other. As one staff (and later board) member noted, 'My memory is of endlessly trying to get funding, trying to get recognition, trying to get the government to agree to put money into this'.

Offering a critique of educational policy had been a fundamental purpose of NALA since its inception. At the 1982 AGM John Kennedy argued that it was significant that responsibility for literacy provision rested on volunteers, when it should be the province of those 'who have the duty to provide adult education'. Resolutions were put forward at the same AGM to use International Literacy Day to 'highlight the glaring deficiencies in adult literacy provision in Ireland' in order to 'expose the grossly inadequate state financing of adult literacy' and ultimately, to 'mobilise public support to remedy the situation'[38].

But the day to day focus of NALA was generally on the more practical roles of training and campaigning for awareness and funding. One former board member questioned the value of this, and whether they had in fact gone far enough:

> **I wonder now if that was the best approach. Should NALA have attacked the system instead? We did criticise. We asked why so many people had been failed by the system. But we left it at that. The focus was on the solution rather than attacking the problem.**

Funding and expansion

In 1984 the Department of Education officially acknowledged that adult literacy provision was an issue requiring attention.[39] They also recognised the role of NALA in tackling it. These important developments were followed by the Department giving the agency a grant-in-aid of £10,000. It was NALA's first official funding and while the amount seems relatively small, its significance was not to be underestimated, and it was greeted with delight (and some surprise) – it meant that for the first time, the government was admitting there was a problem. Immediately after

receiving the grant, NALA began a co-ordinated expansion of its activities, under the auspices of a new executive committee. Working groups were established to target the development of policies and guidelines, of recruitment and services provision, of publishing and, above all, of publicity.

In 1985, a larger grant of £42,000 was provided by the Department of Education, which enabled the establishment of a national office (at this stage in rooms provided by AONTAS), the employment of a small team of staff, and the creation of a dedicated 'resource room'. This was a very significant development for the organisation which could now considerably build its role 'both nationally and locally, seeking to provide a focus for all sectors of adult literacy work'.[40]

At a meeting to mark International Literacy Day in 1985, priorities were set out as: student involvement; increased access to good quality materials for adult literacy work; group support; training and the continuation of NALA's campaigning and lobbying role.[41] During 1986, NALA worked with 'local groups and schemes', in Monaghan, Cavan, Westmeath, Tallaght, Wicklow, Kildare, Laois/Offaly, Carlow, Tipperary, Waterford, Cork, Limerick, Clare, Kerry, Roscommon, Longford.[42]

On a national level, NALA was now in a position to engage with the fact that, for the first time, the Department of Education had issued a discussion document on adult literacy: the problem was increasingly being accepted at an official level. The government had also further acknowledged the issue by introducing the first Community and Adult Education Budget and committing £1,000,000 to fund literacy programmes from 1985 to 1987.[43] Consequently, 1986 was seen as 'a year of consolidation'.[44]

In 1987 a further reflection of NALA's expanding role was that they received a further grant from the Department of Education to carry out a research project into adult literacy services in rural areas, using Co. Offaly as a case study. Literacy services in rural areas faced particular problems: the infrastructure of provision was less concentrated and therefore more difficult to access, and the sense of social stigma that went hand in hand with literacy problems seemed more pronounced in rural areas. The process of researching the project – almost exclusively through interviews – was seen to have aided literacy services in Offaly by listening to learners

and providing an opportunity for those involved in adult literacy to reflect on what they were doing and on how they might see it improved. The lessons to be learned from this could have a wider application.[45]

But perhaps the most concrete development in relation to NALA's evolution in the 1980s came in 1987, when the office and resource room moved to Gardiner Place, in Dublin's historically deprived north inner city. This was seen as a significant step in the formation of NALA's own identity, as distinct from that of AONTAS:

> **It gave us freedom. You … felt you were breathing your air. It was absolutely significant in forming our own identity. And for AONTAS too. I suppose that move was saying, we are answering separate needs.**

An ethos made practical

As soon as NALA opened its own office, support for tutors and organisers was augmented by the provision of a resource room which was open to anyone involved in adult literacy throughout the country. The availability of resources and staff support helped literacy work on a practical level and especially made tangible the concept of student-centred approaches, as one literacy practitioner explains:

> **The resource room was like a shrine actually. … It was this tiny little room with, you know, three bookstands I think. … I think what it was doing was, when people went in there [it] was affirming their practice. You know, there was a real affirmation in that resource room because the way the materials were created, the types of materials that were created, and the way in which they were used were all affirming a practice that people were grappling towards: 'Look, we're doing the right thing.'**
>
> **You were working that much on your own beforehand, to actually see the resource books and the resource room itself was [great]. … And then to bring on your thinking as well. … People love things being concretised, so all the talk about student-centred and adult friendly and going at the student's**

pace and empowering people, suddenly there's a material that embodies all of these abstract ideas, you know? And so I think that was why people loved the resource room.

Many of those who had cause to use it spoke highly of the support provided by staff in this context. It was noted that being treated with respect by the staff was all the more valued when working in a field such as adult literacy, which had so little value placed on it by the rest of society. As one staff member at the time noted:

The resource room was really important. And a lot of informal training went on when people came in to use resources … There was a lot of training.

The NALA resource room became a crucial hub for both learners and tutors.

Surviving cutbacks

The Fine Gael-Labour government of 1982 to 1987 had been in power in the midst of a crippling recession and were unable to grapple fully with the disastrous condition of Ireland's public finances. The 1987 election saw them replaced by a Fianna Fail government that implemented even more severe spending cuts. NALA's grant in aid from the Department of Education was reduced dramatically by 33%, from £41,500 in 1986 to £28,000 in 1987.

The AGM of March 1987 fastened upon continued lobbying for resources as a key objective. The same was true of the AGM of 27 February 1988, which resulted in the creation of a specific 'campaigning and lobbying group, active on a national basis'. But this was done shrewdly: an information sheet issued in October 1987 was exclusively directed at Fianna Fail TDs, in order to put pressure on the government. It stated that 'regional development projects', 'training in adult literacy work', and 'publishing of adult literacy material' had been postponed due to 'the 1987 cut in grant-aid'.

It was a time of instability and uncertainty for staff and members of NALA, as the progress made in the early part of the decade seemed to stall. The majority of plans for the forthcoming year were shelved due

1980 –2010

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Mary Maher, NALA chairperson 1999-2003 and Michael Toomey, NALA chairperson 1996-1999 at Áras an Uachtaráin.

to cutbacks in virtually all aspects of its activities: student bursaries, publications, publicity, and training. Even the possibility of disbanding the organisation was broached, but this could not be seriously considered. As a staff member from the time explained:

> **In those times … I was quite a free bird. … We weren't devastated. … Everywhere was being cut so it wasn't a big surprise. It was like now, except there was less fat at the time. There was nothing.**

NALA survived. But the sad irony was that while NALA's ability to tackle literacy problems was being diminished, cutbacks ensured that the problems would remain. In 1987, NALA tried to find alternative sources of funding to carry on its work, lobbying the Ireland Fund, the National Lottery, the Carnegie Fund, and the European Economic Community (EEC), amongst others. These efforts, however, were not immediately successful and the Department of Education confirmed that there would be no increase in the grant that they provided.[46] NALA's funding from the government was to remain at this reduced level for the next few years.

A reflective approach

During this first phase of NALA's existence, those involved in the fledgling organisation frequently questioned its role and purpose, and accepted that it was open to change. In the words of a past board member: 'You must remember NALA was on a learning curve … they were small and they made mistakes.' And mistakes were there to be learnt from:

> **At the heart of good personalised, liberating education is a self-critical faculty, a critical awareness. The core of Freirean adult education – that an organisational self-critical faculty is essential. Reflect, reflect, reflect, into action, reflecting back.**

In November 1986 an extensive discussion document on the future role of NALA had posed a number of key questions: while NALA was the only national co-ordinating group for adult literacy, could it co-ordinate it all? Were they an advisory body, or should they be monitoring standards also? The conclusions were that NALA should be a body with both an advisory and a funding role and that it was a 'development body to

promote experimentation and change'. The same document also raised the perceived need for open discussion 'to hear things even if we don't like hearing them. NALA needs to look at the way we hold meetings to avoid the notion of it becoming a two tiered organisation'.[47]

NALA in the 1980s was a work in progress in a very new field. It had attempted to address a number of intertwined problems: the failure of society to acknowledge adult literacy difficulties; the reasons for this failure; and the dearth of teaching resources that this denial had created. Receiving a grant from the government was an important milestone, but most of its achievements during this period are largely attributable to the genuine commitment of its members and their shared belief that a more equitable society was not merely desirable, but also achievable. The continuation of such a commitment became all the more important towards the end of the 1980s, as the window for funding that had been prised open so slowly seemed to slam shut once again.

Chapter 3

Everything mushroomed: NALA 1988 to 1997

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A growing membership, a growing need

The late 1980s and 1990s continued to see substantial increases in both the number of NALA members and the number of people contacting local literacy services. It seems reasonable to think that the very existence of NALA and the provision of something resembling a coherent national service encouraged learners to come forward who may not otherwise have done so. The composition of the AGMs in this period seemed to reflect this:

> **The Annual General Meeting … was in the little building in town. It was only a small little room at the time. … And the meetings then began to get bigger and bigger and bigger. … And the amount of people … It used to be in Liberty Hall. … It just, it seemed to mushroom!**

Such growth could be seen as a vindication of NALA's work in raising awareness of adult literacy. But it was obliged to do so against the backdrop of the social and economic reality of Irish life in the 1980s, with high levels of unemployment, poverty and emigration. This was the context for the efforts to have NALA's funding reinstated and meant that lobbying would have to continue, in order to facilitate the on-going work at both national and local level.[48]

Perhaps against the odds, the late 1980s and early 1990s was recalled as a very busy and fruitful period. As one board member from this time noted:

> **There was so little, we were building up the work and the structures and we were trying to increase the service provision, you know, but it was a huge amount of work.**

Training and support work had to be curtailed, and some initiatives had to be abandoned. But NALA had, to a certain extent, come in from the cold: in November 1987 it had been invited to submit to on on-going review

of the primary school curriculum[49] and was now part of the educational landscape, if not the educational establishment. As a result its lobbying efforts carried weight.

A crucial symbolic gesture was that in 1990 President Patrick Hillery became the patron of the organisation, a role that would also be adopted by his successors. At a more immediately tangible level, NALA had managed to offset the new gap in its finances by securing some funding from non-state sources. By maintaining the resource room on Gardiner Street and by continuing their programme of student publications, the agency remained vibrant.

A testament to its continued activities in this period is the fact that it continued to develop its approaches to adult literacy provision and a second, revised edition of the *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* was published in 1991. It also began to expand its scope: NALA began to consider more extensive use of print media and the development of more formal training and accreditation. While its activities had been curtailed, they had by no means stopped developing.

Increasing recognition of adult literacy in policy and service planning

In 1992, the Department of Education produced a green paper entitled, 'Education for a Changing World'. For the first time, this policy document included a specific section on adult education, complete with proposals and recommendations for the future development of the sector. As a result adult literacy began to appear on political and policy agendas in the broader context of lifelong learning, adult education and training. The year 1996 was the European Year of Lifelong Learning, in which key principles were recognised: that all citizens should have access to learning, and learning should be encouraged and supported throughout life.

Growing government recognition also became reflected in its funding of the sector. The introduction of the Community and Adult Education Budget in 1985 was considered an important recognition of the role of the community-based literacy schemes in tackling the literacy problem. In

1990, International Adult Literacy Year, it was renamed the Adult Literacy and Community Education Budget, with a higher priority being given to literacy work, and Adult Education Boards were established.

In the same year, as a result of the new social partnership process for policymaking, the social partners and the government drew up a programme for social and economic progress. This was aimed primarily at addressing the ruinous condition of Ireland's finances at the end of the 1980s, along with their social consequences. It contained a specific commitment to tackling adult literacy, and provided for resources to adult literacy programmes. The Department of Education set up a consultative group of specialists from all areas of adult education and training, with the aim of promoting better exchanges of information and more co-ordinated activities in these areas.

A long term result was that by 1997, approximately 110 adult literacy schemes were receiving government funding through the VECs. NALA had, from the outset, worked alongside VECs in order to promote their ethos and guidelines in adult literacy provision, though they had also sought to promote the autonomy of local schemes. But attitudes towards the role of NALA and its approach to adult literacy varied within the VECs; it was, as one former staff member put it, 'a balancing act':

> **The local schemes came through the VEC so they were technically the providers. We were encouraging them to buy into our events and to become members. So it was a balancing act and it would have varied. … Some of the AEOs were vibrant and enthusiastic. I worked with very positive people in the VECs. There was a number of them who were pointing in the same direction as where NALA was going. And I worked very closely with them.**

The relationship between NALA and VECs has been lively and at times complicated, but led to a very productive partnership in terms of the growth, professionalism and vitality of adult literacy work in Ireland, at both national and local level. Past and current board members emphasised that NALA was essential to the effective development of local literacy services, through:

» its campaigning;
» training and development work with practitioners;
» its role in promoting innovative approaches, and by
» continually raising the profile of adult literacy work.

A past chair of NALA also noted that:

> **NALA challenged not just the Department of Education but also the VECs … In time, it was the heavy involvement of the VECs in adult literacy work that gave the Department of Education the structure and the impetus to provide funding and development and this locally responsive service had the confidence of the financial and policy shapers that purely voluntary organisation would not have had.**

Developments in service planning also had a significant impact on the nature and focus of NALA's work during the early and mid-1990s. In this period, one of the biggest issues for the organisation was that of professionalising a service traditionally provided in a voluntary capacity, by developing an accreditation system for voluntary tutors.

Professionalising adult literacy work: tutor accreditation

As adult literacy provision was formally brought into VEC evening course programmes, concerns arose among tutors and members that their significant expertise and experience in the field would not be acknowledged without accreditation. This was a serious issue: a total of 26 years after the Murphy report gave official recognition of an adult literacy problem in Ireland, in 1973, 85% of adult literacy provision in Ireland was still provided by volunteers. This had led to a perception that adult literacy work was the province of amateurs; a perception that members of NALA understandably felt strongly about:

> **We wanted to be taken seriously … we had a methodology, we had a practice, and people got frustrated that they weren't taken seriously … by other professionals. [There was**

a perception that] this was a "do-gooder" movement … I think that actually was what motivated … the move to get qualifications for people.

The move towards professionalising the service was a logical progression. On a practical level it also served to protect, and give credibility to, the teaching methodologies that NALA had developed, as reflected in its *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work*; the learners remained at the centre of NALA's approach. NALA's publications on tutor training in adult literacy[50] had also ensured that innovative, student-centred teaching approaches became accepted in adult literacy work. Indeed, the work of NALA in the 1990s remained grounded in the pioneering model of education that had emerged from the community and voluntary sector:

The ethos was not a business management approach to the organisation. It was very much an ethos coming from the voluntary sector, from community-based education. [It was] about partnership and collaboration.

But developing an accreditation system, which was also favoured by the Department of Education, was not a straightforward process. A debate arose amongst NALA's members as to whether it would create a divide between paid tutors and those working in a voluntary capacity. Some practitioners, for example, raised concerns about the criteria that would be used to evaluate the effectiveness of literacy programmes. They also voiced concerns about the professional future of tutors with no formal teaching qualifications: were they to be side-lined, regardless of their proven experience and ability?

A number of stakeholders were consulted about these issues, primarily policy makers in the Department of Education, the Vocational Education Committees and voluntary organisations. In the end, a broad consensus was reached regarding the nature of this accreditation process, as a former Director of NALA, Geraldine Mernagh noted:

That's one achievement we can be very proud of, that we got consensus, we got some kind of agreement from the VECs, the Department of Education, the Adult Literacy Organisers,

the Adult Education Organisers, the tutors. They all came on board to develop and implement the degree programme. We worked with all of those groups of individuals.

Following this consultation, a series of professional, accredited, higher education programmes for training for adult literacy work were developed. Initially, from 1992, courses were hosted in St Patrick's College, Maynooth, with funding made available through the Programme for Economic and Social Partnership. Later in the decade, NALA worked with the Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT), leading to the establishment of the NALA - WIT Accreditation Project in 1997. This was a partnership between the Department of Adult and Continuing Education in WIT and NALA. The aim was to support the adult literacy sector in Ireland by providing recognised higher education qualifications for adult literacy educators. In doing so it would help to develop a model of good practice in the accreditation of adult literacy practitioners and to give it formal recognition within the emerging National Framework of Qualifications.

The NALA - WIT programme, based in the Literacy Development Centre in WIT, continues to provide adult literacy practitioners with a suite of accredited courses leading to a degree programme. Between 1997 and 2010 there were over 300 graduates of full award programmes and over 2,000 people completed single modules.

Further awareness raising

During the 1990s, NALA initiated events which were aimed at raising awareness on adult literacy to a higher level. The fact that the patron of the organisation was the Irish president, proved to be of enormous benefit to adult learners, and to NALA:

The patron idea was a new approach. It gave tutors and students a huge lift. A sense of being valued.

Patrick Hillery's successor as president, Mary Robinson, was credited during her tenure with reaching out to a wide range of marginalised groups in Irish society. Consequently, her involvement in NALA was seen as tremendously important: the very people whom NALA sought to support often came from those same marginalised communities.

Her participation, we can't measure [its impact] properly. … We can't quantify it. … The very fact that the President of Ireland was coming to a group who was teaching literacy, a community group ... And [that] she spoke about it was an admittance of the fact, the fact that literacy [difficulties] existed, did exist.

Even aside from the symbolism, there were very tangible benefits:

At the time, it created an aura. She was incredible with the students, more than a celebrity. At local level, she talked about women in Ireland. The number of people who presented after that, who said, 'it's all about me now. I'm going to make changes for me too' [was high]. She was incredible, inspiring.

[We went from] … being a very small kind of insignificant issue in society by trying to associate it with big power brokers and big players. … We were trying to get society to see this as part, everybody's concern. This was to do with everybody, not just the Department of Education at all.

International Literacy Day (ILD) in 1994 involved a powerful and vibrant dramatic presentation of the meaning of literacy. Robinson played a key role in this event, as did its location: the Mansion House in Dublin. This was a very deliberate attempt to make the point that adult literacy was as worthy of a high profile location as any other issue or cause; it was not something be left on the margins of society.

This decision met with a mixed response and the staff of NALA received a number of complaints from its members. Most came from tutors who felt it was inappropriate, and perhaps insensitive, to place adult literacy students into such a public environment. But the event was deemed a success, both by members and staff. In each subsequent year, International Literacy Day took place in a high profile venue. It was this success that also led to International Literacy Day being expanded into International Literacy Week, whereby events were organised throughout the country.

The 1990s also saw on-going efforts to raise public awareness of adult literacy problems via the media. But a recurring problem was that, while NALA staff were keen to use the media to highlight how literacy issues were usually the consequence of social injustice, they found that media outlets were often more interested in 'the human story':

> **We were trying to ask serious questions about how privilege and wealth is distributed in society and educational opportunity. But the media wasn't terribly interested in that. … These messages were very difficult to get through the media because they really wanted the human history.**

However, this could be turned to the organisation's advantage. NALA made a point of involving students in its appearances on media outlets, such as on RTÉ TV, and the impact was clear:

> **If you had a tutor or an organiser or anyone from NALA, they said, 'Oh yeah' … But when a student got up and told how it was for them, everyone sat up, and they rang in.**

During the 1990s NALA also began to organise Literacy Awareness Training for a range of organisations, to further develop understanding of adult literacy issues and the way organisations could make it easier for adults with literacy difficulties to deal with them: in the words of one past staff member, 'to sow a seed of awareness'.

Students were involved in the provision of this training:

> **We did a lot of awareness-raising … [with] the librarians … to see if there were books, or [what they did] to encourage people in, was it friendly or was it not? … And people in the civil service, you know, people behind the grille where you go for the dole offices and all those sorts of people. Even FÁS training offices … and a lot of other places that deal with the public. …**
>
> **So we did a lot of awareness training with those groups of people. … When it was training officers, you could see they thought, 'What the hell are we [doing], spending a half**

day sitting here learning this?' … And we had a couple of students, very good students, more than a couple, and you could just feel it, you could hear a pin drop, as soon as one or the other would start talking.

Official recognition grows

NALA had always liaised with like-minded organisations across Europe. In the 1990s it began to actively represent adult literacy provision in Ireland at a European level by joining a European network on adult literacy;[51] consequently, staff, students and board members attended the associated events and conferences. Indeed, staff members from this period described how Ireland was perceived by other countries as being a forerunner in the field of adult literacy. Its credibility in this regard was also reflected at a national level, as the Department of Education began to fund NALA's attendance at these European and international events.

The willingness to fund NALA's activities at European level was not the only example of how the Irish government was now prepared to work with the agency. The 1990s saw an increasing level of liaison between NALA and the Department of Education. This had the twofold aim of creating an impact on policy making in the field of adult education and increasing the level of funding provided to adult literacy provision. There was an opportunity to be seized here:

I think we saw a small timeframe in which we could grab the attention of the policy makers and the funders to put this on a more premier setting from the early 1990s, and that if we didn't get that opportunity, it was going to go away again and we would lose it.

The approach succeeded. Over the years, a strong and mutually beneficial relationship emerged between the two bodies. Working relationships with civil servants in the Department went from being very formal, to informal and supportive. This led to progress for the organisation, both in terms of accessing funding and recognition of the work carried out by the adult literacy sector. Moreover, many of those

involved at the time felt there was a genuine commitment at government level to addressing adult literacy, as well as a respect for the student-centred teaching methodology that had developed:

> **I think there was a commitment [at government level] to fund literacy. And there was a commitment to really try and advance the service, both increase the numbers participating and also offer more opportunities for people. There genuinely was that commitment. …**
>
> **I suppose the difficulty is getting that balance right because sometimes by working too close to the Department it can compromise a movement that had the student needs at heart. We were really committed to what the students wanted. But I think when you had people and you could work with them, I think the Department were open to listening to the way literacy worked on the ground. And I felt they didn't impose too much structure. There was an understanding, a commitment to support the work.**

Others, however, feared that this closer relationship with the Department would threaten the independence of NALA. There were concerns that the organisation's student-centred ethos would be compromised, and from the mid-1990s onwards, another debate arose regarding NALA's evolution: was it still a movement, or had it become a government funded service? Was it moving away from its grassroots origins?

Movement or service?

The reasons behind this were understandable: it was prompted by concerns about whether or not NALA could maintain its integrity when its funding was provided by the very educational system which had systematically failed adult literacy learners for generations. After all, in 1989 the then chair, Noel Dalton, had stated that NALA's achievement had taken place 'almost in spite of the educational establishment'.[52] But as one past board member noted, 'if your paymaster is the Department [of Education], your ability to criticise government [education] policy is extremely weakened'.

NALA's campaigning focus in its early years was to gain recognition and funding, both for the adult literacy issue and for itself as an organisation. Now this was being achieved, questions arose about the impact funding might have. Such an organisation was bound to raise questions, about itself as well as about the issues that concerned it and these questions were a sign of the members' interest in how the agency developed.

Concerns over NALA's identity were not just prompted by its growing relationship with the government. Another important factor was the increasing professionalisation of the organisation. As it expanded, the executive board came to the conclusion that greater autonomy should be afforded to the staff of NALA. This was described as a gradual process:

> **You'd set up a subgroup on, whatever it was, sponsorship. And this … would be members of the subcommittee, or the members of the board, rather. Usually, we'd have a member of staff in that. So the staff would actually deal with it on a daily basis. So the reality slowly sank in that the staff had been at the coalface and they had to have more authority.**

But others recognised that this move had very clear implications:

> **It was the beginning of edging it towards professionalisation and away from that sense of complete ownership by the members. Because we started to see the things we need to make decisions about. You can't ask 600 people every time you do anything. … You did start realising that … there were areas that could be led by the movement … but the staff had to be allowed to have professional judgement.**

The number of staff employed to work for NALA also began to increase and this development was reflected in the move, in January 1992, to larger premises at 76 Lower Gardiner Street. During this period, NALA's staff began to receive permanent contracts and pension arrangements: a definite sign of professionalisation. The executive committee became less involved in the day to day running of events:

There were staff there when I was on the board so certainly the staff did all the day-to-day work. But I would imagine before my time the board were very involved in the money and fundraising and the day-to-day of organising the International Literacy Day.

These developments were not without critics. Tensions around these issues were exemplified by some members' reactions to the executive decision to change the title of the head of the organisation from 'National Organiser' to 'Director'. The rationale was that this change would improve the status and credibility of the organisation in its dealings with officialdom. On the other hand, some members felt that it indicated a move away from the grassroots origins of NALA:

Was literacy a movement or was it a service? If it was a service, you have a director at the top of it. If it's a movement, you have a co-ordinator. So that was a bloody battle.

There was also a sense of trying to steer a middle path:

Everybody had to be convinced, and you were working with opposites, at the time you were trying to get credibility [in the] mainstream and in professionalisation, while on the other hand, remaining true to the kind of the grassroots, the social justice, the partnership, the collaboration.

Concerns about the implications of such moves also came from the grassroots. As early as November 1994, the Cork-based group 'Write Together' raised questions about the focus and location of NALA in Dublin, the potential dangers of an overly professional, or careerist approach. They too emphasised the importance of a student-centred focus, especially in the light of on-going moves towards accreditation.[53]

One person interviewed for this history described how members of NALA sometimes blamed the organisation, unfairly in her view, for difficulties that they had experienced within the VECs. This was seen to have been caused by a misunderstanding of NALA's role and level of authority, which suggested that the members themselves were often unclear about the role of the organisation:

I felt NALA in some ways were responsible with no authority, in a sense that what happened on the ground was really to do with a lot of the VECs. … If things didn't happen, it was NALA's fault … [when] in fact some of what was going on was probably to do with their own VEC. … 'What's NALA doing?' But sure, what could NALA do? They weren't a service provider. They could only try and lobby and campaign at the national level.

Throughout these on-going debates and challenges, NALA continued to raise awareness of adult literacy in Ireland, to lobby politicians to address the issue, and to seek to promote best practice in adult literacy provision. By 1997, it had made significant inroads into promoting public and governmental awareness of the issue of adult literacy. The year 1997, however, was to bring further developments both inside and outside NALA that were to have longstanding and far-reaching implications for the agency.

Chapter 4

Expansion and consolidation: NALA 1997 to 2010

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The organisation has produced an awful lot of really good stuff over the years, in terms of support and resources and training. It's amazing really, when you think of it. And when the big funding came in, in 1997, that really made a huge difference …

It transformed it.

Years of growth: 1997 to 2007

From 1997 onwards, adult literacy provision in Ireland expanded significantly, and NALA changed with it. While the broad strategy of the organisation remained unchanged, and continued to focus on raising awareness of adult literacy difficulties and lobbying for support, NALA's remit was to grow substantially. In 1999 NALA published its first strategic plan, following an extensive process of consultation and discussion with the membership. In the plan NALA defined its mission:

To ensure all adults with reading and writing difficulties have access to high quality literacy provision.

Its organisational aims were:

» to raise public awareness about literacy issues,
» to secure adequate resourcing of adult literacy work, and
» to develop and support high quality adult literacy provision'.[54]

Broadly speaking, there was little new in such statements; they were consistent with the objectives that NALA had formulated from the early 1980s onwards. But the context in which they were stated had changed beyond recognition. Since its inception, NALA had struggled with the challenge of developing its services while being hamstrung by a lack of resources and slow official recognition of the problems that it sought

to resolve. Its first strategic plan reflected the fact that, with the major economic development of the 1990s, NALA was now in a position to obtain the resources that it needed.

Underpinning the plan were ambitious objectives for a renewed emphasis on research and innovation, on publicity and communication, on training, and on a greater engagement with state bodies and other interested parties with a stake in adult literacy provision. NALA was now working with the new realities of a society undergoing a rapid transformation. The nature of that transformation ensured that it was in a stronger position to fulfil many of its objectives. The decisive year in facilitating these changes was 1997.

1997 as a watershed

1997 saw the election of a centre-right coalition government, comprised of Fianna Fáil and the now defunct Progressive Democrats. It also saw the publication of the Irish results of the International Adult Literacy Survey which was conducted under the auspices of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and carried out in Ireland by the Educational Research Centre (ERC). It authoritatively 'confirmed the extent of the adult literacy problem in Ireland: 1 in 4 adults with very low levels of basic skills, and a further 30% with below average literacy skills'.[55]

This could not be ignored. Here was a major study from a respected international body, of adult literacy levels in sixteen countries, in which Ireland was in fifteenth place, second last to Poland. The findings were met with understandable shock on the part of Ireland's political establishment[56] and, embarrassing as they were, also garnered a great deal of media attention. The OECD findings were later credited with prompting a dramatic increase in the new government's commitment to tackling adult literacy, reflected in both increased levels of funding and in policy developments.[57]

The OECD report was not the only source of information on the adult literacy problem in Ireland. In 1996 NALA received EU funding to carry out a study into levels of access and participation in adult literacy programmes in Ireland.[58] This study clearly linked the major causes of

literacy difficulties to social disadvantage, and in doing so identified a range of cultural, social and institutional barriers to participation in adult literacy programmes. One major barrier was clearly that most adult learners have other obligations in their lives. In addition, information about where to find literacy support might be totally inadequate.

But in particular, it was found that negative experiences of the traditional educational system, along with the stigma and shame associated with literacy difficulties, were sufficiently strong barriers to discouraging potential learners from accessing adult literacy education. These issues were familiar to anyone involved in adult literacy: the report provided a further strong statement of the nature of literacy as a social issue.

Some of the preliminary findings emerging from this research were used in the run-up to the 1997 election, when NALA and AONTAS carried out successful joint lobbying (*Campaign 2000*) to secure recognition for adult literacy and wider adult education from any new government. NALA staff recalled that in the election campaign all political parties made reference to adult literacy issues in their manifestos 'for the first time ever'.

Adult education had gained importance as a policy issue during the 1990s and the incoming coalition now appointed the first junior minister with responsibility for adult education, Limerick TD Willie O'Dea, who proved open to suggestions on ways of addressing the adult literacy issue. The new government also introduced legislation that obliged government departments to set themselves identifiable and quantifiable objectives.[59]

Recognising that such moves were meaningless without resources to fulfil these objectives, the coalition doubled the Adult Literacy and Community Education Budget, from £2 million to £4 million, and increased NALA's funding by 60%, providing a strong basis for future activities.[60] The changing circumstances of Ireland's major economic development, along with crucial shifts on the part of policy makers, meant that NALA was now operating in a far less challenging environment than that of the 1980s. Adult literacy difficulties still needed to be addressed, but NALA now had more resources to enable them to tackle the issue, and certainly faced fewer obstacles.

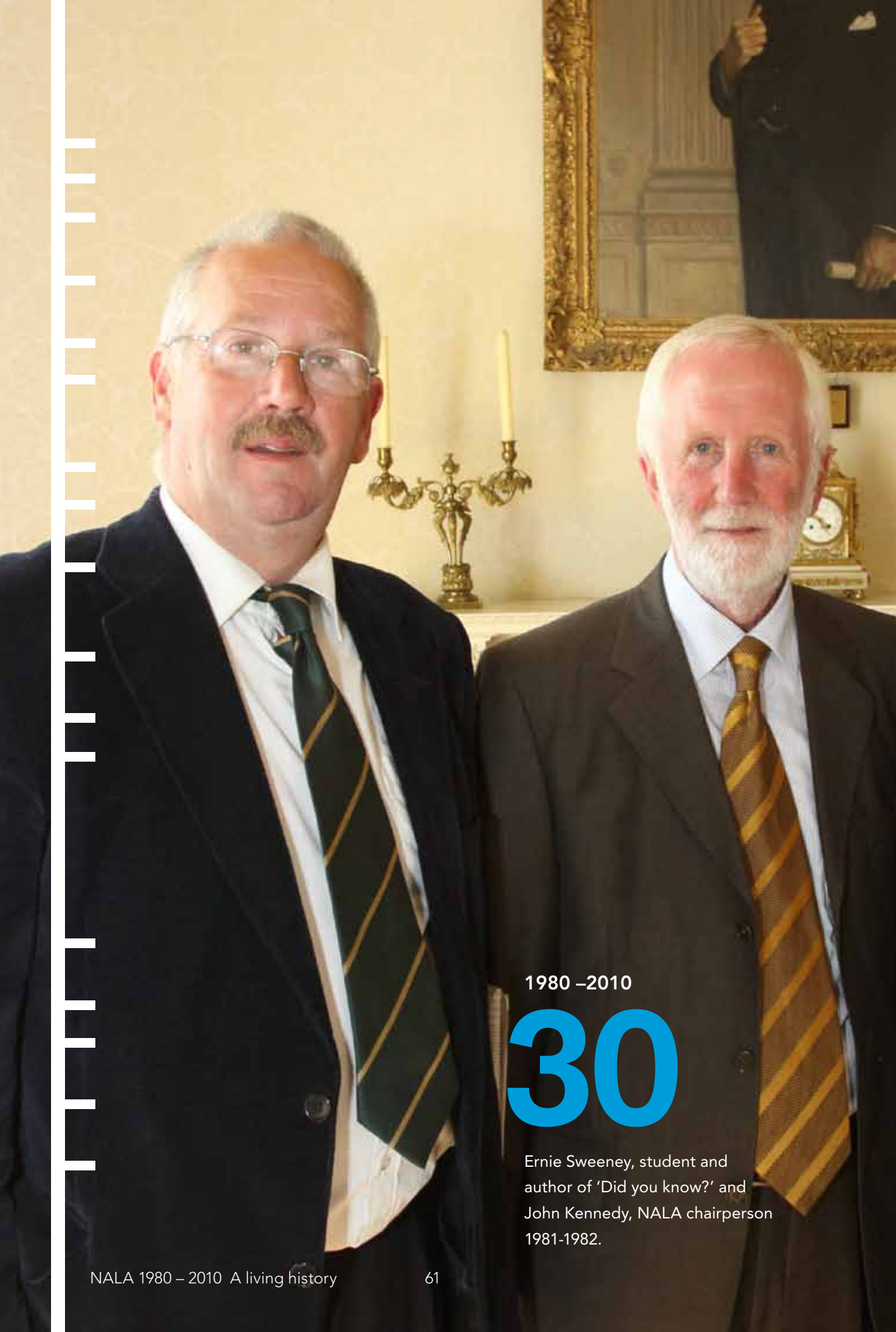
As the numbers accessing adult education were clearly going to increase, the Department of Education moved to prepare a Green Paper on Adult Education and formally invited NALA to contribute. The lesson to be learned from these developments was very clear: organisations involved in adult education, such as NALA, were now being listened to.

National policies

The changed context of the late 1990s saw NALA make significant inroads in terms of influencing public policy. The 1998 Green Paper on Adult Education included a definition of adult literacy that reflected NALA's student-centred ethos, and in 2000 the White Paper on Adult Education, *Learning for Life*, made adult literacy its top priority. Again, this was significantly influenced by NALA's ethos. It presented a broad vision of adult literacy education, and proposed a holistic curriculum and a student-centred approach. As a staff member noted, 'If you look at the wording of the White Paper … on adult education, a lot of the wording echoes the NALA guidelines on best practice.'

A concrete official commitment to addressing the issue of adult literacy came with the unveiling of the government's National Development Plan for 2000 to 2006, which incorporated the first ever National Literacy Strategy. This was a hugely significant milestone for NALA, as it meant that, 'the approach to adult literacy developed since the 1970s … became embedded in national policy, an important victory for adult literacy'.[61]

The White Paper established the National Adult Literacy Programme, aimed at improving adult literacy levels and funded under the National Development Plan. The booming economic conditions of the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' era meant that the core issue of funding was no longer the problem it had once been. And the increase in funding was being complemented – and facilitated – by increased recognition at an official level. For example, adult literacy provision had also been incorporated into the government's new National Anti-Poverty Strategy. NALA had successfully argued for this and it was effectively recognition of the social and economic costs of literacy problems. After all, as the organisation noted in 1997, 'the Celtic Tiger has not created or sustained employment opportunities for those with low literacy skills'.[62] At official level adult



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Ernie Sweeney, student and author of 'Did you know?' and John Kennedy, NALA chairperson 1981-1982.

literacy was increasingly being seen as an issue that overlapped with many others, such as social exclusion, unemployment, and – inevitably – educational disadvantage.

These developments had huge consequences for NALA as an organisation; as one staff member noted with some enthusiasm, 'we were rocking and rolling at this point'.

New context, new focus

Official recognition mattered little in itself; it was important because it opened the door to obtaining the resources that NALA and adult literacy services needed, in a way that had simply not been possible in the 1980s. The challenge now was to identify the best ways of using this new funding.

One focus at this stage was on initiatives to address some of the barriers to taking part in adult literacy tuition, as identified in the *Access and Participation* study.[63] A key objective was 'to embed literacy into all types of vocational and employment related training'[64] and NALA lobbied for the creation of a Workplace Basic Education (WBE) Fund, which came into being in 2002. This led to the expansion of VEC adult literacy services into the workplace, as employers came to see its importance, and increased emphasis on integrating literacy in vocational education and training programmes, especially with young people in Community Training Centres.[65]

NALA and VEC adult literacy services throughout the country also responded to increased immigration to Ireland and adult literacy provision began to include English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Equally, changing technologies saw the necessity of introducing information and communication technology (ICT) training as a basic component of literacy work.

An important development during this period was the delivery of literacy tuition, support and awareness in a variety of media. The year 1996 saw the launch of NALA's first dedicated literacy website, www.nala.ie, and NALA now runs several websites providing a range of information, literacy tuition and support for both tutors and students, including a dedicated

website for its plain English service. Distance learning has proved a particularly successful way of engaging learners who are otherwise unlikely seek help with literacy difficulties.

From 1998 NALA became involved in literacy programmes on radio and TV, both locally and nationally. The most significant was the very successful *Read, Write, Now,* broadcast on RTÉ TV. This, and subsequent series, led to increased awareness of adult literacy issues and encouraged a wide range of new learners to contact adult literacy services. These developments built on the involvement of RTÉ in the early days of NALA and adult literacy tuition in the 1970s.

At the same time the range and scale of NALA publications increased enormously, covering subjects as diverse as using an ATM to the structure of the European Union. Regular conferences and an extensive in-service support programme for tutors were also features of this period, together with developing expertise in areas such as health literacy, financial literacy and family literacy.

NALA continued to develop its staff infrastructure in these years, using public sector practice as a model. The role of the board evolved further, with board members being increasingly encouraged to focus on strategic issues rather than day-to-day operations. This was both a natural evolution and a conscious shift in emphasis. By 2007 NALA had over 20 staff, both full and part time, and three offices: in Dublin, Cork and Mullingar.

Quality in adult literacy work

From the early 1980s NALA had been working for the provision of professional, high quality adult literacy services, and its efforts to do so intensified in the years 1997 to 2007. The Evolving Quality Framework (EQF) was drawn up as a self-evaluation tool for adult literacy practitioners, with the aim of improving the standard of adult literacy provision. The framework was developed through an in-depth consultation process with adult literacy practitioners and students and supported by funding from the EU Socrates fund. Its operation at local level involves students, tutors and organisers in EQF teams.

In the early years of the new century, NALA decided that it was important to address the problematic issue of assessment. It applied for and received a grant from the Dormant Accounts Fund to carry out another process of research, consultation and piloting, which involved many members and local projects. This led to the publication of *Mapping the Learning Journey* (2005), a framework to support assessment for learning, which continues to ensure and build on the student-centred approach. In this regard, NALA had kept in touch with its base, as a previous board member notes:

> **Students see progress as applying their skills, to be able to learn something and then to be able to apply it outside. And that's the most important thing, you know, about any kind of learning. … NALA did loads of work on an assessment framework and we do use that one. That is really based on students learning a skill and being able to then apply it in all sorts of different situations outside the learning situation.**

In the general field of adult literacy education, the issue of accreditation for students also proved contentious. This increasingly came to the fore during the 2000s, with the new demands for accountability in the public sector that had emerged since 1997. In the early 1990s the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) was established and began to provide accreditation for the further education and training sector in Ireland. The aim was to give people outside the mainstream educational structures opportunities to gain recognition for learning - in education or training centres, in the work place and in the community. Throughout the 1990s NALA was involved in providing training to support tutors who were interested in enabling their students achieve NCVA awards. In 2001 the NCVA was subsumed into the new national awarding body, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and FETAC qualifications were developed specifically for the field of adult literacy.

Many of those interviewed spoke about these developments, and many shared a concern that accreditation for literacy learning, if not handled sensitively, might threaten the student-centred focus of adult literacy tuition, which is at the heart of the ethos promoted by NALA. However, this was not in NALA's control. Most of those interviewed felt there was a role

for it, and that it could be a very valuable outcome for learners. However, there was a strong conviction that the concept should be introduced with care, and only when the learner in question was ready for it:

> **I wanted to improve my reading and writing. … I didn't want to be under any pressure. Don't give me pressure. Don't give me homework. I went back full-time for two years. Going home and doing homework, I'd never done it! And I didn't do it because the Christian Brothers hammered me and gave me a tough time. … And it was very difficult then to fall in love with doing homework. …**
>
> **I'll tell you something, when I got my Leaving Cert English and I came out and I was walking up the street and I met the girls coming out of the convent, I knew some, and I pulled out the same paper they had. … And I had a C in my English … And I says, 'Christ, accreditation is good.' It is good. But it's the timing. It's the timing … In the beginning it is very sensitive. I couldn't emphasise [enough] the sensitivity of the whole thing.**

It was essential that moves towards accreditation should take the concerns of adult learners into account and potential problems were obvious. This was an issue for NALA to take up on behalf of students and practitioners. But at the same time it could be just as inappropriate to overlook the value of a formal qualification, both in terms of self-confidence and future development:

> **Adults who have a reading and writing difficulty, they come into a service looking for that problem to be sorted. … They don't actually come in for the most part and say, 'I want to get accreditation' … But I think they're entitled to be offered accreditation. … And anybody who isn't doing that or sees that not as the role is doing an injustice to adults. … They're entitled and … it's doing them an injustice if you don't accredit their learning.**

But at the same time there were strong concerns that the drive towards accreditation could be inappropriate, and potentially damaging to students' experience of adult literacy tuition and the value they could gain from it, as a previous board member observed:

> **I think there was a push for accreditation. … Even at levels that were kind of meaningless. … I think the worry is that … some things are easier to accredit... so they're the things you'll teach, rather than what the students really want to learn. … but once they're improving their skills and confidence, if they then want to work towards a certificate … They should be given the opportunity.**

Adult literacy students were often juggling their tuition alongside a range of other commitments; this could make it very difficult to assess the level of tuition they had received purely in terms of time. Removing flexibility would also be a step away from the student-centred approach.

An evolving organisation

Concerns about the impact accreditation might have on the ethos of adult literacy work sometimes went hand in hand with the perception that the social justice aspect of adult literacy provision had been side-lined. In the view of some people, the transformative power of adult education, on both a personal and social level, was compromised by the emphasis placed on skills acquisition during the years of the economic boom:

> **You don't hear any more about the whole transformative power of adult education, you hear about skill, the national skills strategy… skills this, skills that. … I think it's terrible. I think it's appalling. I think it's important. I'm not saying people shouldn't have skills. Of course they should, absolutely. But I think the social purpose of adult learning is a huge biggie, which is ignored in the skills, especially during the Celtic Tiger years, when people were talking work, work, work …'**
>
> **And:**

The skills could bring the funding with it, but it overshadowed the broader, the rights-based approach that people had to adult literacy in the 1980s, which you don't get anymore … which I think is the most important thing at the end of the day. … The whole thing has become more functional … partly because of funding. … Governments don't like 'rights-based' because once you know you have a right, they have a responsibility, so it's a bit scary for them. But at the same time, it's a pity.

In this changed context, some people interviewed also felt that NALA's closer relationship with the Department of Education had led to a reluctance to criticise the government's educational policy:

It has lost its critical voice, it never speaks out against educational inequalities. It used to draw attention to these inequalities. … The idea that the problem can be eliminated without addressing the root cause, without exposing and criticising it, is a false one.

In addition, some of those interviewed discussed the changed role of members of NALA, suggesting a perceived decrease in their impact and role in NALA's approach and operation. They felt that during the 2000s, as the balance of power swung away from the members and the board of NALA and towards its staff, NALA had perhaps moved away from its original philosophy: 'That voice is missing. And I'm hearing it on the ground. … The bite and need to be political has been lost,' and, 'The big challenge was keeping the educational integrity of the movement and I think we've lost that.'

Comments of this kind reflect an on-going concern about NALA's evolution. An alternative perspective is that this evolution arose from the fact that so many of the initial battles had been won. The most obvious indication of this was that the Irish state now recognised adult literacy as an important issue, and was committed to trying to support literacy development. Moreover, it was suggested by some that NALA had successfully worked towards empowering local adult literacy schemes to sustain themselves, which may have decreased the need for national, collective action. As one staff member noted:

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Frances Ward,
NALA chairperson
2003-2007

There has been a change in the nature of members' involvement. They are less involved in AGMs and ILD for instance. They may be too busy on a local level now, or [feel] that things fought for have been won.

Certainly from 2001 the VEC Amendment Act meant that VECs had more local autonomy and this impacted considerably on NALA's work in local areas. As the CEO (of the VEC) was now the responsible officer, overseeing all programmes, NALA was to deal with them, rather than directly with organisers and tutors.

However, the range of consultation that took place in relation to

» the assessment and quality frameworks
» the research on curriculum development
» the strategic plans

suggests that members were still very engaged in expressing views and making their voices heard. But this was happening in different ways, reflecting changed needs and new structures. A major change was that other organisations now existed to represent the interests of groups such as Adult Literacy Organisers, who set up their own Adult Literacy Organisers' Association (ALOA), and tutors, in the Basic Education Tutors' Association (BETA). These groups were previously represented only by NALA and therefore used the AGMs for this purpose, which was clearly no longer needed.

A former voluntary adult literacy practitioner highlighted NALA's pivotal role in these changes:

NALA … opened doors for us really, you know. If they hadn't been there … Obviously we were part-time for a long time, so we didn't have a great status within the VECs. And also because a lot of people didn't fall into the category of what the VECs knew about. Because a lot of people weren't teachers. There was a difficulty around that. And how would they accommodate us … and what our rates of pay should

be and all of that. And so … it was NALA who kind of championed that and pushed it … and set up the service as a professional service.

NALA, however, remained (and remains) the national organisation representing the views and interests of literacy students. While NALA had always seen this as central to its work, attention was now given to developing this role further. Students were increasingly strongly represented on the NALA board during this decade and NALA's third strategic plan, 2007 to 2010, introduced the 'voice' strand, to focus attention on how all NALA's initiatives and activities impact on and include students[66]. The growing strength of the students' sub-committee became a key aspect of this process.

Inez Bailey, current Director of NALA, noted that NALA was represented on the Committee on Educational Disadvantage, in 2005, and in 2006 presented to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on literacy. These bodies produced important critiques of educational policy and demonstrated how the education system still fails children and adults from disadvantaged communities. In this way, she observed, NALA's voice continues to be critical and challenging. Bailey also points to the organisation's capacity to draw in funding for specific projects from sources other than the Department of Education, including the Departments of Social Welfare and Health, the Dormant Accounts fund, EU programmes, the EBS education fund and An Post which has assisted NALA to retain an independent stance. NALA's acceptance into the Community Platform in the late 1990s, for negotiations relating to social partnership, was recognition of its independent structure as well as its commitment to social justice.

A major restatement of NALA's continuing commitment to its original ethos and values took place in 2005 with the publication of a revised *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work*. In this latest version of its key text, NALA links its work again to the philosophy of Freire and the transformative learning described by Jack Mezirow. It also pushes further the direction in which it feels literacy work should move by describing 'student-directed' literacy work, as well as the more well-known 'student-centred' approach:

A more challenging concept, also at the centre of adult literacy work in Ireland, is the learner-directed approach. This means that rather than curriculum and approaches being formed by tutors who take into consideration the needs of learners, it is formed by the learners in discussion with their tutors.[67]

Beyond 2007

After the decade of intensive activity from 1997 to 2007, the period 2007 to 2010 saw a decrease in the number of pilot projects and schemes being initiated by NALA. Breathing space at this stage was a necessity. In the strategic plan of 2007 to 2010 there was another conscious shift in NALA's role, introducing a focus on 'research and advocacy work [and a] move away from tutor training and the delivery of support material'.[68] The NALA annual report for 2007 explains that, 'since 1980, we have been involved with training, policy making, national co-ordination, research and innovation'. Now, however, the focus was on 'four main areas of activity': policy, advocacy, research and advisory services.[69]

At the same time, the purpose of these activities remains the same: the growth and development of adult literacy in Ireland. This is not just a simple question of being able to read and write. In the again more constricting economic climate of 2011 it is worth pausing to bear in mind how NALA defines literacy and how it might be significant:

Literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. But it includes more than the technical skills of communication: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions.

Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change.[70]

It is a definition that encompasses the ways in which working on their literacy development can potentially alter the lives of adults. The experiences of adult learners, and the difference that literacy can make to

them, was brought to a huge audience in 2008 by the TV series *Written Off*? NALA's continuing purpose to promote adult literacy must always focus primarily on adult learners: in 2009, and again in 2010, NALA had a stand at the National Ploughing Championships. This was aimed at reaching adults from the farming and wider rural communities, who might wish to work on their literacy. The stand was organised and staffed by literacy students, and it is appropriate to end with their voice:

> **We were in the education tent in the Ploughing Championships, and we were hugely unique. Every college or educational provider or citizen's information, they were all full-time workers. … But we stood out. We were all the students. … And everybody, everybody stopped to listen to our story.**

1980 –2010

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Berni Brady, director of AONTAS
and formerly NALA chairperson
1983-1984

Appendices

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Appendix 1

A note on methodology

A mixed methodology approach was taken in the writing of this history, comprising:

» a documentary review of relevant data sources and
» qualitative interviews with people who have been involved in NALA over the various stages of its existence.

A wide range of material published by NALA was examined. Data sources included board meeting minutes, newsletters, teaching resources prepared and published by NALA, annual reports, strategic plans and research studies.

The qualitative stage aimed to add both emphasis and depth to the documentary review. Interviews (n. 18) and discussion groups (n. 2) were held with past chairs of NALA, all of its Directors, staff members past and present, and adult literacy students. Interviewees were asked about their involvement in the field of adult literacy prior to becoming involved in NALA, and their memories and experiences of the organisation's key milestones, achievements and challenges.

Many of the interviewees were involved in adult literacy in more than one capacity; for example, some were adult literacy students and had also served as board members. A phenomenological approach was taken to the analysis of these data, with emphasis placed on describing 'the meaning for several individuals of the lived experiences surrounding a concept or a phenomenon'.[71]

All recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. A thematic content analysis approach was taken regarding the analysis of these transcripts. This involved close reading and listening of the transcripts and audio files. Interview transcripts were all coded and themes were identified within each transcript. Throughout this process, the researcher continued to refer back and forth between the raw data, the codes and the emerging themes, in order to confirm and validate conclusions drawn.

Appendix 2

List of contributors

The following people took part in the qualitative aspect of this research:

- Inez Bailey
- Berni Brady
- Pauline Breslin
- Angela Crowley
- Noel Dalton
- Carol Daultrey
- Fergus Dolan
- Jenny Derbyshire
- Pauline Hensey
- Mairin Kelly
- John Kennedy
- Mary Kett
- Mary Maher
- Geraldine Mernagh
- Peggy Murphy
- Fawzia McGlone
- Claire O'Riordan
- Rosamond Philips
- Michael Power
- Patrick Reeves
- Helen Ryan
- Ernie Sweeney
- Michael Toomey
- Frances Ward

Appendix 3

Chairs of NALA 1980 – 2011

Professor Desmond Swan	1980 - 1981
John Kennedy	1981 - 1982
Berni Brady	1983 - 1984
Mary Kett	1985 - 1986
Carol Daultrey	1987 - 1988
Noel Dalton	1988 - 1990
Tony Downes	1990 - 1993
Angela Crowley	1993 - 1996
Michael Toomey	1996 - 1999
Mary Maher	1999 - 2003
Frances Ward	2003 - 2007
Michael Power	2007 - 2011
Gretta Vaughan	2011

Notes

1 See O'Ciosain, 2010.
2 Daly, M.E., 1990.
3 Ó Buachalla, 1988, p. 78.
4 Coolahan, 1981, p. 55.
5 Cited in Ó Buachalla, p. 277.
6 Cited in Bailey, 2006, p. 199.
7 Coolahan, 1981. p. 131
8 Department of Education, 1973. Adult Education in Ireland: a report of the committee appointed by the Minister for Education
9 See Acheson, N. et al 2003.
10 Freire, P. 1972.
11 AONTAS. 1977.
12 NALA. 1988, p. 8.
13 AONTAS, 1977, p. 7
14 AONTAS, 1977, p. 9.
15 AONTAS, 1977, p. 9
16 NALA Minutes, 29 April 1977.
17 NALA Minutes, 28 June 1977.
18 NALA Minutes, 22 Feb. 1979.
19 NALA Minutes, 4 April 1979; 8 June 1979.
20 NALA Minutes, 9 Nov. 1979; Aide memoire on NALA Seminar group reports, 13/10/1979.
21 NALA Minutes, 9 Nov 1978.
22 NALA Minutes, 30 Nov 1978.
23 NALA Minutes, 30 Nov 1978.
24 NALA Minutes, 6 March 1981.
25 NALA Minutes, 3 February 1983
26 NALA Minutes, 15 March 1984
27 Hamilton, M. and Hillier, Y. 2006, p. 115.
28 NALA Minutes: John Kennedy, 'Chairman's Address, NALA AGM, [6] Nov 1982'.
29 NALA Minutes, 4 December 1981.
30 NALA Minutes, 2 September 1987.
31 Noel Dalton, 'Current practices and problems in literacy provision in Ireland', address given on International Adult Literacy Day, 1984.
32 *Evening Herald*, 5 July 1985.
33 NALA Annual Report – March 1987-February 1988, p. 11.
34 Derbyshire, J. and Warner, K. 1980, p. 240.

35 NALA Minutes, report on AGM, 8 Sept 1984.
36 NALA, 1985, p. 10
37 NALA, 1985, p. 10
38 NALA Minutes, 1982 AGM: John Kennedy, 'Chairman's Address, NALA AGM, [6] November 1982'.
39 NALA Annual Report, 1984.
40 NALA Report, December 1985-March 1987. Introduction.
41 Speech to NALA meeting marking ILD, 7 September 1985.
42 NALA Report, December 1985-March 1987.
43 Ibid.
44 NALA Report December 1985-March 1987. Introduction.
45 NALA, 1988.
46 NALA Annual Report, March 1987-February 1988.
47 NALA Minutes, 27 November 1986.
48 NALA Minutes: 'Staff report to NALA executive committee 24 September 1988 –27 October, 1988'.
49 NALA Annual Report, March 1987 – February 1988.
50 NALA, 1987, 1992, 1996, 2008.
51 NALA Annual Reports early 1990s
52 National Adult Literacy Agency: Annual report to AGM 25 February, 1989, p.1
53 NALA Minutes, 29 November 1994
54 NALA: Strategic Plan 1999-2001
55 National Adult Literacy Agency: Annual Report, 1997-98, p. 3.
56 Bailey, I., 2006.
57 Ibid.
58 Bailey, I. and Coleman, U. 1998.
59 Murtagh, L. 2009. p. 7-9.
60 NALA Annual Report, 1997 to 1998.
61 Bailey, I., 2006. p. 207.
62 National Adult Literacy Agency: Annual Report, 1997-98, p. 3.
63 Bailey, I. and Coleman, U. 1998.
64 National Adult Literacy Agency: Annual Report, 2002 - 2003, p. 14
65 Ibid, p 14-15.
66 NALA: Strategic Plan 2007 -2010, p.10-11
67 NALA, 2005, p.11
68 NALA: Annual report 2007, p. 5
69 NALA: Annual report 2007, p. 9.
70 NALA, 2005, p.3
71 Creswell, J. W. and Maietta, R. C. 2002 p. 143-184.

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