

Here to help

Case study: Pilot of the
National Adult Literacy Agency
(NALA) Peer-to-Peer Literacy
Ambassadors' and Tutors'
programme in Portlaoise Prison.



National Adult Literacy Agency
Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

About this case study

This case study tells the story behind the Peer-to-Peer Literacy Ambassadors' and Tutors' programme in Portlaoise Prison. A unique partnership between a group of adult learners in Portlaoise Prison, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), the Portlaoise Prison Education Unit, Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) and Laois Offaly Education and Training Board (LOETB) formed the foundation for the programme.

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"Prison can be a tough and unforgiving place at times and a lot is taken from you but one thing that cannot be taken away is education."

Peer literacy tutor

"The course has helped give self-confidence and self-belief to participants. They have worked for this and they can help others to read and write. The possibilities for transformation continue. The impact is ongoing."

Education Unit Staff

Introduction

This case study tells the story behind the Peer-to-Peer Literacy Ambassadors' and Tutors' programme in Portlaoise Prison. A unique partnership between a group of adult learners in Portlaoise Prison, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA), the Portlaoise Prison Education Unit, Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) and Laois Offaly Education and Training Board (LOETB) formed the foundation for the programme. From a results perspective the outcomes of the partnership can be quantified in the following way: Seven imprisoned men successfully completed their portfolios of assessment and were awarded NALA/WIT Developing Literacies 1 certificates, a module of the level six Higher Certificate in Arts in Literacy Development in WIT. This already impressive description reveals only a tiny sliver of the quantifiable value of this project.¹ This case study sets out to capture some of the qualitative richness of this pilot project.

The study begins with a review of relevant literature. It is followed by a brief description of the methodology used to gather data. A snapshot of the course participants provides a synopsis of their experience of education alongside an overview of motivations for participating. Conscious that learning is impacted by the social context in which it takes place (Vygotsky, 1978), the writer / practitioner reflections upon entering into a maximum security setting are included and are further expanded in the section which outlines the background to the pilot.

A detailed account of the first two workshops follows to give a sense of the effort made to establish meaningful learning-care relationships amongst the group and with myself, the NALA project worker. In depth information is provided here as the early engagement is a key phase in the development of any group and is of particular significance in an incarcerated setting where the establishment of mutual respect is central to how people work together.

¹ See Appendix 1 for more detail

An analysis of data gathered during the final evaluation follows and the study comes to a close in traditional style with conclusions and recommendations. An Afterword was added in early 2022 to provide the reader with information on developments following the completion of the course.

Context

Worldwide, many commitments to education in prisons have been made and education in prison is as old as the institution itself (Behan, 2014). The overarching objective, education for all, is enshrined in Article 26 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948). In the context of prison education, less than a decade later (1955), the first United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders decreed that penal institutions 'should utilize all the remedial, educational, moral, spiritual and other forces and forms of assistance which are appropriate and available, and should seek to apply them according to the individual treatment needs of the prisoners' (UNESCO, 2021, p.33). At that time, and in recognition of the high levels of literacy inequalities amongst people in prison, access to literacy education was also guaranteed.

Irish prison population

In Ireland in 2019, when this Peer-to-Peer Literacy Ambassadors' and Tutors' programme began, there were 4,015 people in prison custody (IPRT, 2019). By February 2021 there were 3,729 people in custody.² During COVID-19 efforts to keep staff and prisoners safe included releasing 400 people from prison.³ Prisoners have been identified as one of the most marginalised groups in Irish society. Highlighting wider entrenched structural inequalities, people with prison experience are more likely to come from (and return to) the most deprived and disadvantaged areas in the state (O'Donnell et al, 2007). This marginalisation is multiple, intersectional and often intergenerational. It overlaps with poverty, loneliness, homelessness, addiction, disability and ethnicity. As such the prison population in Ireland is characterised by multiple forms of socio-economic disadvantage and communities with the greatest indices of deprivation bear the 'greatest burden of imprisonment' (Rogan, 2013, p 98).

² [Facts & Figures | Irish Penal Reform Trust \(iprt.ie\)](#)

³ [The Irish Times view on prison reform: A need to look to the long-term](#) August 16, 2021

Unmet literacy needs amongst people in prison

Reflecting international research (UNESCO, 2021), Morgan and Kett's (2003) study found that the average literacy level of the prison population in Ireland was much lower than the general population. In 2003, forty-one per cent of prisoners in Ireland left school at age 13-14, never having sat a state exam (Meaney, 2019b). Research has shown that many people in prison in Ireland and elsewhere have harmful, disaffecting early experiences of compulsory education giving rise to what is an understandable reluctance to participate in learning in the context of prison education (IPRT, 2012: Meaney, 2019a: O'Donnell et al, 2007: Tett et al, 2012).

Education in prison

Despite this reluctance many people who are imprisoned do take part in prison education. Reflecting wider debates and ideological viewpoints about the purpose of education, education in prison has been identified differently by policy makers, social justice activists, prison authorities and people who are themselves in prison. Some policy makers see investment in prison education as a means of rehabilitation which can in turn impact on levels of recidivism (Bozack et al, 2018). This viewpoint highlights the importance of skills and vocational training to prepare prisoners for employment on release. Here in Ireland, participation in education has also been shown to support prisoners' re-entry into society (Costelloe, 2014).

Turning towards the economic case for continued investment in education in prisons, UK research highlighted studies that in-prison educational and vocational interventions reduced offending compared with prison alone (NIACE, 2009). The NIACE research also identified that the net benefit to the public sector associated with educational and vocational programmes ranged from £2,000 to £28,000 per offender (ibid.).

From a human rights and social justice perspective, prison education is framed as an opportunity for enrichment, personal change, transformation and the exercise of agency within a coercive institution (Key and May, 2019; UNESCO, 2021). In prison education units, with an ethos of adult education, harmed learning identities are overturned and identities rooted in self-worth emerge (Behan, 2014; Key and May, 2019; Carrigan and Maunsell, 2014). The return to education which often begins in prison has been identified as a key factor in enabling prisoners to think differently about themselves, their identity and their place in society (Meaney, 2019b). The pedagogical practice of intentionally developing learning care relationships built through respect, recognition and reciprocal dialogue is a core driver in this journey towards transformed identities. In the context of literacy learning, Feeley (2014, p.162) describes learning care 'as the affective attitudes, emotions and actions, both paid and unpaid, that dynamically influence individuals and groups in learning literacy.' These root precepts were the foundations of this project.

Multiple motivations

Echoing both the skills enhancement and transformational aspects of participation in prison education and in an Irish context Behan's (2014) study with people in prison provides an insight into how prisoners themselves think about the purpose of prison education and the multiple motivations for participation. These include practical reasons related to gaining skills to prepare for a productive life after prison. In Behan's study, taking part in education was described as a way of coping with prison life and as a way of killing time. Education classes were also viewed as a way of escaping the corrosive prison routine and environment through participation in a different space that was a 'non-penal oasis' (Behan, 2014, p. 24). Other motivations relate to a belief in education as a way of transformation and as a means of exercising personal agency within an institution that seeks to control every aspect of life. Those interviewed by Behan confirmed the importance of the ethos of an adult education approach, which underpins the Irish Prison Service's commitment to prison education (IPS, 2011). This commitment respects the independence of the individual and sees them as agents in the process of change.

It recognises that individuals who choose to take part in prison education bring with them a fund of valuable skills, knowledge and experience.

Gender and literacy education

Gender and the construction of masculinity also have a role to play in prisoners' return to education, and more specifically to literacy education. Literacy and literate activities have traditionally been thought of as passive and belonging in the domain of the feminine (Hegarty, 2016; Martino and Berrill, 2003; Watson et al, 2010). Consequently they are viewed as of lesser value, to be shunned by 'real men' (Francis and Skelton, 2001; Renold, 2001). The legacy of such gendered learning identities can deeply impact and limit the relationship some adult men have with literacy and feed into a reluctance to join literacy classes. This is particularly relevant in a prison context which is most often underpinned by a macho 'hard-man' culture.

Peer support

In Ireland, the Prison Education Service have acknowledged the difficulties in recruiting those with unmet literacy needs and identified peer support and peer referral as a way of widening participation (Morgan and Kett, 2003). Confirming this, research in the UK provides clear evidence that prisoners are more attracted to participate in literacy learning when they are being supported and encouraged by those who have shared their experience (Brooks et al, 2000). Most recently, in the context of Higher Education, Sarah Meaney's (2019a) community needs analysis with prisoners and former prisoners reinforced evidence of the critical role of peer mentors in supporting ongoing participation in education. Her study highlighted the importance of inspirational role models as a significant factor in encouraging people to return to education.

Methodology

The project described in this case study did not set out to be a research project. There was no firm plan to deliver an accredited literacy tutor training programme or even to write a case study. Rather the approach was one of 'let's try this and see what happens next'. The initial contact with the Education Unit in Portlaoise Prison had been made before the project worker joined NALA. Relationships of collaboration between NALA, the Education Unit and LOETB had been established and it was clear that there was a group of learners within the prison who had been involved with the Education Unit for some time and who were interested in finding out more about literacy and the work of NALA. However, at that early stage, no longer term project had been envisaged or agreed. In this sense the project grew incrementally and as the relationship between the NALA project worker, the learner group and the Education Unit team developed. Decisions to continue from literacy awareness training to becoming literacy ambassadors and onwards to an accredited higher level course were agreed during reflective pauses and informed by the changing needs and desires of course participants.

This case study provides a record and reflections about the project. It draws upon notes and observations made by the NALA project worker, notes from the workshops and from a mid-way evaluation.

At the end of the course, three participants completed written evaluations and these were followed in December 2020 by a face-to-face focus group. Three Education Unit staff members took part in a collective phone interview and completed individual written evaluations.

Phone interviews, written evaluations and focus group notes were transcribed and coded using MAXqda. This is a computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDA) tool that allows storage and rigorous scrutiny of data. The voice of participants is central to the presentation of the findings.

Data from publications about the project in NALA's Literacy Matters (NALA, 2021)⁴ and in the Irish Prison Education Association (IPEA, 2020) and the European Prison Education Association (EPEA, 2021) newsletter are also included. This completed case study was read and approved by three of the course participants who remain in Portlaoise Prison.

⁴ See Appendix 2 for Literacy Matters text

Snapshot of group participants

For those readers who expect detailed data recording information about the lives and attributes of course participants there will be disappointment. No such formal record was compiled. However, arising from conversations with course participants some broad statements can be made regarding their previous educational experience.

- Most had left school before the age of 15 with their literacy needs unmet.
- Most had harmful early experiences of school. These included physical and emotional abuse, violence, humiliation and disrespect which had left them feeling like they had been 'written off' by society.
- Most felt that they had not seen the point of education in their early years. It had seemed irrelevant to their hopes and aspirations.
- Those who had returned to adult education in the Education Unit described a very different experience: one that included respect, learning care and positive experiences of transformation in self-confidence and self-esteem.

Motivation

Reflecting much of the literature, motivations expressed by the group for engaging with this programme included a desire for personal change, for the acquisition of new skills and as a productive way of doing time. Many took part as a way of 'bettering' themselves whilst in prison.

- Some described their participation in the programme as a way of escaping what one participant described as the 'graveyard' of the prison landings.
- Others viewed participation in the Education Unit courses as a way of exercising control within an environment that sought ultimate control over every aspect of life.

The men described additional motives to those recorded in the literature. These included 'other focussed' ambitions. They hoped that they would be seen differently by their families through their efforts to 'give something back' to their community.

One man spoke of the compassion he felt for the many men in his community who were unable to read or write and of his desire to support them through learning how to be a literacy tutor.

"I took part in the training because I understood how difficult life could be for people without literacy skills. I recognised prisoners who were struggling with prison-life literacy such as filling in forms for the shop, to obtain property and to add numbers to their phone cards. More significantly, I discovered many prisoners wanted to write letters to their families, especially their children, and could not due to literacy issues. I had the desire to help these people."

Peer literacy tutor

Those who were parents spoke of their deep desire to be better role models for their children. One man told me of his determination to change any negative views his son might have of him because of his prison sentence. He saw his efforts to become a trained literacy tutor as part of that positive re-presentation of himself. Another participant told me his participation in the course was a way of giving back and of making up for the harm and hurt he had caused his family in the past.

"My family and friends have suffered greatly because of me but they forgive and forget that in a heartbeat when they see I'm giving back."

Peer literacy tutor

Beginnings

Entering prison space

Although I had worked with men's groups before, including with ex-prisoners, I had not worked in a prison setting. Ideas I held about 'prisoners' as 'other' were shaped by disparaging discourses in the media and popular culture yet refined by my own experience of working with ex-prisoners. During my doctoral study (Hegarty, 2017) of the relationship between literacy and the construction of masculinity I had learned to take the time to look behind stereotypical representations of masculinity to meet people where they were and as they presented themselves to me. I drew on this experience in this work and committed myself to seeing the men I met as people who were interested in literacy and in adult learning. This did not mean that I was not anxious or nervous about entering the prison. I realised I was equally fearful and curious about this new experience and did not sleep the night before the first workshop.

Portlaoise Prison is described on the Irish Prison Service website as 'A closed high security prison for adult males. It is the committal prison for those sent to custody from the Special Criminal Court and prisoners accommodated here include those linked with subversive crime.'⁵

Entering a prison is a discomfoting and daunting experience (Carrigan, 2015). Entering into a high security prison where there are multiple security checks, guarded and locked steel doors, and a prison yard surrounded by barbed wire and overlooked by armed soldiers heightens such feelings. On my first day, and subsequently, I was accompanied by the Prison Education Unit literacy teacher. She kindly guided me through the entry and distracted me as we proceeded through

⁵ [Portlaoise Prison - Irish Prison Service - Irish Prison Service](#)

the different security checks. At the end of each session we used the reverse journey towards the prison gates as a debrief opportunity.

Each time I visited the prison I thought I would count the locked steel doors which led to the education unit situated in a building within the prison complex. This never happened. Despite more than twenty visits to the prison, and my growing familiarity with the environment my mind could not take in the overload of experiences and feelings in this short journey and allow me to focus on the door count.

The prison education unit is itself a space apart. Prison education officers greet and are greeted by each person by first name on entry. The walls are covered by colourful images which have been painted by students during art class. Posters advertising a range of classes including stone carving, art, yoga and Story Dads⁶ line the walls beside the prison library. Classrooms vary in size for one-to-one and group sessions. Windows overlook the prison yard and are a constant reminder that prison classrooms are embedded in a prison system. Each classroom has a window onto the central corridor that allows for observation by prison staff. Before class time the corridors are empty, and then they slowly and noisily fill with students. Some carry plastic bags with portfolios, others are empty handed. There is a lot of bustle and noise as groups and individuals filter into different rooms.

Foundation building

Twenty-four participants attended 2 introductory workshops. The original group included eleven imprisoned men, Prison Education Unit tutors, Prison Education Officers, staff from the Probation Service and the Prison Chaplain. It was diverse in terms of power and agency. Some held the keys to lock others in. Some were free to go home at the end of the day, and others were not. During these early workshops my hope was to work with the group to create an environment where everyone could contribute confidently and without fear of the judgement of others.

⁶ Story Dads is a family literacy initiative where fathers record stories for their children who then get a chance to hear their father's voice during bedtime routines.

Each participant was welcomed with a handshake. Carefully thought out opening remarks framed the group as one that was interested in adult education and literacy. Workshops were built upon what Connolly (2008: 55) suggests is the 'Golden Rule' of adult education: the process begins with participants' lived experiences. This approach is rooted in respect and recognition for what learners bring to each learning encounter and formed the foundation for trust building and dialogue on which the entire project was carefully built. Small group work, creative methods and opportunities for the group to get to know one another, and me, were built into the design of these workshops.

"We were all starting at the same level in that first session."

Peer literacy tutor

"We knew from the start how everyone structured things that this was gonna be memorable and beneficial to us all. Biscuits helped! We are a mature group I think. We made personal friendships during the course. That all helped too."

Peer literacy tutor

Introductory workshops: Getting to know each other

Introductory workshops took place in April and May 2019. A literacy ambassador from NALA accompanied me for the first workshop. He had previous experience of speaking with people in prison about his literacy journey and his generous sharing and openness resonated deeply with workshop participants. He spoke of his desire to return to learning in order to support his daughter in her encounters with the medical system. He described the sense he had throughout his life that there was more to him than the man he was. His return to learning had proven this to him. Having felt excluded from society he now identified himself as a valuable member of his community. He made himself vulnerable to the group when speaking of the

feelings of pride and joy he felt as a result of his reengagement with education. In hindsight, I believe that the openness with which the visiting literacy ambassador spoke of his experiences and the emotions that underpinned them supported others to risk being open with one another about their experiences and relationship with literacy. He was an inspiring role model who gave a sense of hope to the group.

“When Michael told us his story I thought I couldn’t do that. But then when I heard the whole story I thought that I could.”

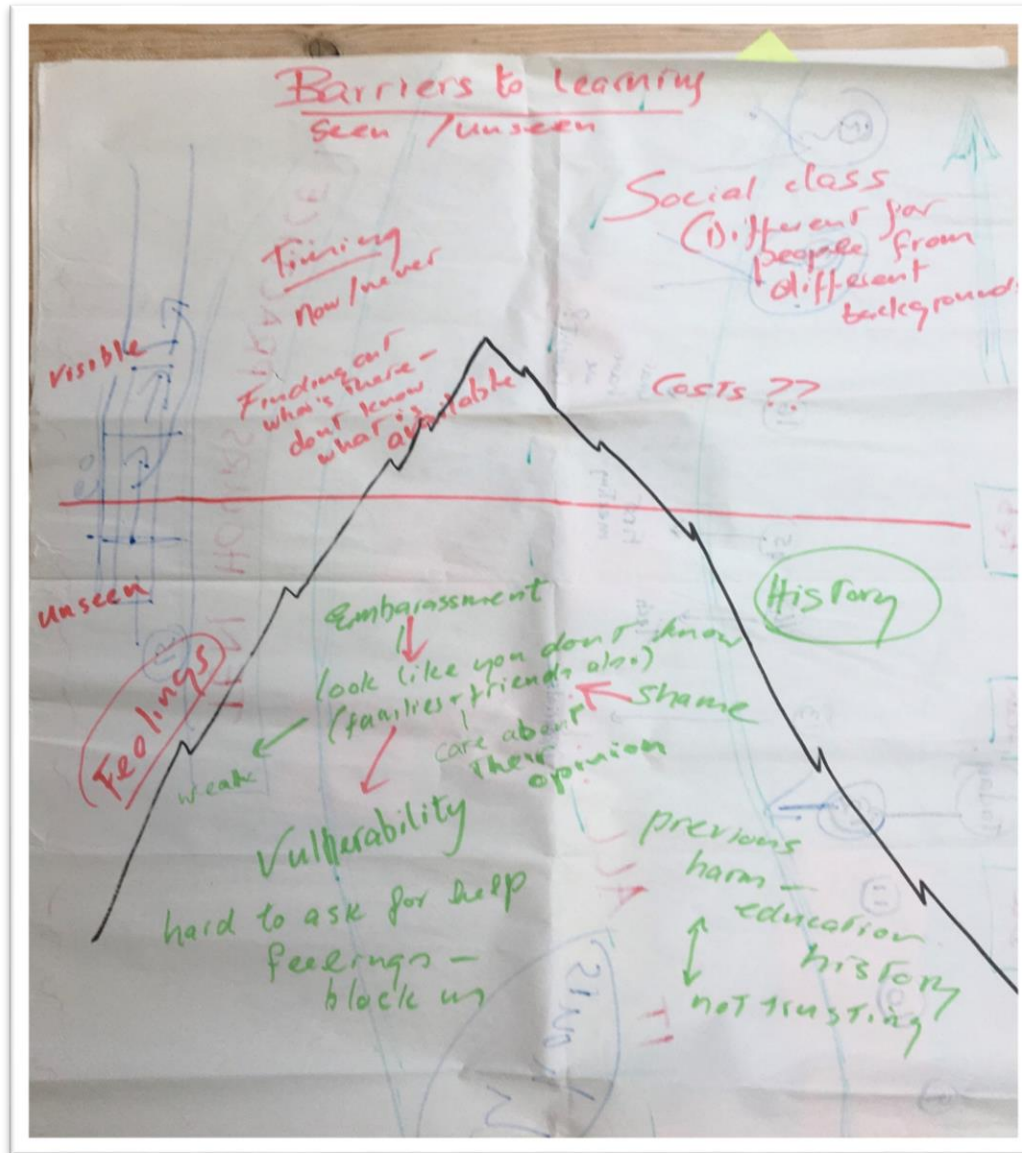
Peer literacy tutor

Following the input by the literacy ambassador, small groups reflected on understandings of literacy and its role in their lives before incarceration, and in the context of their prison lives. Prison literacy included filling in tuck shop requests, keeping in touch with family members, visitation request forms, legal and medical correspondence, phone call requests, P19s (disciplinary correspondence) and letters to the parole board. In their individual and collective reflections group members moved from an initial view of literacy as a functional skill to an understanding of literacy as socially situated. Literacy, they concluded, was crucial to communication, to relationship building, to accessing rights and played an important role in health and wellbeing.

Further individual and group reflection unpacked motivations for returning to learning. In the context of adult education, it was agreed that the quality of the learning relationship that was built between tutor and learner was key to successful and ongoing engagement in learning. Within a prison context, where people lived so closely together, mutual respect and confidentiality were identified as core to learning and one participant memorably described confidentiality in prison as ‘sacrosanct’.

Building the group

The design of the subsequent workshop further supported the development of respect and recognition amongst these adult learners. A collective and reflective group exercise interrogated an image of an iceberg as a metaphor for what is visible/ invisible when men reengage in learning.



This sparked a discussion about masculinity, identity and learning. Participants shared memories of returning to learning and the fears that underpinned this process. Confirming research that entering a learning group can be a daunting experience for men (Corridan, 2002; De Brun and Du Vivier, 2007), fears around

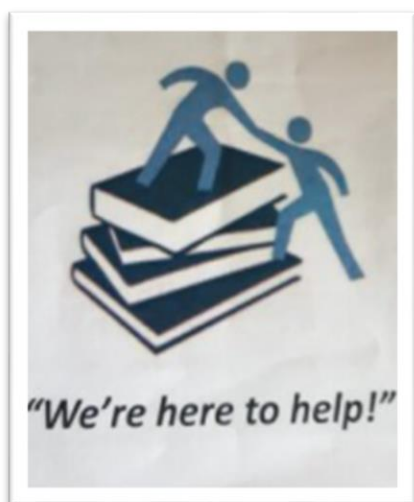
looking stupid, not knowing, being mocked or publicly shamed by other men were shared. In this discussion the men allowed themselves to be vulnerable to one another and found only attentive listening and empathy. I believe this experience was a further turning point in the formation of the group. It contributed to mutual understanding and assured participants that their experiences and reflections were valued by others.

This exercise was followed by reflections on the guidelines of good adult literacy work (NALA, 2012). Participants considered these in small groups, rewrote them in language they were happy with and finally designed images to represent their discussions. The drawing of these images evoked much laughter and a sense of fun and good humour amongst the different groups. Images included drawings of people sitting around tables as equals, of figures that represented the time needed to get to know one another and of two figures shaking hands. Each group's image was presented to the wider group, providing more opportunities for discussion and the further bonding of the group.

These participative opening workshops laid the foundation for the development of learning relationships which have endured for almost two years. An environment of respect and recognition supported participants to share their thoughts, feelings and hopes in a context that was underpinned by a pedagogical practice of learning care.

Becoming literacy ambassadors and tutors

Following these workshops a core group of ten prisoners expressed an interest in becoming literacy ambassadors within the prison. At this point the Prison Education Officers, Probation Staff and Chaplain returned to their usual duties. They continued to informally support and encourage the men throughout the rest of the programme. In a celebratory event in the Education Unit certificates of participation were presented to the men who had completed the initial Literacy Awareness Workshops as a formal recognition of their work.



In summer 2019, and supported by the Education Unit staff, this group met to plan a project to promote the prison's Education Unit. They designed posters and flyers in Plain English and displayed them on different floors, known as landings, throughout the prison. Promotional flyers were also distributed in prison laundry bags. One of the slogans designed by the ambassadors and used in the promotional materials was "We're here to help".

"The ambassador role was great. I'd talk to four people then they'd talk to others and it would go on like that."

Peer literacy tutor

“It has made it easier for prisoners that have literacy problems to feel that it’s alright to ask for help in the school and to ask the ambassadors on the landings too.”

Education Unit staff

In early autumn 2019, participants reflected on their summer experience as literacy ambassadors. In encouraging others back to education, they spoke of the growth in their own morale and confidence. One literacy ambassador described having ‘good feelings’ about the work, another spoke of ‘self-fulfilment’, and of getting something back from being involved.

“I feel like we are being role models to other lifers. The message is they can make the best of their time here.”

Peer literacy tutor

“It feels good to me always to be carrying a folder under my arm. It looks good.”

Peer literacy tutor

Some reflected on the importance of their role in building trust with others about the Education Unit service. They highlighted the unique position they have as peers in reducing perceived barriers to participation. They believed that the Education Unit Staff were sometimes viewed as ‘at a different level and more qualified and educated’ than the general prison population and that this in itself was a barrier for some prisoners. However, this barrier was not there when it came to approaching peers to look for support and to begin to open up about learning needs.

These positive and enhancing experiences prompted the students to think more ambitiously about themselves and their role. They started to envision new possibilities for themselves. With the encouragement of the Education Unit the men began to consider the possibilities of training as peer literacy tutors.

An information workshop was organised by the NALA project worker to outline the steps involved in becoming a literacy tutor. Following the workshop four men left the group at this point as they were involved in a number of other education courses in the Education Unit and felt they couldn't fully commit to the programme. They continued in their roles as literacy ambassadors encouraging their peers to attend the Education Unit. Seven men agreed to continue with their training to become literacy tutors. This group became known within Portlaoise Prison as 'The Peers'. Their new social identities were already confirmed in this title.

The literacy skills training course and its support

The standard NALA/WIT module provides a solid foundation in adult education theory alongside the practical skills needed to support literacy learners. In order to gain accreditation learners are required to:

- Attend twenty hours initial tutor training
- Engage in an apprenticeship phase (trainee tutors begin to work with literacy learners for a period of twenty hours in a supported context)
- Attend ten hours additional in-service training
- Submit a portfolio of assessment (an assignment and three comprehensive lesson plans).

In this phase of the Portlaoise project a timetable of fortnightly training was agreed in collaboration with the group and the Education Unit staff. This was designed to mirror the academic year from September 2019 to April of 2020. Supported by the Education Unit staff the group held meetings after each workshop to reflect on their learning. Experienced external tutors delivered specific modules of the course such as the Reading, Writing, Numeracy and IT units. The NALA project worker met with each of the tutors beforehand to discuss the particular context of the course.

Including external tutors in the programme gave course participants an opportunity to experience different styles of facilitation and provided welcome variety in a context governed by routine.

Internal co-ordination and support was primarily provided by the literacy teacher in the Education Unit. This role was crucial to the success of the course and extensive and responsive communication loops developed between the NALA worker and the Education Unit literacy teacher. Along with a colleague she took responsibility for sharing workshop feedback notes with course participants, for developing a

mentoring programme to support the engagement of the group once they began to work with learners and provided considerable support to the group in their submission of portfolios to WIT. Staff members from the Education Unit and the wider prison staff also supported the programme and the participants throughout the training. These included, at various times, the Education Officers, the Chaplain, the Literacy and English teachers, the Integrating Literacy teachers, and the Supervising Teacher. The support and encouragement given by staff further bolstered the men's growing sense of confidence.

"One of the chiefs was asking me about the course the other day and wondering when we would all be graduating. That felt good. It has a status to it."

Peer literacy tutor

Given the incarcerated setting of the training and the unprecedented impact of COVID-19 on the project, course requirements were modified in collaboration with WIT as the academic year progressed. Before COVID-19, it was agreed that the apprenticeship phase of practice would be shortened from twenty hours to ten sessions with learners. In the best of times it was not always possible for trainee literacy tutors to work consistently with students over sustained periods, prison transfers, illness, family visits, and medical appointments are prioritised over literacy work.

During COVID-19 most opportunities to do one-to-one literacy support work were shut down. The trainee tutors no longer had access to one another, to the support of the Education Unit teachers, or to IT. Many had to complete their portfolios in isolation in their cells. Some completed their portfolios by hand-writing assignments. In-service training was also halted as a result of COVID-19. In light of these unexpected and unique events WIT agreed to modify expectations of the Peers in relation to the number of apprenticeship hours and requested one extra COVID-19 related assignment be completed in lieu of further in-service training.

Impacts and outcomes

The final evaluation of the course took place in December 2020. Prior to the evaluation 3 men from the group were transferred to other facilities and one other was released. The transferred students continued with their studies (some in isolation as a result of COVID-19) and submitted portfolios for assessment through a combination of support from the local Education Unit in their new settings, and the ongoing distance support of the literacy teacher from the Portlaoise Education Unit. The participant who was released had completed the initial training and had already begun working with a number of learners within Portlaoise. With long distance support from the Portlaoise Education Unit, this student completed his portfolio following release. Due to security restrictions the reflections of these 4 participants are not included in the final evaluation.

Challenges

This literacy tutor training course was unique in many ways. It was the first time in Ireland that men incarcerated in a maximum-security prison were trained as literacy tutors, and as such, this was uncharted (and exciting) territory. In addition the COVID-19 context had a profound impact on the final months of the course and on the participants and Education Unit staff.

The gendered prison environment

A men's prison is a particular environment in which to participate in educational programmes. As previously noted, engaging in education and literacy activities can be viewed as feminised and, in a deeply sexist world, of lesser value. To engage in learning requires an acknowledgement that there is something we do not know and within a macho culture 'not knowing' opens men up to the critical gaze of others and this can be a risky undertaking (Connell, 2000).

“In the environment here in a male prison you can’t let your guard down safely, you can’t be vulnerable. That is risky. But here they did that.”

Education Unit staff

To position oneself as a tutor, as someone of status with the skills and knowledge to facilitate learning also carries risk. It involves stepping outside the box others have constructed for you, it involves a change in one’s identity and in how one is viewed by others. In stepping into the literacy tutor role the men wanted to feel confident. They spoke of not wanting to look stupid when working with students with whom they lived day in and day out. They did not want to feel vulnerable or to open themselves up to the possible ridicule and judgement of the wider prison community. They were conscious that the relationship they would be building with their learners, with whom they lived, was unique.

Education Unit staff were aware of these additional challenges for course participants. They designed a structured mentoring support system to ensure that apprentice tutors had a safe environment to tease out issues as they arose.

Resourcing

Whilst a NALA/WIT literacy tutor training programme existed it needed ongoing adaptations and modifications for delivery in an incarcerated and maximum-security setting. The dynamic nature of this process resulted at times in a lack of clarity for Education Unit staff. It was only as the course progressed that the level of independent work required from students outside of workshop times became clear.

“I have documented all the different phases involved, all the way through the process, and I was astonished you know, the amount ...not just the teachers. It’s all other staff in other areas who were involved and then the logistics to be able to get the portfolio looked at. As you know yourself it involves a lot of other personnel.”

Education Unit staff

All apprentice literacy tutors require support and mentoring but in a prison context this requires particular supports which, in turn, requires staffing and time resources. This aspect of the pilot was initially not fully understood but rather emerged as the course progressed. It was clear from the interviews with Education Unit staff that generous staffing of the course would be best planned for in advance.

COVID-19

The greatest and least expected challenge of all impacted the final phase of the project. When COVID-19 reached Ireland the Peers had completed the first phase of the training and had begun to actively work with their students. Draft assignments were being discussed and composed, lesson plans were being developed in collaboration with students and with the guidance of the Education Unit literacy staff. The Peers had access to computers and printers to complete their work. They had access to each other and to Education Unit staff for support and encouragement. There was a sense of hope and optimism amongst the Peers. They were finally getting to put into practice what they had learnt. There was a realisation that the end of the course was in sight. Plans were being made for a graduation ceremony, families were to be invited, the Prison Governor was to attend and security arrangements were being put in place to include the Peers who had been transferred to other locations. They had much to look forward to, and they were enthusiastically practicing their skills as literacy tutors. COVID-19 brutally interrupted this progression.

“And then suddenly bang it all ended. It was heart-breaking in a way it was. So it really was like a knock coming down on us all...it didn't just stop that activity going ahead. It stopped all contact. That was the real difficulty.”

Education Unit staff

Lockdown brought a change in everyone's lives. However, these changes were intensified for those who were already imprisoned. The pandemic resulted in significant changes to the day-to-day life of the men who were practising their literacy tutoring skills. Prison authorities worked to keep people safe but there was a cost to this. Isolation and prolonged cell time were harsh features of the early days of COVID-19. Lockdown intensified the sheer monotony of life and ended what little meaningful human contact prisoners had with the outside world. Longed for and sustaining family visits were stopped. Access to the gym was shutdown. Yard time and access to fresh air was limited. Anxiety, uncertainty and fear of catching COVID-19 underpinned these changes in prison routines across the country.⁷ Prisoners were transferred to other facilities, including some of the students with whom the course participants had begun to build learning relationships. The Peers no longer had access to computers or printers to complete the assignments for their portfolios. Crucially they no longer had access to one another and to the supportive conversations they had previously found so useful. Some had to finish their work with pencil and paper in the isolation of their cells.

When access to the Education Unit closed, staff regrouped to consider how they would support all of their students. The Peers were now at the final stages of training to be literacy tutors and were working on completing their portfolios. COVID-19 information packs along with educational materials and readers were distributed by the Red Cross to all prisoners and the Peers played a role in this task. Teachers observed that the Peers had 'stepped up' when they were needed and

⁷ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/locked-up-in-lockdown-how-prisons-are-coping-with-covid-19-1.4267071> Accessed September 2021

that they had become a trusted and recognisable group within the wider prison context.

Following the initial reorganisation and the implementation of strict safety procedures some of the Peers were eventually able to return to the Education Unit to continue their tutor apprenticeship for a limited time. This was identified during the evaluative focus group as something that benefitted their wellbeing. Whilst others had to deal with the impact of long hours of isolation in their cells they had some chance to do meaningful work with their students.

The Education Officers played a pivotal role in supporting the Peers to complete the course. They had been involved in the initial literacy awareness training and had actively encouraged the men's engagement from the earliest days of the project. They became a vital communication link between the trainee tutors and the Education Unit staff and their efforts supported the men to complete their work and allowed the Education Unit to keep going in a limited way throughout the lockdown.

Transformation

Giroux (1988) reminds us that the purpose of education is transformation. Many of the points made above in describing the design of the course bear repetition here for the role they played in the transformatory outcomes for participants. The conversations and reflections of the Peers and Education Unit staff are rich with evidence of such transformation. Perspectives of literacy and literacy learning have changed. Identities have been expanded. Participants see themselves differently and describe being seen differently by their families, their peers and tutors. They have gained skills and knowledge which they are using to make life better for their community. There is more to them than when they started this programme.

View of literacy

The early days of the Peer project supported people who were imprisoned, Education Unit staff, Prison Officers and the Prison Chaplain to inquire into meanings of literacy. This starting point recognised that everyone had knowledge and experiences to share. The NALA project worker hoped to build a safe, respectful, collaborative space with the group to support such conversations and this proved to be successful.

This introductory phase was described by one tutor as a 'wonderful experience'. Participants commented:

"It has helped prisoners and staff to get on better. Ann and Michael and everyone who came in gave us the belief that we could become peer-to-peer literacy tutors. It was built on getting to know one another and trust."

Peer literacy tutor

"The camaraderie amongst the whole group was there, including Ann, the teachers, the students and the officers also."

Peer literacy tutor

Carefully facilitated group work and creative exercises supported the construction of an open, lively and fun learning environment. An input from a visiting literacy ambassador, himself a returning adult literacy learner catalysed hope and inspired the group.

Drawing from the group's experience and driven by dialogue, understandings of literacy quickly moved from functional to more socially situated perspectives. These transformed understandings were the cornerstones on which the course rested and these learnings were experienced by Education Unit staff and by the Peers.

"The course reminded me that literacy isn't just reading and writing. I now hear different students talking about it as a life skill. You know someone says they want to be able to write a letter. You know, you hear the students (peers) saying it's not only about letter writing. Think about all the other things you could write and think about how you will be able to help your kids. You hear them saying that and I think that that's huge."

Education Unit staff

"Before I began this I thought literacy was just reading and writing. It's bigger than that, it's about communication and lots more."

Peer literacy tutor

Wider impact

As time went on the visibility and work of the literacy ambassadors and the Peers rippled outwards across the wider prison community. Their work changed how literacy was seen and spoken of within the prison and ultimately impacted on the numbers of people attending the Education Unit. Men from the landings were comfortable approaching their peers. They were understood and trusted.

“Because of the publicity we did around the prison, the posters and leaflets that we designed and distributed we now have a significant increase in prisoners coming to the education unit. The fact that we went out and explained what we were doing helped to remove the stigma so that the lads on the landings felt more comfortable asking for help.”

Peer literacy tutor

Teachers observed that discussions about literacy became normalised and further helped to dilute the stigma related to having unmet literacy needs. This in turn led to increased participation in the Education Unit.

Building community

Data gathered during the evaluation is rich with references to the role of the project in contributing to the building of community across a number of areas in the prison environment. These included between Peers and their students, amongst the wider community on the landings, between group members, and between the Education Unit staff and the group.

“For me tutoring has been an opportunity to sit with people and to create a friendship with someone.”

Peer literacy tutor

Others described feeling bolstered and encouraged by people on the landings who were not themselves taking part in education courses. Their efforts were viewed as ‘using’ rather than ‘killing’ time.

“People know we are doing this now and we are being encouraged. They say we are doing the right thing, using our time here like this. Using it to be educated. Many see it as the best way to do time.”

Peer literacy tutor

“I had a bad week last week. I got a bad result in my OU assignment and felt a bit down. Others on the landings were asking me why I was in a mood and when they heard they were saying to me to keep going, that I was doing great and doing the right thing. They helped to build my confidence and self-esteem.”

Peer literacy tutor

The early emphasis on building learning relationships promoted new understandings and respect between the prison Education Unit teachers and Peers. Sitting together, listening to one another's stories and ideas supported the growth of trust amongst participants. As time went by and fuelled by this early emphasis on building relationships, participants began to see themselves as belonging in a group and in turn a sense of being part of a caring community. When participants missed a session others made sure to save extra handouts for them, when someone was feeling down in the group others put extra effort into encouraging them.

“It was very good. Each student gave each other the belief we could do the course, and this was helped by building trust and confidentiality.”

Peer literacy tutor

“It was great. We really helped each other out if we were struggling and we met once a week to talk about ideas and to see how we were all getting along.”

Peer literacy tutor

“A sense of community grew out of it and it is really important. You know there were people who didn’t know each other. I think that was something that was not written down. But there’s lots of great things that came out of the course that I think you know aren’t necessarily terribly measurable but we have witnessed it.”

Education Unit staff

Education Unit staff observed that relationships were further strengthened through a process of ongoing consultation. Stopping points along the way created opportunities for reflection and valued input from Peers provided a sense of agency in relation to the course content and direction.

Identity

During the initial days of the course many had shared stories of their harmful memories of learning. They described internalising messages that they would never learn, that they were stupid, dumb, that they would never amount to anything in life. Such early experiences of learning have a lasting impact on people’s confidence as learners and are carried through into all new learning environments (Duckworth and Smith, 2019).

“The main challenge for me was in building my confidence to realise that I could teach someone.”

Peer literacy tutor

"It was hard to have the belief that we could become adult literacy teachers."

Peer literacy tutor

The Peers all spoke of a transformed view of themselves as a result of their participation in the course. They were students who walked comfortably to class with their portfolios under their arms. They were happy and confident to present themselves differently. They had become literacy tutors. They spoke with pride, care and satisfaction of 'their' students. They had accrued power to influence others and they liked the feeling it evoked. They had a qualification from a Higher Education institute, they had begun to use the skills and knowledge they had learnt during the course. There was more to them than when they set out on the course.

"I won't forget when I saw the look on my student's face when he first realised that he had read nearly a full page by himself though he was only meant to read two lines, but he just kept going."

Peer literacy tutor

"My learner is doing his Junior Cert and my other student likes Marvel films so we are doing worksheets together on that. The most important thing to do is to ask them what they want to do and to plan from there."

Peer literacy tutor

"It has shown me I can do anything and I have the courage to be a great teacher."

Peer literacy tutor

Despite living in an incarcerated setting where choice is so constrained, they had exercised agency in choosing to take part in this course. Through their hard work, commitment and persistence they had developed the skills needed to support others. They were proud and happy to be in a position to give back to their community. Increases in self-confidence and self-esteem were further reinforced by the recognition and respect of Education Unit staff, other prisoners, families and friends for their efforts.

“Taking part in this course has made me more confident that I have the ability to help others and give that same confidence to someone else.”

Peer literacy tutor

“There is a purpose to it, a value. I think that realisation is huge. Certainly the learners I’ve spoken to about the course have mentioned, of their own accord, you know saying it was sort of like a miracle. They couldn’t believe that they’d work with somebody on something they’d learned and they’ve enabled that for others. It was just quite incredible to them, you know? I think that was really quite powerful for them you know?”

Education Unit staff

In reflecting on the changes in the Peers, Education Unit staff had noted a shift in their status within the prison community. Peers were seen by others as successful students who had become tutors and the role of tutor had a status attached to it. Peers were being identified as trained tutors and approached by fellow prisoners for support. This was internalised by Peers as an increase in personal power, a significant acquisition in a context where personal choices are severely limited by institutional restrictions.

"I am getting a lot of recognition for the work I am doing. I feel the power of it."

Peer literacy tutor

"It is the power I get from courses such as this that drives me to achieve more. This course provided structure, confidence, a sense of belonging, acceptance, motivation and hope."

Peer literacy tutor

"I think there was a general sense of importance involved for the men doing the course. They were supporting others and it boosted self-esteem. There was a feeling of power in it. They were enabling and supporting others on the landings."

Education Unit staff

Identities were further bolstered during phone conversations with families and friends. One Peer described how Sunday phone conversations with family had moved from being 'Horrendous, when you have nothing to say' to having 'Something to ring home and talk about'. Peers described how proud their families were of them and their efforts to 'give something back'. They were being approved of by their families as a result of their involvement in the course and enabling the creation of new family stories. It felt good.

"My mother is very happy that I'm helping others – there is such a sense of satisfaction when the student gets it."

Peer literacy tutor

"I have a plan with my family now and the NALA work is part of that plan – I like the feeling you get, the sense of achievement."

Peer literacy tutor

“My friends and family have both said that I seem a lot more confident and my brothers and sisters said I can do all my nephews and nieces' homework with them when I get home. I'll be the family tutor now!”

Peer literacy tutor

Tutor transformation

Education Unit staff identified changes in their perspectives as a result of participation in the project. The early workshops provided opportunities for staff to become part of the learning group alongside the Peers. Group work activities allowed new understandings to emerge and prompted the deepening of relationships between prison staff and the Peers.

“To me, that was the highlight because I learnt from those myself, you know, how to build relationships with the lads. So I found for me that was a learning situation. You know just listening to the lads experiences of their own education journey, you know things that we might take for granted, understanding how they started out you know? And how they were so willing now to learn new methods that they could use in working with others. You know, it was kind of a broadening of my teaching experience as well. They were so willing to share their stories with people delivering the course. There was a great element of trust there and an openness.”

Education Unit staff

“It has made me very aware again of the lost opportunities in the education system and the impact of socio-economic circumstances on literacy levels and life experience.”

Education Unit staff

“I think that it was built by just meeting them where they are and to be able to...listening is very much part of that. Not to be judgemental...to be able to listen to what they have to say, to listen to their view is very important in this. You know, sometimes as teachers we might think we know it all but we have so much to learn every day.”

Education Unit staff

During the course tutors worked closely with the Peers to create log books to record teaching practice. This collaborative experience further enhanced relationships. The consistent use of the log books to record sessions provoked ongoing discussions on practice between staff and Peers during the apprenticeship phase of the project. This was a learning opportunity for everyone.

Conclusion

This unique intervention has developed alongside the evolving needs of course participants. The early emphasis on building good learning care relationships, which attends to both the human and social processes involved in learning, enabled participation and secured a solid foundation from which to progress. Regular pauses provided collaborative spaces for stocktaking and supported learners' agency and empowerment.

Progress has been supported by the students' willingness to reflect on and share their early experiences of learning and to analyse the impact of unhelpful aspects of early learning structures. Through these collaborative reflections the participants have experienced and envisaged a different type of education, one which is underpinned by adult education principles of inclusivity, empowerment, ownership, and transformation.

Previously spoiled learning identities were refashioned. With the whole-hearted and skilful support of the Education Unit staff and NALA, the Peers became literacy tutors. They emerge in the data with more confidence and hope. They have the skills and determination to 'give back' to their community. Furthermore, reflecting their flourishing identities they report being seen differently by their families and community.

During an unprecedented time in our history, a time of great fear and isolation, this community of learners drew upon their personal determination to complete what they had begun in very different times. They succeeded in their goal. They describe seeing themselves differently, they have acquired new social identities which are meaningful for them. They have become literacy tutors and much more. The journey of education, which is towards hope for a different future is clearly encapsulated in the data.

Afterword January 2022

This afterword provides a brief update of the further progression of the 7 newly qualified tutors who were involved in this unique pilot project. Progression takes place in a new literacy landscape guided by the Adult Literacy for Life, a 10 Year Adult Literacy Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2021) which recognises incarcerated people as one of the vulnerable cohorts of learners 'most in need of focussed supports' (p 59). The strategy calls for innovative project proposals, such as the one described in this case study, to redress literacy inequalities which are so clearly in evidence in the prison population in Ireland.

During the literacy tutor training project the Peers reviewed a range of adult literacy readers including texts developed by students from the Dublin Adult Literacy Centre and by Voices, An Open Door Book of Stories (Scanlan, 2020). Following the completion of the tutor training course two of the Peers were inspired by these texts and determined to produce and publish texts which would be of relevance to the prison community. Supported by the literacy staff of the Education Unit and 2 new group members the 'Lads' Literacy Pack' of ten short literacy readers were developed, illustrated and edited by the group. Some of the stories focus on the day-to-day routine of prison life and support those newly arrived to better understand prison life. The pack demonstrates the role that prison education plays in supporting people to find a way through their sentence that is meaningful for them and their families.

Two of the original Peer group are continuing their studies with the Open University. One is studying for a degree in English whilst the other is studying Criminology.

Peer tutors continue to develop their literacy tutoring skills through their support of learners from the Education Unit. The literacy ambassadors work to encourage those who are not engaging with the Education Unit to reengage with learning.

All members of the group continue to participate in and meaningfully contribute to lifelong learning in incarcerated settings. They are succeeding in their original motivation to give back to their community. They are supporting their peers to develop literacy confidence and skills which are the building blocks of human relationships, identity and agency.

Closing words for this case study are best voiced by one of the course participants.

"I never thought during the course that I would look back with so much appreciation, fondness and pride when I finished it. I would do the course again in a heartbeat and I would check in weekly or monthly to discuss these feelings with the group. Sometimes these evaluations go in search of ways to improve, enhance or change things. But sometimes you have to accept it was something amazing that was done and plough on with that acceptance and belief."

Peer literacy tutor

Recommendations

Engaging participants

The group who were involved in this project had been **involved in prison education for some time**. They had a clear understanding and first-hand experience of the **adult education approach** which underpins prison education in Ireland. They spoke of benefitting from their involvement in education and were already **motivated** to support their peers with their literacy development. It is recommended that this project is best suited to individuals and groups whose starting point is similar.

<p>Before the course</p>	<p>Reflecting on the course the Peers and the Education Unit staff had a number of recommendations to make regarding future programme development. Whilst there was a pre-existing programme of work for the NALA/ WIT certificate many felt that clearer communication was needed about the real workload involved for course participants and Education Unit staff who were supporting them. As this was a pilot it was recognised that this information could only be gathered following the completion of the programme, however they suggest this now be quantified so as to inform subsequent courses.</p> <p>Respondents suggested that the course be broken into distinct phases. The first to attract interest, the second Literacy Ambassador training and the third, Peer-to-Peer literacy tutor training including the apprenticeship phase with an option to do the NALA/WIT certificate.</p> <p>The first phase would help to raise the profile of literacy as socially situated amongst the community and demonstrate that adult education worked differently to ‘school learning’. These pre course taster sessions would be a recruitment ground for participants wishing to become literacy ambassadors. Input from WIT and NALA could usefully be included in the programme and begin the process of relationship building with the awarding body. Participants recommended that stopping points be built into the course in order to consider whether to continue to the next phase of the programme.</p>
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Course beginnings/ ambassador phase	Clearly map out the extent of the work involved in this phase of the course. Outline time needed for reading/ study outside of face-to-face contact.
Literacy tutor training phase	Supply a learner information pack to students containing a detailed course outline and accreditation requirements, reading list, workshop commitments and schedule, testimonials from previous participants, estimate of reflection, and reading commitment outside of course time.
Apprenticeship phase	Following their training Peers were matched with literacy learners. Some learning pairs self-selected following informal conversations on the prison landings. Others were assigned students to work with by the Education Unit staff. Staff recommend that the matching of Peers and learners begins before the training phase ends in order to ensure as much compatibility as possible. They recommend that learning pairs have time to build relationships before formally beginning their literacy work. In a prison context this requires resources such as safe spaces to meet, the scheduling of escorts to ensure that learning pairs arrive securely to their study place.

<p>Mentoring</p>	<p>First meetings and literacy classes are challenging enough 'outside', however in a prison setting additional factors come into play. Concerns about Peers and learners incarcerated realities, where they would be living together after each session led to the development of a thorough support and mentoring structure.</p> <p>Each Peer was assigned a mentor and 1/1 meetings were scheduled to occur before and after each learning session. Students identified this as a useful space to talk through and refine lesson plans which had been agreed with learners. Staff also identified this as a successful model which encouraged reflection on practice in a structured way. Peers had a monthly group meeting with an Education Unit staff member to gather, share and reflect on the learning from the apprentice sessions. The Education Unit staff recommend that this structured support be resourced and scheduled into subsequent courses.</p> <p>A mentor's guide was suggested by staff. This would ensure best practice and support mentors who felt they 'were flying by the seat of their pants' when they took on the work. The guide could outline the role and responsibilities of the job and include a timetable of meetings. It was suggested that in normal, post COVID-19 times that mentors could also support Peers in the completion of their portfolios.</p>
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Portfolio support	<p>The usual support for the completion of portfolios was unavailable to the Peers because of the COVID-19 lockdown. Peers were incarcerated in their cells for long periods of time. This was used by Peers to progress assignments and lesson plans.</p> <p>A guide to the completion of portfolios with model assignments and lesson plans would have greatly supported them during this phase and it is recommended that this be developed for future courses.</p>
Progression and skills development	<p>Education Unit staff were clear about the importance of a fully resourced progression path for students who have engaged in such a programme in order that skills and momentum can continue to flourish.</p>

<p>Guidelines for choosing inputting tutors</p>	<p>Prison education takes place in a unique environment where particular skills and understandings are needed from tutors. When choosing course tutors from outside of the prison education system it is strongly recommended that they work from an adult education ethos which builds upon existing knowledge, skills and experience and which focusses on reflection and praxis. In addition it is recommended that contributing tutors have prior experience of working with students in vulnerable situations as many incarcerated people come from communities which have first-hand experience of state neglect.</p> <p>Peers suggested that tutors work from a similar value base to their own. This includes: working at the students' pace; taking time to build respectful relationships through getting to know and understand students; recognising that many people in prison have had a negative experience of education and are often wary of returning to education; reassuring students that the work is confidential; understanding the importance of authentic praise and encouragement.</p>
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Appendix 1: Course outline

NALA/WIT

Higher Certificate in Arts in Literacy Development L6

Module: Developing Literacies 1

Course Description

This course is introductory and aims to:

- Provide those new to adult literacy tuition with an overview of adult literacy and numeracy development, provision and the work of NALA.
- Equip participants with the essential skills, knowledge and attitudes required by those who wish to tutor adults with literacy and numeracy needs, particularly on a one-to-one basis.
- Provide participants with online courseware and learning resources and the option of WIT certification.

Learning objectives

On successful completion of this course, a participant will be able to:

1. Compare and contrast different definitions of literacy and numeracy, including literacy as social practice.
2. Discuss the causes and effects of unmet literacy and numeracy needs among adults in Ireland.
3. Identify barriers to learning experienced by adults with literacy needs, including social, economic and educational inequalities.
4. Discuss how adults learn and the impact of different learning styles.
5. Discuss the role of the tutor in appropriate and effective learning relationships.

6. Negotiate appropriate learning plans in response to the literacy needs, strengths and goals of an adult learner.
7. Use a variety of approaches to teaching reading, writing, spelling and numeracy.
8. Demonstrate how a range of technologies impact on the lives of literacy learners and can be used in literacy learning.
9. Review, select, adapt and create appropriate learning materials and use authentic materials in adult literacy tuition.
10. Enable students to identify their progress and be able to describe assessment and progress in adult literacy practice to learners and other stakeholders (e.g. Adult Literacy Organisers).

Assessment Methods

Face-to-face formative assessment activities are a feature of this programme. Summative assessment will include:

1. 30% Learning Journal
2. 70% Three Lesson Plans based on supported practice

Suggested Timetable

(Workshops will be fortnightly and two hours in duration)

Workshop titles

- Introduction to Literacy
- What do we mean by Literacy?
- Causes and effects of unmet literacy and numeracy needs
- How adults learn
- Role and responsibilities of the tutor in a peer-to-peer setting

- Programme and lesson planning
- Teaching reading
- Teaching writing
- Teaching spelling
- Teaching numeracy
- Making Materials
- Technology all around us
- Getting started: the first tutor-student meeting
- What have we learnt about literacy?

Appendix 2: Extract from Literacy Matters Spring 2021

In their own words

An inspiring peer-to-peer literacy project took place with Portlaoise Prison's Education Unit, NALA, Waterford Institute of Technology and Laois and Offaly Education Training Board, with support from the Dublin Adult Learning Centre.

Seven students were supported to complete the NALA and Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) Developing Literacies 1 Module and graduate as literacy tutors. Three of the tutors described their experience and what taking part has meant to them.

Peer Literacy Tutor 1

"I took part in the training because I understood how difficult life could be for people without literacy skills. I recognised prisoners who were struggling with prison-life literacy such as filling in forms for the shop, to obtain property and to add numbers to their phone cards. More significantly, I discovered many prisoners wanted to write letters to their families, especially their children, and could not due to literacy issues. I had the desire to help these people and the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) and Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) provided the opportunity to do so.

"Prison life consists of days, weeks and months with no meaning. Boring, lonely and monotonous days, just passing time until you are released. However, prison education offers hope, opportunity, structure and purpose. I felt if we could engage with prisoners around literacy and demonstrate the benefits of reading, writing and

communication, then maybe they would become confident and engage further with the school.

"Prison is rock bottom, however, it can be a platform for success if literacy becomes the foundation. For me, it was a no brainer to engage with NALA and WIT.

Although I have huge aspirations and see a lot of qualities in each individual prisoner, I would feel I have achieved success if it meant one prisoner's mother, child or partner was to receive their first small letter of hope, love and progress from their loved ones since the time they entered prison."

"You're helping somebody, while also helping your own personal development, maturity, confidence and self-esteem."

Peer Literacy Tutor

"I guess it inspired me to continue on the path I am following in terms of progressing within my sentence and achieving academic goals I have set for myself. It helped me diversify my skill set and challenged me to learn new skills such as teaching, transferring lessons from the group to the peer-to-peer sessions, and it boosted my confidence.

"It was not easy to shake off concerns that I was not good enough to be a tutor or wondering were people going to pre-judge me based on my conviction. To be teaching a student was very strange at times and I often questioned myself and my ability to be of any benefit to my learner.

"I gained further confidence in myself and a feeling of self-worth from achieving this Level 6 qualification. I helped my student and the skills he learned he still uses today.

"For example, he continues to read the newspapers online and openly speaks about his ability to use the internet. You would not be human if you did not gain some sort of self-satisfaction from how your student has progressed, and I must

admit, it was a great feeling. You're helping somebody, while also helping your own personal development, maturity, confidence and self-esteem.

"The course encouraged me and my student to continue studying, learn new skills and not to be afraid of challenges. The conclusion I make from this course is my learner gained the ability to spell, break down words, use the internet and more, and I learned how to teach, be patient and there are no boundaries to what I can achieve academically. In that sense you could conclude that we were both students who were teaching each other."

Peer Literacy Tutor 2

"The reason I became involved in the NALA and WIT course to be a literacy ambassador is because it is never too late to learn new skillsets. Also this was the first time NALA and WIT had run this course in a prison environment. I wanted to know if I could do this course; I shouldn't have worried too much. With our NALA teacher Ann, and the teachers in the Education Unit, I had plenty of encouragement, and the training, to finish this course.

"I was told that when I finished this amazing course I would be helping students in prison with their literacy needs. I enjoyed doing this course because I have learned that not all students or learners will have the same level of reading or writing skills. One in six adults in Ireland have problems reading and understanding information, also, half of us lack basic digital skills. As this course went on and I learned more about the work NALA does, the more confidence I got that I knew I would be able to help people in this community, in prison.

"I get a good vibe watching and encouraging this student to grow and build his confidence so that he can develop his literacy skills and his relationship with himself and his family."

Peer Literacy Tutor

“When I finished this course I worked with a student who wanted to do Level 3 communications and I helped him to do this. I have got great satisfaction out of helping the student. I also get a good vibe watching and encouraging this student to grow and build his confidence so that he can develop his literacy skills and his relationship with himself and his family.”

Peer Literacy Tutor 3

“I signed up for the NALA and WIT course because, although I could read and write when I came to prison, I had very little education and no confidence in my ability to do any sort of exam. In fact, just thinking about doing anything like that used to give me cold sweats and butterflies in my stomach, but then I started to go up to the school, admittedly just to get off the landing and avoid the yard. I started having chats with the teachers. They obviously saw some potential in me from the conversations that we were having and convinced me to start off with small things. As I started to see results and get certificates the feeling of achievement I got was something that I had never felt before and it was a great boost to my confidence.

“It also made me feel that I could go on and do my Junior and Leaving Certificate exams, something that I had always thought was impossible for me. I just wanted to help someone in a similar situation that I myself was once in – to discover that feeling and I was in a position to help them as those teachers have helped me and continue to help me. Also, when I was told about the programme, the first thing that popped into my head was I wish there’d been a programme like this available when I first started my education in prison.

“Watching the joy on the face of the person, watching as they gained confidence when they finally realised that they could actually do the work by themselves – that was, for me, very fulfilling.”

Peer Literacy Tutor

“I wanted in some way to repay the kindness and patience shown to me by all the teachers that have helped me over the years and pass that on to others. What I got out of the course, which I didn’t really expect, was the sense of satisfaction. Watching the joy on the face of the person who I was working with and also watching as they gained confidence when they finally realised that they could actually do the work by themselves – that was, for me, very fulfilling.”

Find out more

To find out more about the prison literacy projects that NALA is involved in, please contact Ann Hegarty, NALA Literacy Innovation worker, at ahegarty@nala.ie

Appendix 3: Evaluation of the pilot

Evaluation of the pilot of the Peer-to-Peer literacy tutor training course

Course Participants

December 2020

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the evaluation of the Peer-to-Peer literacy tutor training course. Your reflections about the course, its content and the learning relationships which supported (or blocked) your learning are important and will help us to shape the course for those who come after you.

The information gathered will be used for the purpose of improving the programme and may also be used in the case study of the project for NALA. Questions in the evaluation relate to three themes: the course, the impact and learning relationships. Before beginning you might like to remind yourself of the learning objectives of the course:

The **learning objectives** of the course were to

1. Compare and contrast different definitions of literacy and numeracy, including literacy as social practice.
2. Discuss the causes and effects of unmet literacy and numeracy needs among adults in Ireland.
3. Identify barriers to learning experienced by adults with literacy needs, including social, economic and educational inequalities.
4. Discuss how adults learn and the impact of different learning styles.
5. Model and discuss the role of the tutor in appropriate and effective learning relationships.
6. Negotiate appropriate learning plans in response to the literacy needs, strengths and goals of an adult learner.

7. Use a variety of approaches to teaching reading, writing, spelling and numeracy.
8. Demonstrate how a range of technologies impact on the lives of literacy learners and can be used in literacy learning.
9. Review, select, adapt and create appropriate learning materials and use authentic materials in adult literacy tuition.
10. Enable students to identify their progress and be able to describe assessment and progress in adult literacy practice to learners and other stakeholders.

Additional objectives:

- The development of good learning care relationships between NALA and the staff of the PEU, amongst the learner group and between the learners and tutors.
- Pilot and develop a model of a Peer-to-Peer literacy programme in Portlaoise PEU.

1. The course

1. Please indicate your overall satisfaction with the course

Very unsatisfied ☐ Generally unsatisfied ☐
 Generally satisfied ☐ Very satisfied ☐

Additional comments

What were the highlights of taking part in the course for you?	What were the challenges?
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Looking back over the course and our time together are there changes you would recommend that would improve the course for those who come after you?

2. Would you recommend the course to others?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know ☐

3. Please indicate your overall satisfaction with the training methods and learning activities used during the course delivery

Very unsatisfied ☐

Generally unsatisfied ☐

Generally satisfied ☐

Very satisfied ☐

2. Course impact

How would you say taking part in the course has impacted/ affected you?

What impact has the course had within the prison education unit?

What impact, if any, has it had on the wider prison environment?

Has your being on the course had any impact on your friends or family?

3. Learning relationships

Please comment on the following:

How would you describe the relationship between the student group and the course tutors?

What helped relationships to develop?

How would you describe the relationship among the group?

What helped relationships to develop?

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What advice would you give to tutors who are teaching in an incarcerated setting?
(Think about attitudes and approaches for example)

<p>4. Are there any other comments you would like to make?</p>
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Thank you for taking the time to complete the evaluation. Your contribution is much appreciated.

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The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is a charity and membership based organisation. We work to support adults with unmet literacy and numeracy needs to take part fully in society and to have access to learning opportunities that meet their needs. NALA does this by raising awareness of the importance of literacy, doing research and sharing good practice, providing online learning courses, providing a tutoring service and by lobbying for further investment to improve adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

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