

Briefing papers

About this report

This report is a series of briefing papers that were commissioned by SOLAS to support inclusion in the Adult Literacy Services during the implementation of 'Future FET: Transforming Learning', the Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024.

The views expressed in this report are not necessarily the views of NALA.

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About this series of briefing papers

These briefing papers were commissioned by SOLAS to support inclusion in the Adult Literacy Services during the implementation of 'Future FET: Transforming Learning', the Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024 (referred to as FET Strategy 2020-2024 in this document).

The series aims to:

- guide decision-making and thought leadership on literacy, numeracy and digital literacy across the FET Sector during the FET Strategy 2020-2024.
- consider the themes emerging from three recent research reports on:
- Family Literacy (SOLAS, 2020),
- Numeracy (SOLAS, 2021a), and
- The Inclusion of Adults with Intellectual Disabilities (SOLAS, 2021b).

These three reports were commissioned by SOLAS, ETBI and NALA during the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019. Six themes were identified from evidence-based analysis of the research findings.

Each will be subject of a briefing paper.

1. Inclusive learner identities
2. Measurement of learning
3. Tutor identity and inclusive capacity
4. Literacy learner engagement
5. Inclusive organisations and environments
6. Interagency collaboration

Briefing paper 1

Inclusive learning identities and
rhythms

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About this briefing paper

This paper discusses inclusive learner identities. We begin by setting the current context of adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy in Ireland before exploring the themes of learning identities, teaching relationships and learner journeys, and inclusive organisations. We explore how the relationships and rhythm of learning for many of those engaging with the Adult Literacy Services is unique and different from other education settings. We pay close attention to the implications of these learning rhythms for learning identities, teaching relationships and learner journeys in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.

Background context

Inclusion and literacy in a complex and uncertain world

Literacy changes lives

Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy are recognised as essential development life skills in national and international education policies. The 10-year Adult Literacy for Learning (ALL) Strategy for Ireland is a whole-of-government approach which recognises literacy, numeracy and digital literacy as key competences for lifelong learning on an individual and societal level (Government of Ireland, 2021). This builds on a series of policy initiatives including the Transformative Lives FET Strategy 2020-2024 (SOLAS, 2020), the Upskilling Pathway: New Opportunities for Adults (EU Council, 2016), Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020 – 2025 (Government of Ireland, 2020) as well as national inclusion policies across a whole-of-government approach.

International comparative research by the Organisation of Economic Cooperative Development (OECD) highlights the extent of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy challenges facing many adults in Ireland (OECD, 2012). This has adverse consequences on personal, work, health, education and societal levels for individuals, families, and communities (CSO, 2013). The OECD Education 2030 strategy emphasises the importance of learner agency in navigating through the complex and uncertain world of today. The strategy encourages the creation of learning environments that support students to build learning experiences, opportunities, and processes in collaboration with others. It also emphasises a development of a “solid foundation” of literacy and numeracy, digital literacy, data literacy, physical health and mental well-being (OECD, 2018: 4).

This paper is written with this policy backdrop in mind, exploring the distinctive learning identities, relationships and learning rhythms that characterise inclusion in the Adult Literacy Services, and the implications for improving literacy, numeracy and digital literacy in inclusive learning organisations.

Developing capabilities

Inclusive learning identities in Adult Literacy Services

We learn better when we believe in our ability to learn

The development of a strong and confident learner identity is key for all learning. It holds a particular significance for adult literacy students who often have low confidence about their learning capacities as a consequence of damaging school experiences. A capabilities approach shifts attention from a deficit approach of what learners might lack to foreground people's interests and active realisation of their capabilities to learn (Nussbaum, 2011). This broadens the human capital approach to a lifewide approach to learning that acknowledges the social context of people's lives (Ó Tuama, 2016). The Adult Literacy Services create a supportive and welcoming ethos using an adult education approach of lifelong and lifewide education centred on the learner, provided in locally based services. This ethos is highlighted throughout the three research reports completed by SOLAS as crucial in supporting and enhancing literacy learner engagement and capabilities.

The core aim of ETB Adult Literacy Services is to respond to the unmet literacy needs of all adult learners in the population as a fundamental part of an inclusive society. The Adult Literacy Services espouse an adult learning ethos that emphasises "experiential relevance, learner-centredness, and collaborative planning that involves adults in their learning, [as] central" (Numeracy Report, 2021a: 61). The relationships and rhythm of learning for many of those engaging with the Adult Literacy Services is unique and distinctive to other education settings. This has key implications for learning identities, teaching relationships and learner journeys in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy across the FET sector which are the focus of the sections below.

Literacy learner identity

People learn differently, but we all want to feel valued

Learners engaging with the Adult Literacy Services come from very diverse backgrounds, needs and interests. However, they share common features which are evident in the findings of the three research reports. For many literacy learners, their sense of identity as a learner has been deeply affected by damaging experiences of schooling which have had profound consequences for their livelihoods, opportunities and sense of self (Feeley, 2013). The Numeracy Report highlights how “affective reactions, such as fear, anxiety, stigma, and lack of confidence, represent the main barrier to access experienced by adult learners ... with prior experience of learning mathematics at school as the cause of these damaging emotions” (2021a, p. 8).

Varied skills

Varied or ‘spiky’ capacity is a feature of literacy learning, where “learners in a group can differ enormously both in terms of diversity in learning skills and across and between learners” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 69). Many learners demonstrate strengths in particular areas of literacy and numeracy while finding other skills challenging. This variability of literacy skills has to be seen within the specific learning contexts, motivations and needs of the learners. This requires tutors to be highly skilled and responsive in their pedagogy to this wide range of interests and learning capacities within and across groups.

For adults with intellectual disabilities, their literacy skills “vary greatly and can be complicated by greater than average difficulties in communication skills, social skills, and the ability to retain and apply new knowledge” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 61). This calls for specific interpersonal and communication skills on the part of tutors, as well as the support of assistive technology and, where needed, personal assistants. The diversity of literacy and numeracy capabilities amongst learners is an integral part of learning and pedagogy of the Adult Literacy Services. However, this variability in capabilities is not often visible in the learning indicators and outcomes of the FET system. This gap highlights the need for human capital approaches to use multiple perspectives including social, cultural outcomes of learning as well as employability aspects (Ó Tuama, 2016)

Numeracy is distinctive

The Numeracy Report acknowledges that numeracy is a “multi-dimensional concept involving the use of mathematical knowledge, tools and dispositions in a variety of real-life contexts” (2021a, p. 6). Its recommendations identify numeracy as “a distinct concept [to literacy] with its roots in mathematics. Numeracy is embedded in everyday life – in the home, at work, and in community settings.” (2021a, p. 9). The report identifies numeracy as “critical thinking, working with representations and tools, and applying mathematical knowledge confidently in a range of contexts.” (2021a, p. 10). Its guidelines highlight the need for ETB staff to be aware of numeracy needs amongst learners as well as supporting numeracy demands within integrated courses (2021a, p. 11).

Embedding learning in everyday tasks

All three research reports highlight the embedded nature of literacy, numeracy and digital literacy in everyday activities. Their integration with other skills is an effective way to learn a number of skills in an inclusive manner that can occur in any course or level (Tett et al., 2012). For example, a course on gardening becomes “a natural context for numeracy learning about measurement (length, perimeter, area, volume) and shapes (different-shaped garden beds).” (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 63). Activities such as sewing introduce numeracy, maths, literacy, digital literacy amongst other capacities sensitively and fluidly to learners “as an integral part of the creative process” (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 88). Literacy learning also includes key transversal skills, such as communications skills, study skills, time management, project planning and completion and “working collaboratively in a group ... [and] cognitive development about concepts that are transferable to the workplace” (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 89). These are essential learning indicators which can be mapped as part of the literacy learning journey.

Learner motivation and transformation

Learners’ motivations are key to understanding how they approach learning, with many learners in family literacy “initially attracted to learning rather than literacy. ‘Learning’ was viewed as positive and optimistic whereas ‘literacy’ generated resistance in those with unmet needs and negativity about their learning ability.” (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 56) Crowther et al. highlight how the role of learning in (re)shaping identities has made an important contribution to research on engagement and persistence in adult education” (2010, p. 654). Hence, people’s perceptions of literacy and learning are crucial to understanding how learners construct their identity, with family literacy supporting parents to “establish a new learning identity and become integrated into a solidary parent groups and often into the wider community. Children too benefit in terms of the attitude and skills they acquire from a richer family learning culture.” (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 101).

Learners and literacy staff described how learners with intellectual disabilities develop their learning identities when attending literacy classes, gaining greater independence in their sense of self (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 67-68). Providers of family literacy to ESOL described how it created “an enthusiasm for opportunities to create a new life, to learn a new language and to enhance their children’s learning” amongst learners as well as offering opportunities for intercultural exchange and learning amongst all staff and students in FET (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p.55).

The research reports all cited examples of best practice where literacy and numeracy staff adeptly design “context-rich [literacy and] numeracy experiences that build learners’ confidence and competence” (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 66). This level of personal transformation is vital. It opens up a possibility of progression onto other areas of learning, as well as the enormous personal and social impact. For example, parents described how they “had learned to be ‘relaxed’, ‘confident’ learners with new positive identities and were able to consider further learning options and in some cases employment”. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 59). The transformative potential of learning is also evident in rising levels of social and political capital with tutors citing examples of how literacy learning gave “people the confidence to question and to be more active in their communities” (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 45)

Better learning indicators needed

However, this transformative impact of literacy – a key basis for success in literacy learning and all further education – is not easily recorded in current data or learning indicators. Learners and those working in the sector called for the development of qualitative learning indicators which can record variable and transformative impacts of literacy as a learning journey taking account of where each learner began. Several aspects of literacy learning and indicators of achievements are recorded in these research reports (see figure 1 below). We discuss them below in terms of their implications for literacy learning and will be the focus of Briefing Paper 2 on the measurement of inclusive literacy learning.

Rhythms of inclusive literacy learning

No person's education journey is the same

Literacy learning is a lifelong and lifewide journey for many people. Many literacy learners demonstrate a “wavy line of progression” through courses. Progression can be interrupted as they take time away from learning due to other events in their personal, family, employment or community lives. For adults with intellectual disabilities, their learning journey can mean “lateral progression that learners move in and out of the literacy service, needing varying amounts of time to complete courses at the same level and taking several courses at the same level rather than progressing ‘upwards’” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 75). This is a feature of adult education and adult literacy internationally (Barton et al. 2007), with Crowther et al. (2010:652) noting how learners are ‘dipping in and out of provision’ as suits their life conditions and possibilities. These diverse learning rhythms do not easily map onto existing learner assessment, engagement or accreditation processes. This creates many opportunities and challenges for the Adult Literacy Services in both responding to learners’ needs as well as in creating inclusive learning processes and cultures.

The Family Literacy Report describes how literacy learning can be part of an ‘interrupted learning trajectory’ that many learners have experienced since school (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 56). Learners in the family literacy and numeracy reports both describe how their engagement with the Adult Literacy Services is often linked to key life events, such as their children’s progression in school or their employment context. The Inclusion of Adults with Intellectual Disabilities Report identifies a continual demand for lifelong and lifewide learning which varies over time for adults with intellectual disabilities. This raises key challenges for a learning system focused on progression.

Time rhythms within learning are also important as there is often a “slower pace and rhythm to learning” among adults with intellectual disabilities (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 69). Maintenance and reinforcement of literacy skills learnt may be needed on an ongoing basis. While this slower rhythm of learning may be valid for many literacy learners, it has a much more extensive time-range for adults with intellectual disabilities. Some learners take several years to complete courses or re-engage with levels they have already completed previously to maintain learning.

Staff in all literacy contexts describe how the extensive time and scale of literacy learning does not easily fit the current FET structure of hierarchical progression through QQI levels. Learning indicators need to be able to record time in more fluid ways than the current focus on annual attainment and progression rates. Qualitative indicators are recommended which can better record different paces of learning. Learning trajectories may occur during a person’s life in a series of interruptions, pauses and re-engagements.

Relational nature of inclusion in literacy learning

To create the right environment for learning, we have to build trusting relationships

The tutor and learner relationship demands literacy tutors create a deeply interpersonal and affective bond in their pedagogy. Unfortunately, the building and nurturing of ongoing relationships of trust between tutors and learners, and within learner groups,

tends to be an invisible and unrecognised part of the teaching process. The skills and time involved in making good connections with colleagues and learners are taken for granted rather than forming part of CPD [Continuous Professional Development]. This lack of recognition means that the considerable skills, work and time devoted to building and maintaining relationships is not resourced and left very much to the good will of those involved (Family Literacy report, 2020, p. 79). (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 75)

Much of this relational work is done by women who make up the majority of those working as literacy tutors, reflecting the wider concern about the gendered cost of this type of relational and care work in education (Lynch et al., 2007)

In this light, more refined indicators are needed to capture the transformative nature of literacy learning including developing capabilities for greater independence of learning which one tutor describes as “the structure ... and the relationships and the confidence and the personal development that [learners] gained.” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 77). These transformative capabilities are evident not only on a personal level but also through “learning opportunities that bring about significant changes in family life” (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 69).

The research reveals the importance of “carefully selecting literacy tutors with the experience, expertise, [and a] teaching philosophy and disposition suited to working with adult learners with intellectual disabilities” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 79). The Numeracy Report and Family Literacy Report also highlight the importance of staff capacity to work empathetically in relating and communicating with students, to build capacity and independence amongst learners, and to responsively and creatively negotiate learning objectives and assessment briefs. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 86-88). This requires specific skill-sets for literacy tutors which will be a focus Briefing Paper 3: Tutor identity and inclusive capacity.

Integrating literacy across learning organisations

Building spaces fit for learning

How literacy learning is improving within and through the environments and organisational supports for literacy learning is also crucial to consider. These features of literacy learning need to be appreciated in the different stages of the learning journey from initial assessment, engagement, assessment and progression. From the outset, there is an extensive period of “confidence raising, time and ... supported engagement ... before someone is ready to tackle their unmet literacy needs” (Family Literacy Report, p. 56-57). This is echoed by findings in research on access and widening participation in adult and higher education sectors (Riddell, 2012; Fleming et al., 2017; Ryan, 2019).

Spaces bring challenges and opportunities

As noted earlier, adults with intellectual disabilities may also face challenges in communication skills, social skills, and knowledge retention (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 61). Assistive technologies and personal assistance are often required, along with reasonable accommodations in the physical environment. There is often a need for staff to receive the necessary training and IT support to make sure it is applied properly for learners’ benefit; a point which is made across the three research reports. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides an inclusive framework which supports learning for all (SOLAS, 2020a).

The context of learning in literacy centres is also crucial. Often learners with intellectual disabilities can build capacities from being in a learning environment which offers less support than their IDSS (Intellectual Disabilities Support Services) centres. Staff describe how learners gain valuable independent learning and living skills as they “have to manage within that environment. We are there to catch them but it is not as obvious. They get a chance to do different things, study and learning.” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 73).

Responsive centres meet learners' needs

The capacity of centres to be responsive to the fluid and variable needs of literacy learners is crucial. For family learning, consideration of the family context is vital. This can be done through providing family friendly supports for literacy classes and flexibility around childcare and family life. Adult Literacy Services demonstrate great skill at integrating learners with varying levels of intellectual disability and differing capacities together in a group, matching learners who could support one another in the class. This requires a nuanced level of knowledge about a learner's individual capacities ... [as well as] familiarity and creativity with strategic requirements of different course and awards requirements." (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 73).

Integrated approaches are identified as useful where literacy and numeracy provision can be embedded in different FET programmes to support learners. This emphasises the importance of consistency of provision across centres and the provision of ongoing assessment for this learning (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 9). This offers great potential to develop inclusion across all FET programmes, including apprenticeships, traineeship and ESOL where literacy and numeracy can be integrated within the learning objectives of these programmes. Creating opportunities for Adult Literacy Service staff to share their experiences of inclusion with colleagues across the FET sector provides a key learning opportunity for the sector.

No organisation is an island

Collaborative partnerships are key in literacy learning. Each research report emphasises the importance of sustained and ongoing partnerships to support learners in multi-faceted ways across different spheres and time periods of their learning and lives. This is both in the formal spaces of the learning environment as well as the informal spaces which are vital for many aspects of learning. "Learner solidarity contributes significantly to retention" (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 63).

It can provide key opportunities for community engagement and independent living for many adults with intellectual disabilities. These informal social instances also provide a key feedback mechanism in all literacy contexts where the cup of tea at the start of each class or at end of term is where a "lot of planning and feedback happens informally" (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 90).

The wider support structures and culture of the organisation were also acknowledged as crucial. The ETB Adult Education Guidance Service (AEGS) was acknowledged as key for the placement and progression processes for literacy learners.

Their broad knowledge of ETB services means that members of the Guidance team play an important role in ensuring learners' needs can be catered for, that learners are placed with the appropriate adult education service and that learners have the necessary supports in place (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 64).

Greater awareness about what inclusion means

The three reports also acknowledge the need for cultural and social awareness in the institutional culture about the provision of learning content. This can be in terms of socio-cultural, political and economic diversity, different communication modes, confidence levels amongst learners and life conditions. For example, the inclusion of adults with intellectual disabilities provided key opportunities as well as challenges for the inclusion of people with disabilities in education. This can occur in contexts of existing vulnerabilities and feelings of stigma about literacy learning and disability exist "that can be very, very difficult and needs to be managed very carefully and may not always be appropriate for everybody." (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 65). This need for heightened awareness about inclusion was also evident in the Family Literacy Report which described how

cooking was a well-liked introductory course in many places, [but] providers saw a dissonance or conflict for homeless family learners and for those in Direct Provision. Their children never saw their parents cooking. In such circumstances, embracing education as a realistic priority or recognising the cultural power of family literacy activities was not something with which everyone could equally engage (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 66).

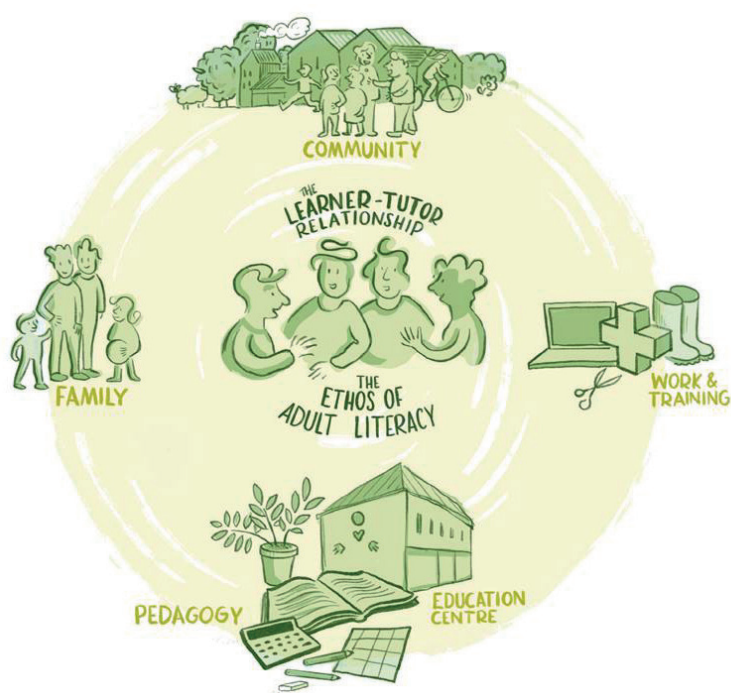
Hence the organisational structures and cultures are also key to consider in thinking about how literacy learning is enhanced within and through the environments and organisational supports for literacy learning. These features of literacy learning need to be carefully considered throughout all stages of the learning journey.

What the reports recommend

Throughout the three reports are examples of best practices and recommendations. From these we have distilled the aspects which are key for the inclusion and identity of literacy learners.

- **Maintain the learner-centred ethos of the Adult Literacy Services**

To create an inclusive approach to learning, we must keep the learner-centred ethos of the Adult Literacy Services. Pedagogy must always be embedded in the daily life experience and interests of learners. This approach considers the specificity of each learner's experiences, interests and context. For many adult literacy learners, this includes an awareness of how their sense of identity as a learner has been damaged by negative experiences in school resulting in a profound lack of confidence and self-esteem about their learning capacity. This must be acknowledged but shifted to a capability approach.



- **Recognise the specific capacities of literacy tutors**

Tutors need specific capacities to improve inclusive practices in literacy learning.

This includes:

- being highly skilled in relationship-building to enhance learners' confidence,
- approaching learning objectives within programmes in a learner-centred way, and
- supporting and progressing the personal transformation and growing independence of learners as they become more confident and able to take ownership of their learning.

- **Diversity in the design of learning programmes and supportive approaches**

Recognition of the diversity of literacy and numeracy capacities needs to be integral to the design of all learning programmes and approaches. We need to be aware of varied or 'spiky' literacy capacities which is a feature of individual learning as well as within groups.

This means programmes and tutors need to be highly skilled and responsive in managing diverse learning profiles through their learning relationships, pedagogy and curricula.

This may also include the support of assistive technologies, reasonable accommodation and personal assistants.

- **Collaborative partnerships and agreements are key**

The learning organisation and collaborative partnerships with other agencies is key to ensure the creation of a lifewide learning environment for all learners across different spheres of their life. To ensure a lifewide learning environment, relevant organisations must continue to map and manage their ongoing collaborative relationships and agreements and keep the learner at the centre.

- **Learn from existing practice base in Adult Literacy Services**

There is a considerable practice base in the Adult Literacy Services of how to work with learners with very diverse capacities within and across groups and supporting learners through these varied learning journeys. There is also an awareness of how to build an inclusive learning environment. Both hold insights for CPD for all sectors of FET.

- **Recognition of diversity in progression levels and rates**

As many literacy learners progress unevenly, a lifelong and lifewide ethos is needed to support continued but varied levels of engagement over the learning journey and QQI accreditation. This ethos needs to consider the pace of learning ensuring that it is responsive to what specific learners need.

For example, a more extensive time-range may be needed for some adults with intellectual disabilities to complete a course or re-engage at levels already completed to consolidate learning. For numeracy and family literacy, a lifewide and lifelong approach is needed that recognises the interrupted learning trajectories of people's lives.

- **Develop qualitative learning indicators and outcomes**

There is a need to ensure that this diversity in literacy learning capacities is visible and recorded in more fluid qualitative learning indicators and outcomes of the FET system. This will ensure that universal design for learning (UDL) is fully practised and achieve greater inclusion.

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Briefing paper 2

Measurement of literacy learning
in inclusive contexts

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About this briefing paper

This paper discusses the second theme about how performativity impacts on measurement of inclusive learning contexts in the Adult Literacy Services. The three research projects completed for SOLAS give considerable evidence of the impact of performativity and measurement throughout the Adult Literacy Services. In light of this, the paper outlines the context for measurement of literacy learning in FET before considering the opportunities and challenges of current data collection and quantitative metrics for inclusive learning practices in the Adult Literacy Services. It draws on international and national research to understand how public discourses about adult literacy and numeracy direct attention towards specific measurable outcomes. The three research reports issue a clear call for more responsive qualitative indicators and measurement processes to capture the diversity and fluidity of learning that occur in Adult Literacy Services.

Background context

Performativity, measurement and accountability in FET policy

Performativity has become an increasing feature of all education systems in recent decades, in response to demands for greater transparency, accountability and measurement across the public sector (Clarke et al., 2000, Lynch et al., 2012). In this paper, performativity is understood as “a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation” that monitors, guides and transforms education in a systemic way (Ball, 2006, p. 144). Performativity became evident in Irish further education as a mode of regulation when the sector was reformed in the wake of the Further Education and Training Act 2013 (Murray et al., 2014, Lynch and Grummell 2016). This included professional registration of further educators through the Teaching Council in 2013 and reforms of QQI accreditation. It also included the setting of performance targets in SOLAS Corporate Plan 2017-2019 and in annual FET Services Plans. These targets were in line with EU targets of increasing FET lifelong learning participation by 10 per cent to help Ireland reach EU averages (SOLAS, 2017).

Current practice of performativity

Developing a systemic approach to performativity that can responsively capture the diversity of learning experiences and outcomes has always been challenging (Clarke et al., 2000, Murray et al., 2014, Lynch, 2015). It is useful to explore how performativity is presented in the current FET Strategy 2020-2024. The theme of ‘learner and performance centred’ is positioned as one of the four enabling themes of the strategy, with three priority areas identified which will be developed in future strategic performance agreements. They are:

- “robust indicators in terms of FET success in generating outcomes of employment, progression, active inclusion, lifelong learning, meeting critical skills needs, and new models of delivery
- more effective means of representation ... ensuring a clear learner voice on organisation oversight, planning provision, delivering support services, curriculum development, quality assurance and improvement, and future strategy
- creation of a ‘distance travelled’ tool which captures and measures ‘soft’ or ‘transversal’ skills development of learners” (SOLAS, 2020, p. 57).

This commitment is set within the broader context of the three pillars of the FET Strategy 2020-2024 of ‘building skills’, ‘fostering inclusion’ and ‘facilitating pathways’. The priorities for the ‘fostering inclusion’ pillar include committing “consistent levels of support and good practice for all learners; rooting FET in its communities; targeting and facilitating participation by the most marginalised groups in society; and tailoring literacy and numeracy resources to meet complex learner need” (SOLAS, 2019, p. 45). The implications of focusing on these priority areas for inclusive practices for adult literacy is discussed throughout this paper.

A core discourse that is evident in the FET Strategy is the theme of responsiveness, with the ‘building skills’ pillar focusing on how the FET system can be agile and responsive to changing economic, technological and social needs by developing different types of skills through QQI accreditation (SOLAS 2019: 32). This echoes a broader emphasis on change and responsiveness in international policy making as analysed by Ball and Exley (2010) in the UK context, Taylor (2004) in Australia and Milana (2012) across Europe. The ‘facilitating pathways’ pillar is presented in the FET Strategy in terms of learning pathways, supporting clear transitions and progression into, within and from FET (SOLAS, 2020, p. 51). These pillars combine to create an acknowledgement in the FET Strategy 2020-2024 about the need for a clear and agile structured system that is responsive to the complexity of the learning journey and paths through FET and consolidates efforts from previous policies and research.

The legislative basis

These FET policies are supported by legislation which places inclusion at the heart of national policy-making. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Act (2014) ¹ requires public bodies, including education and training organisations, to report annually on their progress in relation to equality in their service provision and employment. Equality legislation gives a clear legal framework to combat direct and indirect discrimination and to support inclusion through the Employment Equality Acts (1998 – 2011)², Equal Status Acts (2000 – 2012)³ and the Disability Act (2005)⁴. ETBI (2017) acknowledge that the Equal Status Act and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) Act (2014) place greater onus on large public bodies, including ETBs who are required to take a proactive approach that puts human rights and equality at the centre of how public bodies deliver and monitor their functions (ETBI, 2017).

1 <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2014/act/25/enacted/en/html>

2 <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1998/act/21/enacted/en/html>

3 <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2000/act/8/enacted/en/html>

4 <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2005/act/14/enacted/en/html>

This is supported by international and European legislation which promotes equality and inclusion in public services enshrined in policies by UNESCO (2005), UNCRPD (2006) and others. 'Upskilling Pathways: new opportunities for adults' has become the key building block of the European Pillar of Social Rights since 2016⁵, promoting equal rights to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to support fair and well- functioning labour markets and welfare systems. This supports inclusion goals in the National Skills Strategy 2025⁶, intended to make a significant contribution to Ireland's delivery of the Social Pillar of Rights.

These national and international policies create a structure which requires educational bodies to develop and measure inclusive strategies and processes, as is evident in the national FET strategy plans. What remains less evident is the impact of these strategies on the inclusive practices and experiences of learners and educators in FET. The three research projects on Family Literacy (SOLAS, 2020), Numeracy (SOLAS, 2021a), and The Inclusion of Adults with Intellectual Disabilities (SOLAS 2021b) provide considerable evidence of the impact for practice in the Adult Literacy Services as discussed throughout this paper. This highlights the opportunities and challenges of current data collection and performativity for inclusive practices in the Adult Literacy Services.

This briefing paper explores how public discourses about adult literacy and numeracy direct attention towards specific measurable outcomes which do not capture the full range and value of literacy learning in people's lives. Research literature locates this context within a broader culture of change where a decade of continual reforms, performativity and research within the sector has led to a sense of pressure and fatigue on the part of many staff. This has led to a clear call for the development of more responsive qualitative indicators and measurement processes to capture the diversity and fluidity of learning outcomes that occur within the Adult Literacy Services. The three research reports commissioned by SOLAS give voice to learners' and educators' experiences of the impact of performativity on the learning practices that are at the heart of Adult Literacy Services.

Impact of performativity in the Adult Literacy Services

Current approaches to data collection in the FET sector reveal the opportunities and challenges of contemporary approaches to performativity for inclusion in and through education. The three research reports all question whether current data measurement approaches capture the responsive and qualitative capacities of Adult Literacy Services to respond to the diverse needs of literacy learners. In this, they highlight two key considerations:

1. The challenges posed by current data measurement approaches and the type of knowledge they record.
2. The need to develop qualitative performance indicators which capture the specific features of diverse learner identities and varied learning rhythms of literacy learning (see briefing paper 1).

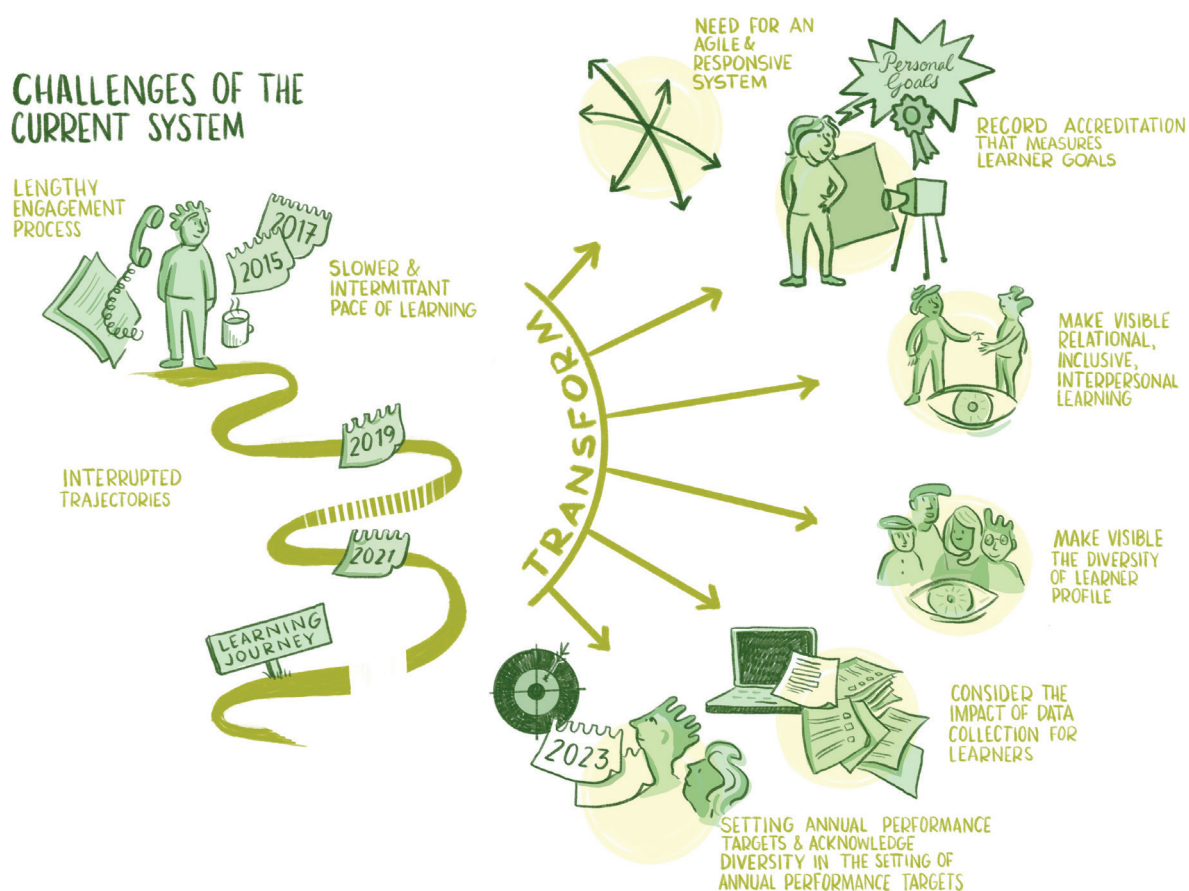
A gap between the reality of people's learning rhythms and journeys and the setting of performance targets for literacy services is identified by research participants as points of tension (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 22, Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 75;

Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 11). There is a perception by educators that transversal learning outcomes, although hugely significant for individual learners, are not recognised within formal monitoring and evaluation systems. ETB staff noted a "tension between targets 3 (transversal skills) and 4 (participation/ lifelong learning) and the other goals in the performance agreement strategies of ETBs". (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 74)

5 <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1224>

6 https://www.education.ie/en/publications/policy-reports/pub_national_skills_strategy_2025.pdf

Figure 1: how measurement impacts on learning



Challenges with recording data

The reports identify that recording the distinctive length and rhythm of the adult literacy learning journey is difficult in the current data measurement approaches and performativity targets of the FET sector. In particular, literacy staff note the challenges of recording the long engagement process into literacy learning, the length of time before any accredited certification takes place and the often interrupted learning trajectory which marks the learning journeys of those in family literacy (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 56), for adults with intellectual disabilities (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 78) and for learners in numeracy or integrated programmes (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 30). Literacy staff highlight that this slower and intermittent pace of progression requires an awareness from SOLAS of the need to develop responsive data measurement systems and for QQI of the challenges and varied timings for accreditation. ETB staff also emphasise that “accreditation should be balanced with learner goals and that learner ambitions be honoured at all times (whether those ambitions are for certification or otherwise).” (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 55)

The FET Strategy 2020-2024 recognises that a “key concern in the FET system has been the programme-based rigidity around the deployment of resources and operational regulations” (SOLAS, 2020, p. 56). This concern is evident throughout the research reports, especially the earlier timing of the family literacy report – conducted in 2018 – occurring in a context where “family literacy is not a separate budgetary or data collection category and as such its worth is relatively unknown. The absence of disaggregated family literacy data means that there can be no real, data driven decision-making”. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 12). As the Family Literacy Report notes, this changed in 2019 as family literacy became a separate category in FET returns, which should ensure that data-based decisions can now be made. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 27) This does highlight that “what is counted becomes what counts” (Merrifield, 1999), as it enables certain issues and aspects of learning to become visible in the system, with resources and supports then following. This requires ongoing dialogue between the educational agencies led by SOLAS, and literacy staff and learners to develop, monitor and refine a robust and responsive data measurement system that captures the diversity of literacy learning that occurs in a socially situated context.

Data informs decisions

The invisibility of aspects of learning or learner profiles in current measurement metrics removes key aspects of learning and inclusion from view and hence from consideration for decision-making or resource allocation. As well as difficulties in making aspects of learning visible, this can also occur for valid reasons such as respecting the rights of each individual over self-disclosure of information. The unintended consequences of this for measurement and learning supports needs to be considered. For example, it is the right of the learner whether or not they choose to disclose a long-lasting condition or illness on the Programme Learner Support System (PLSS) form when they enrol (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 34).

Similarly the Family Literacy Report notes that some respondents felt that information in relation to learner characteristics like age, gender and ethnicity was hard to access on PLSS after initial data entry (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 49). These features are understandable from a disclosure and GDPR rationale, but subsequently prove problematic as these features can remain as under-reported or invisible in the data collection categories and future planning. It also points to the need for professional development with staff about the purposes and use of data management systems in their work. In place of clear and user-friendly data, other information is used as a proxy to estimate numbers and profiles of learners, which for example, “leads to provisional and partial estimations of learners with disabilities in Adult Literacy Services” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 34). This is again indicative of the unintended consequences of how current data systems are used.

Barriers to inclusion

The way data is collected is important to consider, with the three research reports highlighting the need to develop “means of collecting the necessary data required by funders and national administrative systems in a way that does not also alienate new learners and overburden staff” (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 73). Concerns were raised in the research reports about the challenge that the online Further Education and Training Courses Hub (FETCH) information and application process posed for some literacy learners. Some research participants described it as a “barrier” which can be “intimidating” for literacy learners as they engage firstly with the Adult Literacy Services (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 58). Timing is key here where, as a first point of contact, the FETCH portal and the PLSS form can present accessibility issues for some learners with literacy, confidence or cognitive difficulties. Completing these online forms without support or guidance can be an intimidating experience for some learners due to the literacy capacity needed, the personal information required and the complexity of some questions (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 69).

Many Adult Literacy Services have put in place supports to help people use the FETCH portal, offering plain English and abridged versions of the form and supporting learners to complete both FETCH and PLSS forms. The Family Literacy Report highlights that where time and resources were invested locally to train family literacy staff to understand the demands of the reporting system, it made the process less contentious. Tutors were able to explain to learners the reasoning behind the personal nature of the data being collected and why it was significant. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 69). Although these supports worked, many feel that creating a more accessible portal is preferable and would demonstrate high-level support and commitment to inclusive practice throughout FET (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 58-59). This highlights the broader context and need for an inclusive system based on Universal Design for Learning principles for administrative and performance management aspects of the system as well as in the learning processes and structures of FET (SOLAS, 2020b). ETBI have convened an Expert Group to develop a tool to capture the Wider Benefits of Learning in FET programmes. The proposed tool will be completed in 2021 with links to PLSS to provide the sector with robust qualitative data on the wider benefits of engaging in learning.

This issue of commitment to inclusion throughout all aspects of the organisation becomes key when we look at another aspect of performativity – the setting of targets through the Strategic Performance Agreements. As highlighted in the three research reports, this raises key issues for the Adult Literacy Services who are:

expected to show a 10 per cent increase in literacy learner participation numbers and 10 per cent increase in rates of certification over three years in their ETB Strategic Performance Agreements. AEOs felt that the 10 per cent participation increase in the number of learners was achievable but that the 10 per cent increased accreditation in literacy will always be challenging, if not unfeasible, given the unique biographies of learners with intellectual disabilities.” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 75)

This is recognised across the FET sector, with QQI establishing a Reference Group to review the award standards at Levels 1-4 in 2018. The subsequent report highlights similar issues and encourages:

- consistency across providers,
- coherence of learners experience,
- clarity about progression,
- greater suitability of standards (in relation to societal, work-related and digital literacy skills), and
- enhancing flexibility in broader learning outcomes (QQI, 2018: 4).

This was particularly evident when the Inclusion of Learners with Intellectual Disabilities Report was being conducted with ETB staff highlighting the tensions between the emphasis on progression inherent in current measurement systems. They reported that “students count against you when you keep them for literacy maintenance purposes. How does that work in this drive towards progression? It is a difficult, difficult issue.” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 78)

The Numeracy Report and Family Literacy Report similarly describe the challenge of matching the unique profile of literacy and numeracy services to the broader requirements and strategic targets for performance. The current FET strategy 2020-2024 recognises that the “challenge of embedding both a learner-centred and performance-centred FET system ... cannot be recognised within formal ‘hard’ performance metrics” (SOLAS, 2020: 57). However, Irish education policies have been shaped by public concerns about adult literacy and numeracy levels in recent years (Hislop, 2011). These concerns have been strongly influenced by the findings of large scale international datasets on educational outcomes as explored below.

Role of public discourses about adult literacy and numeracy

All of the research reports draw on data from large scale international datasets such as PIAAC as well as national datasets collected by the Central Statistics Office (CSO), the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and SOLAS. While these quantitative datasets provide a general profile of literacy learners, the three reports highlight limitations to how data is collected and used, which is also supported by international research (Hamilton, 2012, 2017). In particular, the research reports highlight that “large datasets like PIAAC are also persuasive at the level of the public imagination, focusing attention on measurable outcomes rather than broader learning processes and impacts for people’s lives” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 20).

The results of these datasets became very significant in driving national attention on literacy and numeracy. This occurred at school level firstly, with the 10 year Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life strategy emerged from national concern about the decline in Ireland’s literacy and numeracy performance in OECD’s PISA 2009 tests (Hislop, 2011). Ongoing concern about adult literacy and numeracy levels in PIAAC results (NALA, 2020) has influenced current development of a whole of government 10 year strategy for literacy, numeracy and digital literacy (SOLAS, 2020).

What the numbers don’t show

The introduction of large-scale international testing of adult literacy and numeracy through PIAAC provides valuable quantitative country-level data on learning performance, but it has highlighted “concerns about how to effectively assess adults’ numeracy skills at the local level, in authentic everyday contexts.” (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 52). Standardised assessment and measurement tools can flatten and render invisible the learning that occurs dynamically in everyday context (Cumming and Gal, 2000). The research reports also highlight the limitations of data that is currently available about literacy learning in Ireland, which requires that data is read carefully and in context.

Carvalho and Costa (2015) and Ryan (2019) highlight how variations in systemic data collection about learners leads to a misrecognition of their learning characteristics and needs. Hamilton (2012, 2014) contends that the use of numbers and quantification to measure literacy decontextualises literacy skills from the socially situated context that learning occurs in. Instead the “performances (of individual subjects or organisations) serve as a measure of productivity or output or displays of ‘quality” (Ball, 2006: 144).

When the socially situated context of learning is not considered, “measures cease to reflect real literacy skill and are restricted to being test-based proxy measures of performance on mechanistic aspects of literacy” (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 22). Oughton (2018) highlights the consequences for the assessment of adult numeracy as:

the relevance and accuracy of test items used by PIAAC can be challenged since these items do not assess how individuals solve numerical problems in the authentic contexts they encounter in their everyday lives. Thus PIAAC test items are likely to underestimate adults’ numeracy skills, and the actual levels of adult numeracy may not be as poor as those reported in international studies. (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 19).

While the research reports all acknowledge and give learner profiles using these datasets to provide key baseline data and valuable comparable data, crucially they highlight how these datasets lack contextual and qualitative features to express the dynamic complexity of literacy learning. This becomes very relevant when the learning metrics produced from these datasets become dominant in public discourse and drive policy concerns (Hamilton, 2017).

A change culture: The impact of continual reforms and performativity

The comparative analysis of national literacy and numeracy levels amongst the school population (mapped through PISA) and adult population (through PIACC) has informed public concerns, and prompted a series of policy initiatives and strategic reform across the education system over the past two decades (Hislop, 2011, SOLAS, 2020). This has to be set within the broader societal and economic context acknowledged in the three research reports where the past two decades have been marked by the global financial crisis of 2008, followed by national austerity and slow socio-economic rebuilding. As the research reports note, this socio-economic context continues to have a disproportionate impact on specific groups through “multi-faceted inequalities including poverty, social and cultural exclusion, disaffection and disempowerment” (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 11). Many literacy learners have been impacted by multi-faceted and intersecting inequalities.

The research reports also capture the impact of the extensive change that was also occurring across the FET sector during this time. Multiple and concurrent consultations were taking place while these research reports were being completed, including: these research projects, a review of Universal Design for Learning, a review of ESOL provision, and a review of QQI Levels 1 – 3. Literacy staff were also aware of the impact of reviews and reforms in other FET sectors, such as the literacy services’ increased interactions with those in employment especially through Skills for Work and Apprenticeships. These reviews bring welcome attention and recognition of the role of Adult Literacy Services in FET, but equally place pressure on literacy staff as they lack the additional resources and budgets to address many of the concerns about literacy and inclusion. They called for an integrated and sustained way to draw out and consolidate the learning from these changes, as is occurring through these briefing papers and the Marking Progress project. (NALA, 2020b)

Those working and studying in FET describe being overwhelmed by the pressures of continual change, reform and measurement (Murray et al., 2015, Redmond 2015). Public sectors, including those in equality, disability and education, struggle under performativity demands where the social justice, care and developmental outcomes of learning at the heart of their work are often difficult to visualise and measure (Clarke et al., 2000, Lynch et al., 2009, Feeley, 2014). Austerity and public sector cutbacks has had a disproportionate impact on people already living with poverty and disadvantage including those with disabilities, from ethnic minority, lone-parents, immigrant backgrounds and other vulnerable groups (Skalecka, 2014, IHREC, 2015, Houses of Oireachtas, 2019).

The three reports highlight the increased culture of performativity and measurement in education as a consequence of these changes and reforms across education governance and policy.

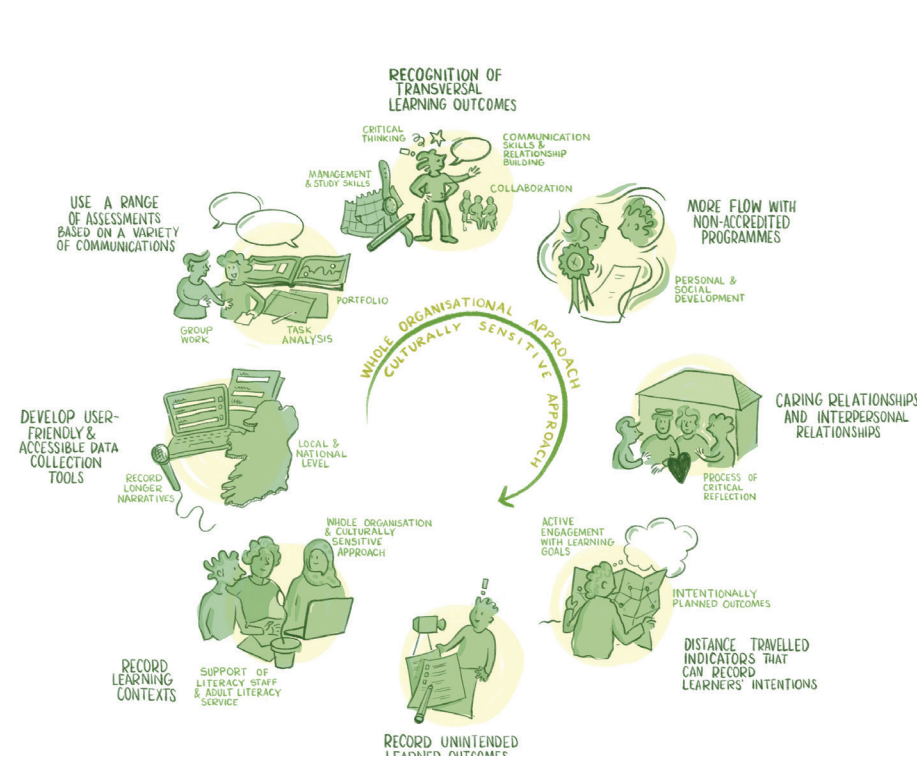
Key concerns which emerge from ETB managers and educators across the three reports are the extensive range and variation in what data is collected. Numeracy sees only limited data being collected and family literacy has only recently been made a category in its own right. Furthermore, the variations in scope, reliability and availability of different types of data collected makes it challenging to provide reliable, useful and comparable data. This affects not only policy-makers, programme planning and provision in the sector, but learners and educators as well.

Qualitative learning indicators: Learning journeys and distance travelled

The FET strategy 2020-2024 calls for consideration of how learning outcomes can be validated outside of formal certification, through assessment tools and the “creation of a ‘distance travelled’ tool which captures and measures ‘soft’ or ‘transversal’ skills development of learners” (SOLAS, 2020: 57) This raises key questions about how we can measure and record the diverse, fluid and qualitative nature of literacy learning.

Transversal skills (or soft skills) are currently measured in the Strategic Performance Agreements of each ETB which emerged as part of the first FET Strategy 2014-2019. Goal 2 of SOLAS Corporate Plan 2017-2019 outlined the aim of ensuring that “FET provision is equitable and inclusive, and reflects government policies, leading to enhanced access and participation for individuals who are socially, economically or educationally disadvantaged”. Part of this goal was a “10 percent increase in the rate of certification on courses primarily focused on social mobility-skills development that is transversal in nature” (2017: 16). This has been translated into the performativity goals of the annual Strategic Performance Agreements between SOLAS and each ETB, the implications of which are discussed earlier.

Figure 2: Measuring the diverse and qualitative nature of adult literacy learning



The three research reports highlight the need to record a broader range of learning outcomes that have a significant value to the individual learner and their quality of life. Literacy staff in the reports are clear about the need to provide accredited and non-accredited programme as they are needed by learners (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 75; Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 48). The reports argue for greater recognition of the role of unaccredited programmes not only in leading learners to an accredited phase, but also for their value in enhancing inclusion through personal and social development (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 51).

The skills that they [learners] might learn... are on a wider breadth of skills, in many cases soft skills and personal development and confidence and life skills, they don't necessarily fit the boxes of QQI but they can be the things which can lead to a more independent life and less co-dependency on other people. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 50)

Literacy changes lives

As NALA defines it, literacy "increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change" (2012, p. 6). Literacy has social, economic, political, cognitive and affective dimensions, and is deeply connected with the rights of individuals and communities - to have their voice, to learn, to read and to be read (NALA, 2012, p. 6-7). Numeracy and digital literacy are part of, and also distinctive to literacy, with numeracy defined as involving "critical thinking, working with representations and tools, and applying mathematical knowledge confidently in a range of contexts" (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 10)

The QQI review report on levels 1-3 recognises transversal skills as "core learning outcomes... native language, communications, mathematics, digital media, employability and citizenship competences, critical thinking, problem solving and making arguments" (QQI, 2018, p.6). These 'soft' or transversal learning outcomes of literacy that are highlighted across the three reports include key personal and interpersonal capacities such as learner confidence, capacity for critical thinking, communications skills, collaboration and group work, relationship building, time management, study skills. As the Numeracy Report highlights, learning outcomes in literacy "need to consider objectives in the affective, as well as the cognitive, domain" (2021a, p. 50).

The research reports highlight that these learning outcomes rely on interpersonal relationships between learners and their tutors in the first instance, but also must be supported by a broader inclusive learning environment co-created by all levels of staff and learners in the ETB centres. They must also be supported through collaborative partnerships with agencies such as family learning centres, disability support services, schools, local community centres and businesses, and other support agencies. Redmond highlights the significance of finding a way to recognise and record these “unintended outcomes of the services” that occurred through the caring relationships at the heart of inclusive learning (2015: 58).

What the reports recommend

Throughout the three reports are examples of best practices and recommendations. From these we have distilled the aspects which are considered key as qualitative indicators of learning.

- **Develop distance-travelled indicators**

Critical amongst these are indicators which acknowledge the distance travelled by learners rather than pre-set standards. Within this, distance-travelled indicators need to be able to record the intentionality and planned nature of the learning outcomes, acknowledging a process of critical reflection in which the learner has actively identified and engaged with their learning goals.

- **Capture all learning outcomes**

Alongside this, creating a process to record the unintended learning outcomes that emerge in the social context of the learning is key. How this occurs with the support of the literacy staff and the Adult Literacy Service who work with learners to design learning which will support their learning goals in an inclusive whole-of-organisation and culturally sensitive approach needs to be documented in research.

Examples of this learning process are outlined in the research reports (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 85-98; Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 48-49; Intellectual Disabilities Casestudies Report, 2021b).

- **New approaches to document learning**

The research reports note the importance of being open to alternative approaches to learning metrics. Approaches that can record longer narratives which include the learning context are worth considering. These can include a “case study approach such as that currently used by educational guidance staff [which] might offer a more appropriate measure (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 81).

- **Recognise partnerships**

Data collection should also capture aspects of the collaborative partnerships that are key in literacy and other FET learning contexts, including the impact of the relationships and contexts of schools, community services, family centres, disability support services and other local services, that help to build inclusion (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 12-13; Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 11)

- **Learner-centred**

Learning outcomes need to be aware of cultural and linguistic diversity throughout learning and assessment (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 30; Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 59-60).

Developing user-friendly data collection mechanisms at local and national level is vital, not only in family literacy (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 73), but also sensitivity to accessibility and universal learning design (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 63).

- **Learner participation and consultation**

The reports echo the emphasis in the FET Strategy 2020-2024 on learner participation and consultation, calling for adult learners to “be consulted about appropriate ways of measuring their success in numeracy learning. These might take into account changes in numeracy knowledge and skills, as well as dispositional changes in confidence and perseverance” (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 61).

The numeracy report in particular offers useful guidelines on learning outcomes, noting the importance of consistency in the selection of learning approaches and resources with the learner’s goals and specific learning objectives (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 65)

- **Varied forms of assessment**

The reports highlight how the recording of learning outcomes needs to recognise that adult learners may perform at quite different levels in oral discussions from how they perform on written tasks (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 65). Assessment forms should include oral reports, group activities, portfolios, task analysis of work and so forth (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 52). This is also echoed in the Family Literacy Report, while the Inclusion of Learners with Intellectual Disabilities Report gives valuable examples of how varied mediums of communications – visual, tactile, kinaesthetic, creative – are appropriate at different times and context for diverse learners in learning contexts and learning outcomes.

- **Recognise that progress is not a straight line**

The reports also highlight the significance of having metrics which can hold temporal flexibility, capable of recording learning outcomes as and when they occur for learners..

Conclusion

Issues to consider

This briefing paper has explored the distinctive nature and impact of performativity for inclusive learning in and through the Adult Literacy Services. The three research projects completed for SOLAS provide considerable evidence of the impact of performativity and measurement throughout the Adult Literacy Services. It has explored the opportunities and challenges of current data collection and quantitative metrics for inclusive learning practices in the Adult Literacy Services. It draws on international and national research to understand how public discourses about adult literacy and numeracy direct attention towards specific measurable outcomes. As noted through the research reports, these metrics do not capture the full range and value of literacy learning in people's lives. As Lynch reminds us:

Focusing on measurable outputs has the ultimate impact of defining human relationships in [learning] in transactional terms, as the means to an end – the end being high performance and productivity that can be coded and marketed. This reduces first order social and moral values to second-order principles; trust, integrity, care and solidarity are subordinated to regulation, control and competition. (2015: 16).

This shift towards increased performativity in education is also positioned within a broader culture of change where two decades of reforms, performativity and research within the FET sector has led to a sense of being inundated on the part of many staff. The three research reports issue a clear call for more responsive qualitative indicators and measurement processes to capture the diversity and fluidity of learning outcomes that occur in Adult Literacy Service that have inclusion at their heart.

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Briefing paper 3

Tutor identity and inclusive
capacities

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About this briefing paper

This paper discusses the role of the literacy tutor in contributing to inclusive practices in the Adult Literacy Services. It begins by describing the current work context for literacy tutors and then outlines some of the key features of their professional identity and practices.

The three research reports demonstrate how the relationships, qualities and practices at the heart of literacy tutoring can facilitate deep inclusion and transformative learning. Exploring the identity and practices of literacy tutors holds key learning for inclusive practices in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy across FET.

Background context

The ethos of the Adult Literacy Services to respond to the unmet literacy needs of adult learners gives a very specific inclusive orientation to the work of literacy staff. The Adult Literacy Services are key in the national provision of basic educational programmes. They offer a diverse range of unaccredited and accredited courses of literacy and numeracy learning, as well as supporting progression to other levels and services.

A broad remit and inclusive approach has been a feature of adult literacy in Ireland since the groundswell of community-based activity in literacy during the 1970s in Ireland. Much of this was based in local community development efforts and was inspired by the Freirean adult literacy approach (NALA, 2011). The adult education organisation, AONTAS was a key driver of the movement. It established a subcommittee on literacy and provided ongoing support for networking amongst literacy staff.

This groundwork and voluntary effort supported the foundation of NALA as the representative organisation for adult literacy. Ward and Ayton (2019) and NALA (2011) document this history and highlight the gradual development of literacy provision and structures since then.

This includes landmark events such as:

- the identification of literacy issues in the Murphy Report in 1973,
- the extensive voluntary efforts in local communities,
- the establishment of Adult Literacy Services in the Vocational Education Colleges (VECs).
- the publication of the results of International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1997, and
- the recognition and consolidation of adult literacy and numeracy within Education Training Boards (ETBs) and in community education groups over the following decades (NALA, 2011; Ward and Ayton, 2019).

National policy attention has continued to recognise literacy and numeracy issues since the Murphy Report in 1973. Formal recognition of literacy occurred with the Green and White Paper in Adult Education, although political strategies and actions were slow to emerge (NALA, 2011; Ward and Ayton, 2019).

The publication of the IALS survey in 1997 was very significant, formally recording that 25 per cent of the Irish population had very low levels of basic literacy skills. This sparked government attention and investment in addressing these issues over the following decades, culminating in the publication of Adult Literacy for Life: A 10 Year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2021).

The Adult Literacy for Life strategy is a whole-of-government approach which recognises literacy, numeracy and digital literacy as key competences for lifelong learning on an individual and societal level (SOLAS, 2020c, p. 18-19). It is allied with the inclusive focus of the 'fostering inclusion' pillars in the FET Strategy 2020-2024. This paper is written with this policy backdrop in mind. It explores the distinctive contribution that literacy tutors bring to the Adult Literacy Services

Recognising the specific capacities of literacy tutors

The SOLAS literacy research reports reveal evidence of a strong culture of adult learning practice delivered by dedicated and skilled tutors, who exhibit a strong commitment to a learner-centred approach to adult literacy. The reports identify specific capacities as essential for adult literacy tutors which are discussed in the following sections. These include:

- being learner-centred,
- building relationships to improve learners' confidence and capacities, and
- using responsive and creative pedagogies and forms of assessment.

Similar skills are described in international research about numeracy tutors (Oughton, 2018; Swain, 2005) and literacy tutors (Allatt, 2020). The skills displayed by literacy tutors can be considered as part of the 'ecologies of practice' that Stronach et al., (2002) describe as the "accumulation of individual and collective experiences" of work. These ecologies of practice are evident in the personal experiences, beliefs and commitments that people use to describe 'good practice' in their profession (Stronach et al., 2002, p. 122). Key elements in the ecologies of practice of literacy tutors are discussed in the following sections and contribute to their professional identity as educators.

Commitment to a learner-centred approach

The literacy staff and students across the three research reports spoke of the importance of an inclusive approach by staff that is based in a deep commitment to a learner-centred approach in literacy. (Crowther et al., 2010; Feeley, 2014)

Literacy education adopts a learner-centred ethos rather than the subject and curriculum-centred emphasis of other forms of school and higher education. This is at the heart of adult education as it places the learner and their experiences at the centre of educational practice. It is based in Freirean principles of learner-centredness, experiential learning and critical thinking and dialogue about the social and political contexts of people's lives and learning (Shor and Freire, 1987). The role of the tutor is to facilitate and support this critical engagement. It is evident in the responsive and creative learner-centred pedagogy that is cited throughout the research reports.

... the whole ethos of adult education in meeting the learner where he or she is at and being able to support them to achieve what their goal is, whether that's, you know, learning how to do long division or writing a birthday card for the first time. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 74)

Tutors recognise and value adults' literacy and numeracy practices in their everyday life, that are often unnoticed or invisible. Tutors use these daily practices to build literacy and numeracy capacities during sessions in a structured pedagogical approach with which learners can identify (Numeracy Report, 2021a).

Social and relational aspects of learning

A core premise of literacy education, evident throughout the literacy research reports, is the significance of the social and relational aspects of literacy learning. Skilled tutors are crucial in recognising and enhancing the quality of relationships which constitute the heart of literacy learning – what Duckworth and Smith (2018) describe as the relational ties through which transformative learning takes place. Many learners describe their tutors as inspirational and acknowledge how these relationships of trust supported them to become confident learners.

Literacy tutors are aware of the impact of these learning relationships and they have become a conscious part of their pedagogical practice.

Irrespective of the curriculum content almost, if I'd built a relationship with the learners, and you often will, they were more likely to come back for future classes. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 79)

Tutors describe the considerable work and time that is devoted to building trust and maintaining these learning relationships. This requires very specific interpersonal skills and this capacity was cultivated by the Adult Literacy Services. Adult Literacy Organisers (ALOs) recognise that the process of matching literacy tutors to each literacy learner and group was crucial. This interpersonal capacity is needed to work on an individual level with a learner but also inter- and intra-personal skills to support group-based learning.

Adult Literacy Organisers describe assigning tutors on the basis of their responsiveness, range and flexibility to work with specific literacy groups “If you get the right tutor to work with them, they can nurture partnerships with them” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 65).

... it's what literacy tutors are good at is just creating that trust in the room. That's what it's about really. And then, you know, letting people kind of come forward themselves (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 74).

Core in these relationships is the capacity to see learners as people without any prior assumptions or judgements, “to me they are just people who I respect and who I am going to assist as much as I can to get them through their course” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 65). Similarly, Duckworth and Smith describe the significance of tutors getting “to know the students as people and be part of their journey” (2018, p. 172). This is particularly vital given the legacy that many literacy learners carry with them from previous school experiences and which is discussed below.

Also key in this relational work is a highly developed communicative skill to relate to learners. This comprises of a deep awareness and use of multiple modes of communications, including oral, aural, visual, embodied, affective and kinaesthetic. In the context of adult literacy work, this is vital, given the lack of confidence that some learners initially feel about their capacity to learn as a consequence of previous negative educational experiences. For adults with intellectual disabilities, their literacy skills “vary greatly and can be complicated by greater than average difficulties in communication skills, social skills, and the ability to retain and apply new knowledge.” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 61). This requires advanced interpersonal and communication skills on the part of tutors, as well as the support of assistive technology and personal assistants, where needed.

Many tutors are conscious that this communicative and relational work is not solely within the literacy session, but also consists of supporting the integration of the learners into the life of the literacy or FET centre. This means making the effort and taking the time to ensure that learners are mixing with other learners and groups and supporting them to engage in social events and activities.

Personal qualities of tutors

The capacity to support this type of social and relational learning requires personal qualities of literacy tutors. The skill to work empathetically in creating positive learning relationships and environments is vital.

Personal qualities such as patience, communication skills, and understanding of the previous learning difficulties experienced by adult learners. (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 8)

One learner pointing to the 'be happy' sign in their room to describe their tutor and another learner group using words such as "fun", "patient", and "kind" to describe their tutor. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 68)

The Numeracy Report identifies affective responses, with personal qualities of empathy and patience as essential qualities for addressing the negative emotions about poor numeracy skills (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 50).

The personal and empathic qualities of literacy tutors are cited as core in supporting learners to regain confidence in their learning and literacy capacities. These personal qualities give tutors the scope to use teaching approaches or pedagogy vital for literacy learning which are explored in the following section.

Pedagogical capacities

The learner-centred, relational and responsive approach to literacy shown in the research data is echoed in the types of pedagogy or teaching approaches used by literacy tutors. These pedagogical practices are evident throughout the various stages of the design, delivery and assessment of literacy programmes outlined below.

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Programme design and planning

Unlike other forms of education where a formal curriculum is pre-defined, literacy tutors need to be adept at course development and adaptation to fulfil the learning objectives. Given the unique and personal nature of the literacy learning for each person, tutors need to be reflexive and skilled in programme design. This work requires resources. A lot of time is needed to develop content and pedagogy which is specifically adapted to learner's needs. The research reports acknowledge that there is:

... a lot of hard work really designing those programmes and making sure that everything that happens within the programmes is done to a really high standard. So, it is really around being very reflexive around that as well ... and having that adult learning strengths-based approach is really important. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 72)

The capacity for reflexivity and flexibility during learning is key. This capacity for 'reflection-in-action', or thinking on your feet in the moment of teaching as Schön (1983) describes it, is vital for adult literacy tutors. It requires that tutors are well prepared and planned for their sessions in order to be able to adapt in the moment.

... planning is so important because you have to be prepared in your sessions for anything to happen... because sometimes you have that thing where you have to scrap the whole lesson that you had planned after three minutes. So where do you go then? What resources are you drawing on at that point? (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 47)

The professional knowledge of tutors is important to recognise, with the Numeracy Report describing the 'mathematical knowledge for teaching', which involves "knowledge of adult learners' abilities and needs, knowledge of how people learn mathematics, deep understanding of fundamental mathematical concepts, knowledge of flexible teaching strategies, and the ability to "see" numeracy in the world around them" (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 49). Numeracy tutoring also requires the attitudinal or personal qualities described in the previous section as well as 'professional practice' of planning and using responsive numeracy teaching and assessment strategies with learners (Numeracy Report, 2021a).

Creative and multi-modal responses to literacy

A strong pedagogical creativity to support learning is core to literacy work. The research reports reveal the wide range of creative media and activities tutors use to enhance literacy learning and to communicate with learners, especially with those who are non-verbal. These include mosaics, art work, craft, music, role plays, quizzes, word searches, cooking, photographs, internet searches, historical archiving, and music, to name but a few. They range across different forms and media, including the use of digital literacy to research information and materials. Some examples are discussed below to highlight some key features of the pedagogical processes.

Tutors describe using creative and multi-media approaches in their practice to ensure that learning is not reliant on reading or writing modes. Approaching literacy and numeracy through practical classes is a very effective way of learning. For example, the Family Literacy Report describes how sewing classes provide a way of encountering literacy and numeracy, where both are ever-present in discussions about:

... cutting things neatly and incorporating seam allowances... So they really have to think of the conscious cut. And ... metric measures - millimetres and centimetres and so on measuring, and adding seam allowances ... things like symmetry, and parallel lines, and how to spell them properly. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 88)

Numeracy can be explored in embodied and spatial ways during walks around the area, learning about linear structures and proportions through photographing and studying local buildings and bridges. A literacy group describe doing a role play of buying something from a shopping catalogue in class and the following week going out to a café to order from a menu and independently paying their bills as part of numeracy and budgeting. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 69)

These examples provide real world engagements in learning which have an immediate resonance and value for learners. Such types of experience-based and context-rich examples make literacy and numeracy learning directly relevant for learners. The different media and forms are carefully and responsively designed by tutors to support literacy learning in multi-modal ways that resonate with learners' experiences and communicative preferences.

People's experiences provide the context for learning

Particularly noteworthy is how tutors use people's own experience as the basis for learning. This allows tutors to base learning in a real life context that people could connect with. Tutors ensure that they are integrating literacy and numeracy learning explicitly throughout and after the activities in 'context-rich' daily experiences that learners can recognise (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 11). For example, a numeracy tutor describing a session on addition and subtraction which the group found difficult until:

I put a euro sign in front of it and they could do it so fast. So it was really a learning moment for me, you know! And they could do huge sums in their head once the euro sign's there... relevance is so important. (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 61)

This requires literacy tutors to be very tuned into learners' interests as well as being alert and creative in identifying learning possibilities in people's daily lives and environments. This links back to the importance of the learner-centred, relational and experiential nature of literacy.

The importance of the learning environment and rhythms

Tutors described how they consciously create a learning environment in the group to help learners feel relaxed and receptive to learning, with one tutor describing "the homeliness of the classes. The atmosphere is very good during classes." (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 95). An open atmosphere is crucial as it specifically creates a "non-threatening learning environment that usually contrasted with their prior experience of learning in school." (Numeracy Report, 2020, p. 8). This is a very specific pedagogical act which seeks to create safe, respectful and democratic learning environments between all involved. Duckworth and Smith (2018) describe how creating a safe environment is premised in "an awareness of the historical positioning of the learners and their communities" which has led to inequitable prior experiences of schooling and society (2018, p. 171).

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While similar types of creativity and responsiveness are evident across many forms of teaching, the research reports contend that this type of pedagogical sensitivity is a highly attuned skill which is crucial for adult literacy. It requires literacy tutors to be tuned into and responding to issues that have implications for pedagogical practices, such as the different paces and rhythms to learning described in Briefing Paper 1.

A tutor talked about a process of integrating literacy incrementally to support people to settle and become more confident in their learning ability. This supports people to learn and to become knowledgeable and responsible for their own individual learning style and approaches (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 56). This capacity to envision successful learning that people have from their previous experiences, to carry that into current learning moments and to transfer it into future learning is core to literacy learning.

Tutors discussed how they developed differentiated learning approaches as the learners in a group might differ enormously from each other both in terms of diversity in learning skills and between learners themselves. This means that adult literacy tutors need an extensive pedagogical, relational and organisational capacity to span this range across the different groups, courses and locations that tutors work with. An Adult Literacy Organiser acknowledges that this is:

...quite a task to ensure that everyone is getting what they [need] but it is what literacy tutors can do, that's what we are trained to do and it is different to any other services in that respect. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 70)

Responding to such diversity in a group can present pedagogical challenges when it has to fit into specified learning outcomes and awards structures. The numeracy report highlighted a specific need amongst literacy staff for CPD about differentiation of curriculum planning and contingent responsiveness during numeracy sessions to support adult learners with diverse needs (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 47).

Assessment of learners' capacities

The assessment of learners' capacities is distinctive to other sectors of education and is worth considering. Assessment occurs in the initial phase as the learner joins the service as well as on an ongoing basis.

Initial assessment of learners' capacities

The initial assessment identifies learners' current literacy attainment and gives a context for planning how learners can further improve their literacy capacities. This assessment process is often based on a capability approach that emphasises the literacy skills and experiences that learners already have and directs attention to where they can further improve their capabilities.

The assessment process often reveals the uniqueness of each learner's literacy profile where learners can display "real spikiness where maybe their reading is at level 3 but their writing is at level 1" (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 61). There may also be very distinctive and potentially intersecting needs in terms of literacy, numeracy or digital literacy supports. Learners have particular preferences and background experiences of learning which they carry into each learning context. All of this requires nuanced assessment from the Adult Literacy Organisers, tutors and other staff to develop a "level of knowledge about learner's individual capacities in different areas, their capacity for group work, their memory and concentration levels and their interests" (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 73).

From the perspective of literacy staff, ongoing assessment requires familiarity and creativity with strategic requirements of different course and award requirements to ensure that learners are placed on an appropriate programme and level. This initial assessment may identify the need for other supports, for example, a personal assistant, assistive technology, childcare supports and IT resources. Literacy staff spoke about ensuring that these supports are in place before literacy provision begins to ensure consistency of supports for learners and to maximise outcomes.

The Numeracy Report recommends that the centres expand the numeracy assessment repertoire used in initial screening, and continue to use a wide range of numeracy assessment approaches to collect evidence of adult learners' progress. (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 55)

Ongoing assessment of learners' capacities

Literacy staff recognise the importance of ongoing assessment of learners' capacities. Individual staff and centres have developed local criteria for the ongoing assessment of programmes. This assessment is often informal and contextualised to suit learners. Literacy staff in the research reports cited the importance of the national guidelines and CPD opportunities about initial and ongoing assessment of literacy and numeracy at levels 1-3 in ETBs as a key resource for inclusive initial assessment of all learners. Similar to initial assessment, tutors noted that ongoing assessment of capacities can be challenging as literacy skills vary greatly. Indeed, they can be complicated by differences in communication skills, social skills, access to resources, and the ability to retain and apply new knowledge. Tutors spoke about the importance of retaining a learner-centred approach throughout the assessment process and recommend:

- seeing the person at the centre...
- providing learners with choice and opportunities for their voice to be heard,
- taking small steps and letting the learner set the pace. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 63)

Hence, the numeracy and literacy skills of adults have to be assessed within the broader context of learners' life context and experiences, communication skills, social skills, the ability to retain and apply new knowledge, similar to what Allatt (2020) recommends in the United Kingdom context.

Supporting progression

Supporting the progression of learners onto other courses, levels and opportunities is an issue which literacy staff were very conscious of. They recognised the benefits of progression but also the pressures, unfamiliarity and lack of confidence which learners often felt (Crowther et al., 2020). Throughout progression, tutors aimed to ensure that pressure was lessened, while opportunities to scaffold future learning were maximised. Learners were often introduced to the idea of progression gradually. Staff took the time to create and introduce learners to the content, environment and staff involved in progressing to other levels of courses. In many cases progression was not to other levels but to different courses or other opportunities in employment and community.

We are mindful to give people their options about progression but equally not to frighten them, people are on their own journey and we are mindful of where they are on their journey and if people are coming to the end of their literacy journey and ready to move on somewhere. We have learners from literacy who have moved onto to level 4 and 5 and PLCs, but generally it is a much longer route and people are at a different pace. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 77)

Supporting the inclusion of literacy practices across FET

The research reports discuss how the capacities demonstrated by literacy and numeracy tutors hold relevance for the inclusion of literacy practices across other areas of FET. This has become increasingly relevant with inclusion policies such as the Integrating Literacy Guidelines for FET Centres (2013) and the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy (2021). All courses have specific literacy and numeracy demands which may need to be supported. For example, The Numeracy Report outlines how a course on developing IT skills will develop digital literacy and numeracy capacities by introducing spreadsheets as an efficient way of calculating, finding averages, or working out percentages. While a course on gardening is a natural context for numeracy learning about measurement (length, perimeter, area, volume) and shapes (different-shaped garden beds) (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 62).

These examples, and the many others cited in the research reports, involve using different kinds of tools like:

- digital tools such as computer software,
- physical tools such as measuring instruments,
- organisational tools such as spreadsheets, and
- representational tools such as diagrams

Literacy and numeracy tutors and organisers can raise awareness of the specific literacy and numeracy demands of the courses which FET staff teach. Tutors can work with and support colleagues who teach other FET courses to capitalise on the literacy and numeracy learning opportunities within their courses.

Supporting inclusive practices of literacy across different areas of FET would hold significant staffing and additional resourcing implications for the Adult Literacy Services as well as continuous professional development needs.

Impact of employment conditions

Employment conditions are key issue for many FET staff, including literacy tutors. Many are employed on a part-time basis, and they are generally paid only for direct contact hours with learners. Their employment relies on whether courses get sufficient numbers each year. Tutors are often part-time and relatively isolated when working with groups, as they don't have regular contact with their peers (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p.55).

Consequently, tutors often feel quite isolated in their work, as well as from peers in their own and other centres. (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 11). This means tutors do not often have the learning opportunities for the informal social networking and exchange that characterises most education settings.

This precarity is also evident in other countries with Tett and Maclachlan describing how adult literacy and numeracy tutors in the Scottish context "are amongst the most over-stretched group of educational providers who often are on hourly-paid contracts with little access to staff development" (2008, p. 665). These type of insecure and precarious employment conditions are not unique to adult literacy. They are also evident across many areas of education including FET (Murray et al. 2015), Early Years Education (Mooney-Simmie and Murphy 2021) and higher education (O'Keefe and Courtois 2019), as well as being evident in the rising numbers of teachers on substitution hours and contracts.

What is key for the Adult Literacy Services is the impact of precarious and isolated working conditions on literacy practice. The three reports document how tutors are not paid for many work related activities such as developing new courses or attending CPD. For others, access to available training was prohibitive in terms of travel and the associated costs (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 49). Tutors may develop a new course in their own (unpaid) time without knowing if there will be sufficient numbers for the course to take place. "They mightn't get any work out of it. It might come to nothing because you mightn't get the necessary enrolment." (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 69). Consequently many literacy tutors took work where they could get it, which may not always be in the area of literacy.

As a consequence, literacy tutor availability was a challenge for those coordinating provision and Adult Literacy Organisers struggled to find an appropriate tutor for shorter courses or at short notice. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 102). This has obvious impacts for planning and staffing across the sector.

It also has an impact on pedagogy with the research reports documenting “large amounts of ‘underground’ working, whereby tutors routinely engaged in working well beyond their job descriptions’.” (Hodkinson et al., 2005, p. 2 cited in Coffield et al., 2007). This included vital aspects of their role such as planning and the relationship building described earlier which tutors “felt that this aspect was not a formally recognised part of their role or workload in FET. Consequently it was often left very much to the good will of the tutors involved.” (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 79)

Supporting staff through continuing professional development

All three research reports highlight specific demands from staff for continuous professional development (CPD) for literacy tutors arising from the issues and contexts described in previous sections. In addition, they call for tutors to be supported with dedicated time for professional development in inclusive pedagogies and assessment strategies generally. CPD needs to work on an individual and collective level – supporting transformation at an individual level as well as the level of educational culture.

CPD is described in all of the reports as necessary for the effective implementation of innovative and inclusive pedagogical approaches described in earlier sections. In particular there are three specific areas:

1. Pedagogical supports for numeracy
2. Working collaboratively to support family literacy
3. Supporting the learning of adult learners with intellectual disabilities

CPD for programme planning and assessment

Previous sections highlighted how initial and ongoing assessment of learners' capacities are complex and varied. The Family Literacy Report highlights how programme planning and assessment require consideration of the learning context of the entire family and surrounding context of school and community.

Many participants reported a need for professional development to consider these types of issues. They highlight the benefits of having guidelines about an inclusive initial assessment process, given the emergent emphasis on inclusion of literacy and numeracy across FET (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 61).

CPD for different aspects of literacy work

Particular areas of CPD mentioned include differentiation of curriculum planning and responsiveness during numeracy sessions to support adult learners with diverse needs (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 47). The Numeracy Report also identified needs for CPD in specific areas such as maths for farmers and budgeting (2021a, p. 42).

The context of family literacy requires tutors to have a very special skill set, and the international research suggests that ongoing tutor training is important alongside opportunities to exchange ideas with peers (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 12).

The literacy skills of adults with intellectual disabilities can be complicated by greater than average difficulties in communication skills, social skills, and the ability to retain and apply new knowledge. Tutors called for additional CPD and learning communities to support them to address these needs (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 61).

Interpersonal aspects of CPD were also noted as vital both in terms of the social and networking aspect amongst colleagues, as well as people's own resilience and wellbeing.

Research participants highlighted the need for guidance and professional development training in how to adapt and adjust assessment methods to meet statutory requirements for reasonable accommodation where needed. They also called for the development of a community of practice where tutors could share resources, materials, ideas and innovative approaches (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 83).

CPD to support the use of assistive technology and learning supports

The role of assistive technology in supporting learning was highlighted in the Intellectual Disabilities Report in particular, calling for training and IT support around the kinds of assistive technologies available and how they can apply them to their teaching practice (2021b, p. 84). In some instances, this was being provided but tutors were not aware of it.

IT support was also identified as a need here, so that tutors and learners had expert assistance to draw on when difficulties with software or hardware arose. Once again, funding was cited as an ongoing issue in making available specialised technology to those that needed it (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 85).

CPD for FET and core partners

The research reports all highlight that many of the concerns of tutors in other areas of FET about supporting literacy and numeracy needs of learning could be allayed through relevant training. Adult literacy staff in the reports described how they have provided broad equality and diversity training for FET staff who do not normally work in a literacy context. They describe how

There is a small amount of anxiety for some staff, born out of the best place, they don't want to say or do anything wrong, so that's where the specific training came in. While the broad equality and diversity training is good, it is like whitewashing your canvas to make sure your canvas is good, but we need to do a little more to allay fears and to feel adequately support in relation to it. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 66)

The reports also highlight that CPD is also relevant to core partners. The Family Literacy Report calls for CPD about childhood and adult learning to be available to core partner members, such as Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) tutors and library staff (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 14). While the Intellectual Disabilities Report calls for training and partnership supports for partners in the disability support services (2021b, p. 11).

This is acknowledged as a two-way process, with literacy staff needing to become more familiar with the disability support services or school culture so that partners have an equal respect and recognition for the imperatives directing each other's work. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 81). Such collaborative CPD also gives opportunities for exploring the considerable cultural differences between school and FET learning styles acknowledged in the Family Literacy Report (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 82) or the different expectations of literacy learning between disability support service staff and literacy staff documented in the ID report. These types of engagement would support the building of collaborative partnerships in many centres, and need to be resourced and planned collaboratively as a negotiated joint strategy (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 102).

How CPD is provided

Professional development needs to be widely promoted and accessible to staff, and this could be done by offering regional workshops and informal meetings in different locations throughout the country as well as via online webinars (Numeracy Report, 2020, p. 9). Many literacy staff in the research reports called for existing professional development opportunities to be promoted more widely as there appears to be a lack of awareness around current CPD that is available (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 11). This points to the need to expand the professional development opportunities which are available at QQI levels 5 – 7 to QQI levels 1-4 where the Adult Literacy Services operate.

Literacy staff called for CPD to be embedded in a support structure where all tutors are supported to attend training sessions and given access to ongoing CPD supports (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 83). Ways of paying tutors for collaboration, administration and training need to be planned at a central organisational level. CPD needs to be provided for tutors in their local area, as some tutors work in isolation in small centres.

Sharing resources and 'communities of practice'

The research reports document how literacy staff desire to network and create stronger communities of practice to share practices and resources. This would support discussion about the pedagogical approaches that suit adult learners, as well as the sharing of resources and information about inclusive practices in literacy and numeracy. It would also help to consolidate a collective sense of identity as literacy tutors.

The reports call for tutor solidary networks to be encouraged and promoted, so that all staff have a sense of belonging and sharing in the literacy strategy (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 114). This is key to the formation of a professional sense of identity and the ecologies of practice to which Stronach et al. (2002) refer, as well as raising the community profile of adult literacy and numeracy provision (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 11).

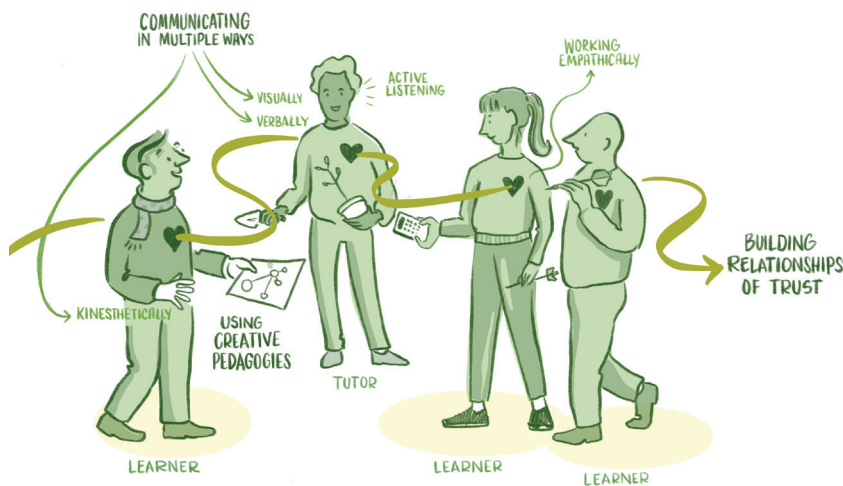
Collaborative planning would enable and support the good practice and resource creation, which is already occurring locally, to be shared between staff. Much of this is currently being organised by Adult Literacy Organisers on a local or regional level and is reliant on individual or centre initiatives. The research reports call for CPD to be coordinated nationally with the aim of establishing communities of practice across the centres which are accessible for all tutors (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 56).

Tutors also note specific needs such as the lack of resources for adults with intellectual disabilities and for adult numeracy. In this regard, some tutors suggested 'communities of practice' to support and develop expertise and skill in this area. One tutor suggested how they "should all be linking in more and in the same way I'd share with [other tutors]. To have that community of practice develop, that would be great" (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 76).

What the reports recommend

This briefing paper highlights the ecologies of practice that constitute 'good practice' amongst adult literacy staff (Stronach et al., 2002). The reports identify specific capacities as essential for adult literacy staff, including tutors. These include:

- a commitment to a learner-centred responsive form of adult learning
- being highly skilled in the social and relational aspects of learning in their personal and pedagogical approach
- using responsive, creative and multi-modal forms of pedagogies and assessment
- supporting colleagues,
- maintaining collaborative partnerships
- developing an inclusive learning environment within the literacy services and across FET.



The reports also highlight key elements which are needed to support adult literacy staff:

- recognising the impact of the wider system requirements in terms of learner progression and tracking for the specificity of the adult literacy services
- acknowledging the distinctive nature of adult literacy and numeracy learning, the diverse learning journeys and the ripple effects of transformative learning
- improving the employment conditions of adult literacy staff
- developing the professional identity of adult literacy staff, including supporting staff through continuing professional development, communities of practice and the sharing of resources.

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Briefing paper 4

Literacy learner engagement

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About this briefing paper

This paper discusses the distinctive ways that learners engage and learn with the Adult Literacy Services. We begin by describing the current context for literacy learner engagement in Ireland. These three research reports illustrate the rich complexity of adult literacy learning, including the value placed on learner-centredness, relationships and experience in literacy learning. The research highlights the legacy of previous education encounters when engaging in new ways of adult learning.

Recognising the distinctive learning profiles and journeys of adult literacy learners is key for successful engagement. The social context of learning is acknowledged throughout the research as core to engaging learners. This context includes the construction of respectful environments and places learning relationships as central to the process. Learner solidarity and socialisation is a key part of learner engagement. Duckworth and Smith (2018) call this the 'ripple effect' of literacy learning. As the benefits of literacy learning flow through the different elements of the life of the learner, their family and the wider community.

Background context

The inclusive ethos of the Adult Literacy Services gives a very specific role to responding to the unmet literacy needs of all adult learners in the population. This ethos has been evident through the emergent policies about adult literacy and numeracy during recent years. It has been a feature of adult literacy in Ireland through its origins in the groundswell of voluntary activity in the 1970s in local areas. The values of this emergent sector were expressed in the publication of the Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work report in the 1980s. This guide was written by practitioners and these same principles hold true in literacy today.

Students were to be recognised as equal and knowledgeable partners in a learning process where they had the right to explore their needs and interests, set their own goals and decide how they wished to learn. Adult literacy work was to relate to the whole person; it was concerned with personal development (Ward and Ayton, 2019:3)

This person-centred and inclusive ethos has been evident through the emergent policies about adult literacy and numeracy during recent years:

- The FET Strategy 2020-2024 calls for adult literacy and numeracy to be “fully integrated with wider FET provision and... links learners to pathways within FET” (SOLAS, 2020, p. 48).
- The Adult Literacy for Life: A 10 Year Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy (SOLAS, 2021) is a whole-of-government approach which recognises literacy, numeracy and digital literacy as key competences for lifelong learning on an individual and societal level (SOLAS, 2020c, p. 18-19).

Adult Literacy Services, in partnership with SOLAS, ETBI and NALA, have been important in developing guidelines and frameworks to anchor adult literacy provision in learner-centred and equality-based principles and approaches. This ethos is evident in the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) definition of adult literacy as social practices involving

listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. But it includes more than the technical skills of communications: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals, families and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities and initiate change (NALA, 2012, p. 6).

This definition by NALA highlights adult literacy's basis in a philosophy of adult education that is concerned with the social context and transformative potential of learning. A socially situated understanding of literacy acknowledges how learners have the right to explore their needs and interests, set their own goals and decide how, where and when they learn. It emphasises the centrality of learners' experience and knowledge in the literacy process and their right to be involved in all aspects of provision (NALA, 2012). This paper is written with this policy backdrop in mind, exploring the distinctive nature of learner engagement through the Adult Literacy Services.

Recognising learners and their engagement

The three research reports highlight robust evidence of a strong culture of good adult learning practice through local centres across the country. These practices are delivered by dedicated and skilled tutors. As such, a strong commitment to an adult education, learner-centred approach to literacy is evident throughout the service.

This paper charts the elements of learner engagement, highlighted in the research reports, which need to be acknowledged to support learning.

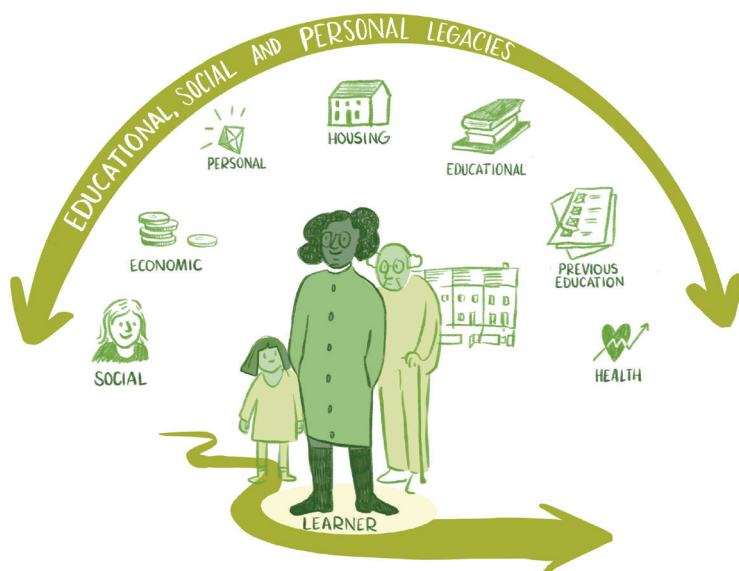
- A learner-centred approach
- Recognition of learners and their engagement
- Legacies of previous education encounters
- Distinctive learning profiles and journeys
- Creating respectful environments of learning
- Significance of learning relationships
- Learner solidarity and socialisation
- The ripple effects of literacy learning

A learner centred approach

Putting learners at the centre is a core value of the Adult Literacy Services' aim to respond to the unmet literacy needs of adult learners. This gives the Adult Literacy Services a unique role in the provision of basic educational programmes for adults nationally. They offer a responsive range of unaccredited and accredited courses of learning, as well as supporting progression to other levels and services in FET and elsewhere.

A learner-centred approach to adult literacy and numeracy acknowledges people's diverse goals and needs. An adult learning ethos emphasises the relevance of people's life experiences in their learning. It is learner-centred in its ethos, values and pedagogical approaches, with adult learners actively collaborating in the decision-making about their learning (The Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 61). This is evident throughout the three research reports and is documented in more detail in Briefing Paper Three, Tutor Identity and Inclusive Capacities. This deep commitment to a learner-centred approach is based in an adult education approach that begins with and builds on a learner's experiences and knowledge throughout the learning journey (Shor and Freire, 1987).

The whole ethos of adult education in meeting the learner where he or she is at and being able to support them to achieve what their goal is. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 74)



Legacies of previous education encounters and labels

Many learners have fragile sense of their own identity as learners which originates from their schooling.

Most parents reported that they frequently felt alienated from the school, and they realised there were gaps in their knowledge about how school worked, how to support language development, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 29)

The Family Literacy report also highlights the significant impact of negative experiences of schooling which has considerable emotional impact on subsequent learning encounters. This point is also echoed extensively in international research by Crowther et al. (2010), Duckworth and Smith (2018), Duckworth and Tett (2019). Adult literacy remains a deeply sensitive issue for many learners, and requires a careful thoughtfulness and learner-centred responsiveness from Adult Literacy Services and the wider education system.

The Numeracy Report clearly identifies how this legacy is a complex process with 'mathematics anxiety' (2021a, p. 27) and a disengagement from numeracy occurring as a consequence of

The abstract and crowded nature of the school mathematics curriculum, the resultant time pressures involved in covering the curriculum, and the emphasis on assessment via examinations exacerbate this problem for many students. Some adult learners in the interview sample also referred to what they saw as their school teachers' own lack of mathematics knowledge, or these teachers' inability to explain mathematical ideas in ways that students could understand. Equally disturbing were accounts given by these adults of being told by school teachers that they were stupid, or of being left to sit at the back of the classroom. (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 51)

This complex mix of external factors of curriculum and assessment, combined with interpersonal issues of teacher' capacities and stigmatising are often internalised by learners as a failure on their own part – a deeply felt individual sense that 'I'm no good at maths, writing, reading'. For many, this labelling is deeply embedded in structural and cultural inequalities of class, gender and disability. Burke talks of the history of institutionalisation, stigma and marginalisation experienced by people with disabilities which has left a legacy of doubt that stifles educational growth (2018: 12).

A more complex scenario often faces learners with intellectual disabilities as they attempt to progress in their learning after schooling. The Intellectual Disabilities Report describes how adult literacy and basic education is often seen as the 'default destination' of learners with intellectual disabilities as they transition from mainstream post-primary schools. While many older adults with intellectual disabilities have not been included in mainstream schools and are seeking literacy or numeracy opportunities, many younger learners have completed post-primary schooling with literacy skills above QQI Level 3 and are seeking other types of educational progression (2021b, p. 64).

Coffield et al. (2007) note the "very significant but unsung achievement" of further education colleges in the United Kingdom.

They take in students ...[whose learning has not been recognised in the school system] and, through sheer hard work and through forging more respectful and inclusive relationships, they restore them as human beings who begin to see themselves again as worthy of respect and who can and do succeed in gaining qualifications. Many of these students talk of being neglected and even insulted in schools and they have ended up, after 11 years of formal schooling, as damaged learners with serious gaps in their basic skills. Such students are some of the most challenging to teach in the whole educational system, but they are not homogeneous. (2007: 724)

This element of creating 'respectful and inclusive relationships' that Coffield talks about is a key part of the pedagogical approach of adult literacy. It is premised in a recognition that each learner and their experiences are unique. The Adult Literacy Services ethos of supporting the needs of all learners in a learner-centred approach recognises this. This is a significant achievement which is built through the educational ethos, collaborative efforts and learning relationships of its learners and staff which is explored throughout this briefing paper.

Distinctive learner profiles and journeys

The three research reports highlight how the individual learning profile and journey of each literacy learner needs to be recognised. In practice this happens through a careful process of individual assessment and is supported through a responsive pedagogical approach and a focus on relationship building during the learners' literacy learning journey. This has to account for the "wavy line" of "lateral progression [as] learners move in and out of the literacy service, needing varying amounts of time to complete courses at the same level and taking several courses at the same level rather than progressing 'upwards'" (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 75).

The research reports also highlight the "interrupted learning trajectory" that many learners have throughout their life (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 56). This journey requires a lengthy period of supported engagement before someone is ready to tackle their unmet literacy needs (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 57). The Numeracy Report highlights how numeracy issues arise for adults throughout many different contexts and times in their lives. The Intellectual Disabilities Report describes the continued demand for learning opportunities over the course of people's life.

The assumptions of learners engaging in a programme of study and then progressing upwards through predefined levels is often not relevant or suited for many literacy learners. This is widely evidenced in international studies of adult education and adult literacy (Barton et al. 2007, Crowther et al. 2010). Carpentieri notes that shifting from a system-centered model to a "learner-centered focus acknowledges that learners may be 'dipping out' [of learning] for a while, generally because of other responsibilities... Inconsistent does not necessarily mean non-persistent." (2007: 20)

A learner-centered approach needs to be recognised and facilitated within the broader system requirements and imperative for progression by QQI levels. For example, The Family Literacy Report speaks of supporting literacy through "the chronological stages until transition to secondary school and beyond" (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 58), focusing on the literacy needs of adults through their children's learning needs. The research reports recommend the need for a more responsive and flexible system as discussed in Briefing Paper Two, Measurement of Literacy Learning in Inclusive Contexts.

All the reports highlight the embedded nature of literacy and numeracy in everyday activities that interest learners. The integration of literacy and numeracy with other skills in a multi-modal way in real life contexts is an effective way to learn a number of skills at once.

To meet learning outcomes... I decided to use the dartboard as the main resource. Along with other activities such as price comparisons, going onto the Argos website and seeing how much certain sets of darts cost, or certain quality of dartboards, etc. So the whole theme of that one game could be met through, but there was a lot of thinking involved at the beginning to make this work, you know. But the learners enjoyed it. They're all taking turns; they're throwing fifty darts randomly at the board. And I'm keeping track of where those darts are landing. And we're tallying. There's a tally sheet, there's a table, there's a bar chart being created. (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 63)

This form of learning is a highly complex process with daily activities such as these involving numeracy, maths, literacy, digital literacy among other capacities.

Learning how to learn

Balancing literacy and general learning skills is necessary in literacy engagement as many learners may not have engaged with formal learning processes in some time. They have to be reminded of study skills, learning processes, and language and processes associated with learning. In particular, to engage in QQI Levels 1-3 courses, learners have to grapple with what may be new and complicated language, with unfamiliar processes and concepts of assessment. This learning care work is supported by tutors in an incremental way and is an embedded part of the literacy learning process. In this way it becomes a secondary and subsidiary consideration for learners (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 88).

The research reports show that a general focus on learning is often appealing for learners who may have learnt to be sensitive about their literacy or numeracy capacities because of the social stigma associated with unmet life needs. The Family Literacy Report discusses how a “themed or integrated approach to family learning allowed literacy to be embedded” into the learning in a way that was more appealing for learners (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 45). This is supported by the integrated approach as part of existing programmes which is encouraged across FET, especially for more practically-orientated programmes where some learners may feel challenged by the literacy and numeracy components of the courses (SOLAS, 2018).

The three research reports all emphasise the balance that the Adult Literacy Services have to strike between their primary focus on literacy or numeracy and other forms of learning. The Numeracy Report also notes that it is key to differentiate between numeracy and literacy in its learning activities.

The relevance of experience and context-rich learning to critical pedagogy

The evidence suggests that the integration of literacy and numeracy skills into ‘context-rich’ real life experiences that learners can recognise is key for learning, as the example below reveals.

They have a child’s party, you know, and then like what are the items you need? So we use an Excel spreadsheet. How many people responded? Adding, subtracting, give them a budget... You are integrating your communications, your literacy, your IT skills, and your computer skills together... if you just isolate maths on its own, it doesn’t work (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 62)

As Tett and Maclachlan point out “literacies learning arises directly out of, and connects specifically with, the issues that the groups are exploring. It is therefore embedded in real-life situations that have relevance and importance to the learner” (2008, p. 670). This distinguishes it from curriculum-based subjects, orientating its focus firmly to a learner-centred focus. The sharing of experience enables learners to critically reflect about the conditions of people’s lives and construct a new sense of their world.

As Briefing Paper Three explores, literacy and numeracy pedagogies often use a wide range of creative media and activities to enhance literacy learning and to communicate in diverse ways with learners. These creative modes include art work, music, role plays, quizzes, cooking, photographs, internet searches to name but a few. They range across different forms and media, for example to experience the text of a novel in an interactive way and multi-modal way, to ensure that learning is not entirely reliant on reading or writing modes. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 70). Approaching literacy and numeracy through multi-media and creative methods is a very effective and engaged way of learning that offers space for critical thinking.

Critical reflectivity based in a critical pedagogy that allows learners to reflect on the broader conditions of their learning and their actual lives is a core part of adult and community education. This approach is based in a Freirean pedagogy that supports learners to link with and critically reflect on the value of their life experiences and to engage in a process of critical thinking and dialogical engagement about its social, political and historical contexts (Shor and Freire, 1987). This sharing of experience and critical analysis of the conditions of their lives enables learners to construct a new sense of their world. “Critical literacy offered a space for dialogue and the reimagining of the exploration of ‘hope’ and new possibilities.” (Duckworth and Tett, 2019, p. 13).

Digital literacy

The research reports highlight how digital literacy is becoming increasingly important, with concern expressed about the growing divide in digital capabilities. Digital literacy has had a disproportionate impact on those already disadvantaged. The third wave of the 'Intellectual Disability Supplement to the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing' (ILSA) by McCarron et al. (2017) recorded that over three quarters of adults with an intellectual disability did not write, text, email, or use social media to contact their family or friends. Three quarters of participants reported that they had difficulty in using technology. This is a significant gap in digital literacy, given the pervasive nature of digital technology in contemporary life. This is a point that has become starkly evident throughout the global pandemic, with O'Reilly (2021) noting that "the significant, complex barriers – many due to long-standing structural inequalities – have resulted in an exacerbation of educational disadvantage" amongst adult learners.

Even before the COVID-19 global pandemic, the Family Literacy Report illustrates how digital literacy became essential for parents as schools increasingly communicate with parents using texting and apps. Family literacy centres provide basic computer literacy sessions to enhance parents' capacity to communicate with schools, but also to develop their own digital capacities (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 58). Other areas of literacy such as health literacy, media literacy, work-based learning also increasingly require digital literacy capacities.

Digital literacy is particularly significant for groups who have already been impacted by low levels of digital literacy and engagement. The Intellectual Disabilities Report notes the low levels of digital use and technology among adults with intellectual disabilities (McCarron et al. 2017) and the impact this has for digital literacy capacities.

Digital modes are increasingly integrated as a core part of literacy learning, with mobile phones and iPads used in literacy and numeracy sessions to research topics and communicate. Enabling critical media and information literacy is a key capacity within this, supporting learners to critically source and assess online material. The need for digital literacy is relevant for staff and learners alike.

Respectful environments of learning for adults

As outlined earlier, creating respectful and safe environments of learning for adults is core to the ethos of adult literacy. A learner in the Numeracy Report describes how

It's a very safe environment and we all feel comfortable. And usually when I was going to school you'd never ask a question in class because you'd be made to feel so stupid whereas here in ETB you can ask any question you like. (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 48)

Delivery of family literacy should be sensitive to learners' needs and backgrounds. Allatt's research in the United Kingdom literacy context notes the impact for literacy learners of issues "such as social participation, empowerment, independence, personal confidence, the development of identity and benefits to family life and children's life chances." (2020, p. 41). Literacy staff need to be cognisant of these issues that shape learners and ensure that they are creating environments of learning which can nurture learning.



The literacy services often work in contexts where learners, schools and communities have direct experience of social disadvantage and multiple inequalities. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 110). Staff are aware of this and work to ensure that the learning environment is carefully constructed to be comfortable, relaxed and accessible for all learners.

The research reports remind us that there are different dynamics depending on where centres are based. They remind us that these issues need to be taken into account in designing environments of learning. In some cases, this may be due to social or economic disadvantage.

As well as financial challenges, mental health was raised as a barrier to participation in learning. Learners spoke of their isolation prior to joining in family literacy activities. For some this was because of language or economic restrictions. For others the fundamental personal resource of a permanent home or stable mental well-being was missing and facing out into a social, educational setting was a cause of additional anxiety. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 65)

In other instances, conditions may be due to geographical location, lack of childcare, poor transport links or digital connectivity, or lack of assistive technology and supports. For English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL), language and literacy issues are inextricably linked to equality and interculturalism issues, with NALA highlighting the internal and external factors that impact on ESOL Learners' Attendance. (NALA, 2003, p. 22).

The creation of a respectful learning environment is a key characteristic of further and adult education internationally which learners value.

Learners, for example, valued an experience of learning that was different from that which they had had at school, in which there was a relaxed and safe atmosphere, a culture of mutual respect, more one-to-one attention and (for the younger learners in particular) a relationship in which the students were treated as adults. (Coffield et al. 2007, p. 739)

Part of this respect is acknowledging and supporting the emergent independence of learners. All the research reports describe how learners grow in capacities and independence as they progress. This is a core part of transformative learning which literacy can support as learners gain confidence and capacity in their own learning. This is particularly important for learners who may not have had the opportunity for such independence previously. The Intellectual Disabilities Report describes how learners

get a chance to be in a different environment where it is less supported than the centres they come from... We are there to catch them but it is not as obvious. They get a chance to do different things, study and learning... to meet with all the different students and tutors. (2021b, p. 73).

The significance of learning relationships

The building of relationships of trust between literacy learners and staff is noted as a key part of literacy engagement in Briefing Paper One, Inclusive Learner Identities. These relationships of trust support adults to become confident learners, to build capacities and to progress to further training and into work. Tutors saw making these connections as significant in the retention and progression of learners.

So in a classroom I would build a relationship with the learners. And I've noticed the better that works, the more often the learners came back. Irrespective of the curriculum content almost, if I'd built a relationship with the learners, and you often will, they were more likely to come back for future classes. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 79)

The considerable effort and time that are devoted to building and maintaining relationships are often left to the goodwill of those involved. The Family Literacy Report reminds us that

recognising the value of learning relationships is fundamental to adequately resourcing this time-consuming, core element of family literacy work. These learning relationships will enable more extensive and effective family literacy delivery, and ultimately they will contribute to reaching national and EU targets in lifelong learning. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 14)

This occurs from the beginning of contact with potential learners, as they often need a lengthy period to "gradually re-introduce them to the world of learning and to a sense of themselves as learners" (Crowther et al. 2010, p. 658). As Crowther et al. note, the relational element is key in this and they need to support adult literacy and guidance staff throughout this process. Core to this was the capacity of literacy staff and learners to critically reflect on their own normative assumptions about literacy learning and to accept each other for who they are.

The Family Literacy Report describes how “family literacy programmes respect local, vernacular language and literacy”. Essential to this is supporting “schools and parents in reducing the cultural gap between them so that schools can be equal and welcoming places of learning for all children and their parents.” (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 35). It is what an Adult Literacy Organiser in the Intellectual Disabilities Report describes where “there were no labels, [learners] would see that clearly for themselves, they were the same as everyone else.” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 68)

The Adult Literacy Services – whether it be tutors, groups or modes of learning – need to develop open and respectful relationships. This is a very nuanced and empathetic relationship where

you have to gauge where people are at – you have to know the [learner] well enough to know where they are at, and, when you see everything is going good, that’s when you can approach them about courses... And to know that you have to be on the ground with them. You have to be very real with them because, if you are not real with them, then where do you go? (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 68)

Consequently, literacy staff can tailor their sessions to be responsive to learner’s context and needs at a given time.

Literacy is something that changes and evolves depending on the situation that a person is in on a given day on a given week. If they are unemployed, if they are working, if they are going to the doctors or have to meet a teacher. So, their needs every time are going to be their needs and regardless of what accreditation ... While we will try to aim towards it [QQI award level], if we need to deviate for the learner, then we’re learner-centred and that’s what we’re going to do. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 75)

Learner solidarity and socialisation

The formal learning environments and informal socialising spaces provide spaces for learners to engage together. They are both key spaces for learning as a social activity. ETB staff spoke about creating inclusive environments where learners contact and talk to each other. The group basis of much of literacy learning opens up other opportunities, viewpoints, and approaches to learners. Informal socialising is a key element in building group solidarity, trusting relationships and connectivity.

Informal spaces and moments also provide a key feedback mechanism, with the Family Literacy Report describing how the cup of tea at the start of each class or at end of term is where a “lot of planning and feedback happens informally” (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 90). Tett and MacLachlan (2008) highlight that “learning is a social activity as well as a cognitive process, and part of that meaning for ALN [Adult Literacy and Numeracy] learners is learning who they are... to share their apprehensions, their experiences of literacies.” (2008, p. 667) The group context of literacy learning is acknowledged as vital, as people “learn in groups where diversity is welcomed [and] it provides for rich learning opportunities” (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 57)

Literacy was seen to aid social and community inclusion and provide opportunities for solidarity and networks of learning communities (NIACE, 2013). The Family Literacy Report described how “parents establish a new learning identity and become integrated into a solidary parent groups and often into the wider community” (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 59). Learning as a social activity is acknowledged as an essential element for many learners with intellectual disabilities who often have limited options open to them after school (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 77). For many, the Adult Literacy Services offers greater independence not only in literacy and numeracy learning, but in giving them the right to decide what they will learn, to travel to centres independently, to socialise beyond their immediate context and to seek transformative possibilities for their futures. It is “the relationships and the confidence and the personal development that they gained [that] is success... in terms of being able to do things independently” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 77).

The Numeracy Report describes how the group basis of numeracy sessions provides a “sense of connectedness and engagement with others”. Group work reduces isolation and lessens some mental health issues (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 49). Having a new and vital social network is part of the motivation for people to remain in adult learning. The adult learning approach of building relationships, sharing experiences, through group work and dialogue all encourage solidarity between learners.

They’re building relationships with other parents too, their own peers, which can be a lifeline too for some people that might not have that connection. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 78)

This sharing of experiences and building of solidarity community between learners is a vital part of the pedagogical approach of literacy learning. Duckworth and Tett (2019) describe how this sharing of experience validates learners’ own

experience and deconstructed the old knowledge, where they blamed themselves for being ‘thick’ and ‘stupid’ because they struggled in literacies and instead substituted it with the construction of new, shared knowledge where they were able to see the inequalities and violence in their lives this had stemmed from. (2019, p. 372)

The ripple effect and motivations of learning

Duckworth and Smith (2018) talk about the 'ripple effect' in transformative learning which rolls out beyond the individual learner to their family and wider network. They describe this as "a counter metric... an unmeasured and therefore widely unrecognised social benefit that ...has a significant positive economic impact beyond the achievement of a qualification by a single individual." (2018, p. 164). They describe this "transformative process as a collective phenomenon and as having social as well as individual origins" (2018, p. 172).

This ripple effect of adult literacy learning is captured in different ways in these research reports. The Family Literacy Report illustrates this ripple effect. When parents are resourced to engage in family literacy, wider effects are evident in their lives, their families, schools and the wider community family culture. As the report notes

many became ambitious for themselves, as well as their children, and continued in education and eventually into employment. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 30)

The Numeracy Report describes the

recognition by adult learners that they had developed new knowledge and understanding... as well as specific capacities in the development of financial awareness and problem-solving skills and the ability to support family members in numeracy tasks, such as helping children with homework, mental health and social benefits, since course attendance helped relieve feelings of isolation and social disconnection. (Numeracy Report, 2020, p. 8)

The Intellectual Disabilities Report describes the significance of enhanced “confidence... self-esteem, ability to go independently and seek a job” as part of what learners gained from the adult literacy approach (2021b, p. 70). This type of education and capacity-building is in line with The National Disability Authority’s principles of “maximising participation, and enabling choice and independence” for people with disabilities (2012, p. 28).

This transformative potential of literacy is cited by many learners as part of their motivation for becoming involved in literacy learning. Many are motivated initially by a desire to support their children but this then ripples into their own learning possibilities.

family literacy provides a means of attracting new learners who are motivated by their desire to support their child’s learning development. Through participation in family learning they become more confident and may feel empowered to consider their own learning needs more carefully. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 51)

What the reports recommend

This briefing paper highlights the importance of a strong adult education ethos in adult literacy, with an emphasis placed on the values of:

- learner-centredness,
- relationships and
- life experiences.

This places the learner at the centre of the work and pedagogy of the Adult Literacy Services.

How to engage with adult literacy learners

- Recognise and respond to learners' distinctive learning profile and journey through:
 - o lengthy engagement,
 - o initial assessment, and
 - o person-centred learning.
- Be aware of a learner's possible fragile identity.
- Create respectful environments and relationships.
- Build an inclusive learning environment for all.
- Use experience-based learning, and creative and multi-modal forms of communications and learning.
- Develop responsive and qualitative systems of progression and outcomes.
- Support learner solidarity and support learners to socialise informally.
- Develop learner engagement through the 'ripple effect' of literacy learning across different levels of a learner's life, family and wider community.

Literacy changes lives but it doesn't change everything we need to

The reports remind us that

Having better literacy skills does not change structural inequalities, but it does increase the likelihood of personal well-being, employment, social and cultural inclusion and the skills to work for just change in our communities. (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 11)

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Briefing paper 5

**Inclusive organisations and
environments**

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About this briefing paper

This paper discusses how the organisational structures and learning environments in Education and Training Boards can support inclusion in the Adult Literacy Services. We begin by discussing the legislative and operational context which set the ethos of human rights and inclusion in public sector organisations – including education. The paper explores how inclusive policies are distilled through the culture and structures of local learning organisations of the ETBs and their partners. This paper explores the significant breadth of knowledge needed by ETB staff to fulfil these inclusion policies.

Modelling inclusive policies and practices of literacy across the learning organisation is already a core part of the ethos and behaviour of adult literacy staff. The organisational and environmental factors that impact on inclusive learning are considered in this paper. The briefing paper also focuses on how these organisations create learning environments which improve social engagement and solidarity which in turn support inclusive learning practices.

Broader organisational issues are also considered in terms of supporting the extensive partnerships that are a feature of literacy work, as well as resources and funding for inclusion, and staffing issues. These themes are all explored throughout this paper in terms of their origins in and implications for the organisational structure and culture of Adult Literacy Services.

There is a difference between the timing and contexts of the three research reports which is relevant for this briefing paper. The Family Literacy Report was carried out in 2018 as family literacy was expanding in provision, but before “family literacy became a separate category in FET returns” in 2019 (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 26). Hence, the findings of the Family Literacy Report highlight differences in the funding, status and visibility of family literacy in different ETBs’ organisational culture (Family Literacy report, 2020a, p. 50). Numeracy is acknowledged as an “under-researched and under-theorised aspect of FET” (2021a, p. 5). The Numeracy Report focuses on providing an evidence base on numeracy provision in Ireland and developing good practice guidelines and recommendations for ETBs (2021a, p. 5).

The Intellectual Disabilities Report (2021b) focuses on providing a picture of inclusive practices with reference to the existing Guidelines for the Inclusion of People with Intellectual Disabilities in Adult Literacy Services (2018). It aims to support Adult Literacy Services in their use and provides information on relevant developments across the Further Education and Training (FET) sector (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021, p. 6). The implications of the different contexts of the reports for findings about the organisational structure and culture of Adult Literacy Services are discussed as they become relevant throughout this paper.

Legislative context for inclusion in education organisations

Briefing Paper Two on the measurement of learning includes an overview of the legislation which promote inclusive policies for everyone involved in education including the Adult Literacy Services. This legislation has been embedded into European and Irish policies, becoming part the processes of Irish education. In the European context, the Upskilling Pathways: new opportunities for adults policy has become the key building block of the European Pillar of Social Rights since 2016 .

National equality legislation gives an organisational framework to combat all discrimination and to support inclusion through the:

- Employment Equality Acts (1998 - 2011) ,
- Equal Status Acts (2000 - 2012) , and
- The Disability Act (2005)

This has had significant implications for improving inclusion in all public bodies over recent decades and is currently under review .

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) Act (2014) requires public bodies, including education and training organisations, to report annually on their progress on equality and inclusion in their service provision and employment. The act places greater onus on large public bodies, including ETBs, to take a proactive approach that puts human rights and inclusion at the centre of how public bodies deliver and monitor their functions (ETBI, 2017).

In parallel with these policies, FET strategic plans have contained an active inclusion strand (SOLAS, 2014) and a fostering inclusion pillar (SOLAS, 2020). They already prioritise inclusion across the FET sector including the Adult Literacy Services. More recently, the 10 year Adult Literacy for Life Strategy (2021) promotes a “cross-Government, cross-economy and cross-society approach... that can help create a more equal, inclusive Ireland for all where everyone feels they can participate and belong.” (Government of Ireland, 2021, p. 33). This reflects the move across government and international policy development towards promoting inclusion in all organisations.

The FET strategies have been rooted in an acknowledgement of deep-seated systemic inequalities, with an emphasis on “targeting and facilitating participation by the most marginalised groups in society” (SOLAS, 2020, p. 45). This has had a profound impact for inclusive cultures and practices in education organisations. Of particular relevance is the requirement in these strategies for the development of an operational basis for inclusive policies, procedures and guidelines across all areas of FET including the Adult Literacy Services.

1 <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1224>

2 <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1998/act/21/enacted/en/html>

3 <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2000/act/8/enacted/en/html>

4 <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2005/act/14/enacted/en/html>

5 <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/066b6-review-of-the-equality-acts/>

6 <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2014/act/25/enacted/en/html>

Implementing inclusion policies in the Adult Literacy Services

The three research reports on literacy and numeracy explore how these national policies and legislative obligations are implemented and communicated within the Adult Literacy Services to relevant staff working at different levels in the organisation. The difference noted earlier in the timing and circumstances of the Family Literacy Report which was conducted before “family literacy became a separate category in FET returns” in 2019 is significant (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 26). Its findings on the relative invisibility of family literacy provision in the ETBs’ organisational culture are notable (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 50). Given the “under-researched and under-theorised” nature of numeracy in FET, the Numeracy Report highlights numeracy practices within the broader context of a literacy service, making recommendations and good practice guidelines about numeracy (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 5).

The Intellectual Disabilities Report (2021b) reviews how the statutory requirements around inclusive policies and the Guidelines for the Inclusion of People with Intellectual Disabilities in Adult Literacy Services (2018) have been implemented in ETBs. Given the focus on the implementation of statutory requirements for inclusion, this report provides useful insights into how inclusive policies are made visible and implemented in the Adult Literacy Services.

The Intellectual Disabilities report reveals that ETB staff believe that the statutory requirements around inclusive policies had been communicated effectively in their organisation (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 47).

Staff describe that current guidelines are:

- issued to all staff,
- circulated to literacy centres, and
- discussed at organisational and local community network meetings.

It is in the practical implementation of guidelines that staff call for more opportunities for peer networking and continuous professional development (CPD) about inclusive practices and supports (see Briefing Paper Three on Tutor Identity).

The findings of the research reports reveal the complexity of implementing inclusive policies at an organisational level. Participants in the Intellectual Disabilities Report discuss how they believe that there are a number of different ways that inclusive policies are being implemented in ETBs (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 49). ETB staff expressed concern about the lack of clarity and guidance about how to implement inclusion policies in their local organisational structures and context.

For example, the challenges of understanding and navigating the complex legislative requirements in the implementation of the reasonable accommodation policy is a central finding in the Intellectual Disabilities Report. The 2017-2021 National Disability Inclusion Strategy gives a clear commitment to actions to remove barriers and improve access to employment, transport and other supports for persons with disabilities. However, the requirement to provide reasonable accommodations and supports “where practical and appropriate” gives a qualified obligation, especially in ETB centres with older buildings and facilities. Negotiating this while trying to provide supports for learners is part of the complexity of the daily work of staff in the Adult Literacy Services (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 39).

Issues in the implementation of inclusion at an organisational level

Participants in the research reports describe gaps between national policy and management priorities on the one hand, and local actions and needs on the other. These gaps are evident in different levels of resourcing of programmes, staff and additional supports. These are experienced in different ways at an organisational level, especially where additional or inter-sectoral supports are required. For example, assistive technology, physical access and other supports are key for learners with disabilities in accessing educational services, while family and care supports are vital in family literacy contexts. The fact that numeracy is perceived as being “everywhere” highlights the need to recognise the specificity of numeracy and to “provide adequate resourcing for coordination and delivery of adult numeracy programmes” (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 9). The Family Literacy Report notes differences in the “status and visibility of family literacy in diverse ETBs’ organisational culture” (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p.50).

The need to gather detailed data at an organisational level causes challenges for Adult Literacy Services which is discussed in Briefing Paper Two on measurement of literacy. Currently literacy learners need to navigate a detailed Programme Learning Support System (PLSS) Registration Form and the online FETCH information site amidst GDPR requirements. This can become what some ETB staff describe as a “barrier” for literacy learners due to the “literacy level needed, the personal information required and the overall complexity of the questions” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 59).

At an organisational level, many Adult Literacy Services have put in place supports locally to help people use the FETCH portal, developing plain English and abridged versions of the form, and supporting learners to complete both FETCH and PLSS processes. These innovations enable accessible versions of the forms to be created and staff to work with learners to complete the forms. Considerable time and resources are invested locally to train literacy staff to understand the demands of the reporting system, so they can then create these accessible processes and explain to learners why and how their data is being collected (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 69). Although these supports work, many staff suggest that creating a portal that all learners can use would show a high-level support and commitment to inclusive practice throughout FET as an organisation (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 58-59).

These factors highlight the need for an inclusive system based on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles in the organisational and administrative structures, as well as in the learning processes of FET (SOLAS, 2020d). This has been acknowledged by SOLAS and embedded in their conceptual framework for UDL in FET which encourages systems and solutions that are accessible for all persons regardless of their age, size, ability or disability (SOLAS, 2020a, p. 2). ETBI has convened an Expert Group to develop a tool to capture the Wider Benefits of Learning in FET programmes. The tool is currently being piloted and is intended to be completed in 2021 with links to PLSS. This will provide the sector with robust qualitative data on the wider benefits of engaging in learning.

Tensions between the commitment to inclusion and practices on the ground become key when we look at another aspect of performativity in FET – the setting of targets through the Strategic Performance Agreements. The Adult Literacy Services are:

expected to show a 10 per cent increase in literacy learner participation numbers and 10 per cent increase in rates of certification over three years in their ETB Strategic Performance Agreements. [Adult Education Officers] AEOs felt that the 10 per cent participation increase in the number of learners was achievable but that the 10 per cent increased accreditation in literacy will always be challenging, if not unfeasible, given the unique biographies of learners with intellectual disabilities (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 75).

This causes challenges for the Adult Literacy Services which has learners from varied backgrounds and learning trajectories with differing progression levels (as discussed in Briefing Paper Two on the measurement of learning). The Intellectual Disabilities Report reports that “students count against you when you keep them for literacy maintenance purposes. How does that work in this drive towards progression?” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 78). The Numeracy Report (2021a) and Family Literacy Report (2020a) similarly describe the challenge of matching the unique profile of literacy and numeracy services to the broader requirements and strategic targets of performance measurement. This is the “challenge of embedding both a learner-centred and performance-centred FET system... [which] cannot be recognised within formal ‘hard’ performance metrics” (Family Literacy Report, 2020, p. 57).

As Lynch reminds us “focusing on measurable outputs has the ultimate impact of defining human relationships... in transactional terms, as the means to an end”. (2015, p. 16). Adult literacy staff throughout all reports spoke repeatedly about the tensions this caused at learner, pedagogical and organisational levels. Organisational flexibility and creativity enabled literacy staff to work around and overcome this to some extent. For example, an Adult Literacy Organiser (ALO) describes how they would sometimes:

refer someone in midway through a level 3 major award so that they will complete that in a BTEI and be really well settled there before moving onto a level 4. That can be a very good way of progressing people as opposed to landing them into a new environment with a new level of study and with a new course. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 26).

While such solutions enabled smoother progression, literacy staff in all of the reports argued for progression to be addressed at a systemic level in the organisation. Current work by ETBs in developing wider benefits of learning models is intended to recognise transversal outcomes completed in different time periods in more responsive and learner-centred way.

Distinctiveness of local learning organisations

The research reports document how each ETB and Adult Literacy Service has its own historical, geographical and social profile that responds to the learning priorities and needs of the local communities it serves (NALA, 2011). Changes in ETB organisational structures still carry with them the legacy of previous organisational structures (Ward and Ayton, 2019; Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 69). Partnerships have been established and developed over time with:

- local schools,
- family resource centres,
- disability support services, and
- enterprise and community development groups.

These collaborations give a distinctive form to locally-based literacy initiatives. The specificity of literacy provision in local contexts is rooted in the learner-centred ethos of the Adult Literacy Services to respond to the unmet literacy and numeracy needs of adult learners. This is a “flexible, innovative, supportive, learner-centred approach” that is based in communities’ learning needs (Ward and Ayton, 2019:8). So while national policies and operational guidelines may be standardised across ETBs as an organisation, they take different forms in each local centre and programme. This is evident in variations between rural and urban centres but also within and across different localities.

Hence literacy programmes are socially situated and tailored to meet local needs and circumstances, whether this is through themed literacy approaches or programmes designed in response to the needs of specific groups and communities. The research reports remind us that this local basis of literacy and numeracy provision is key. This is evident in NALA’s description of how “literacy learned at home and in local communities is rich in the use of local language and the expression of the experience and history of families, communities and cultures” (NALA, 2011: 2 cited in SOLAS, 2021, p. 45). This research shows that the local specificity is key to the organisational culture and nature of each ETB.

The Family Literacy Report points to an organisational tension in having a responsive system, describing how they “tended to be responsive to demand rather than having a studied strategic framework” (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 79). By its nature a responsive institution requires a capacity to be able to rapidly adapt at an organisational level. However this capacity to be responsive to demand can seem to be unplanned and unorganised. It can have the unintended consequence of leading to too much variation in levels of provisions across the ETB national system. It is a delicate balancing act between responsiveness and consistency of provision which each Adult Literacy Service has to tread. Each ETB has to decide what and how literacy and numeracy provision is offered to maintain a learner-centred quality provision through their organisational structures.

Part of the history that the research reports also document are the disparities in how FET services are resourced and organised in different areas and centres. This has implications for the national provision of inclusive practices in literacy and numeracy. The research reports recount how some ETBs have clear staff roles in their organisational structure dedicated to family literacy or an inclusive development worker, while other ETBs have allocated these responsibilities into different staff roles. There is no numeracy coordinator position reported in any of the ETBs in the Numeracy Report (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 35).

This diversity of approaches to coordination creates a fragmented approach nationally. It points to the need for national “coordination and resourcing” to ensure that literacy and numeracy supports are available evenly across the entire ETB services (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 72; 2021a, p. 55). This is also evident in the recommendation in the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy of regional literacy coordinators who would be “facilitating cross-Government, cross-society and cross-economy collaboration at local level and coordinating development of Regional Literacy Plan”. (Government of Ireland, 2021, p. 38). It is key that these coordinator posts will have an appreciation of adult literacy approaches.

The local specificities of each institutional context results in ETBs investing different levels of organisational resources into adult literacy and numeracy, in terms of budgets, tutor hours and range of provision. This has implications for the provision of literacy and numeracy in each Adult Literacy Service. The research reports document how in some areas there is a well-developed and long-established provision, for example for numeracy provision, or programmes for learners with disabilities or for family literacy initiatives.

In other instances “there were no hours for family literacy coordination, and this was not always attributed to the task lying with the ALO” (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 50). In the case of numeracy where it is not a named priority, none of the ETBs had “appointed a numeracy coordinator, and none reported a separate numeracy budget” (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 9).

The reports recommend that clear recognition and clarity about the ethos and strategic goals of literacy and numeracy programmes is needed, both within the services and in the broader FET system. The Family Literacy Report points to the imperatives of a system where “you’re going to put more resources and more manpower into the larger budgets”. Consequently, the absence of a “clear ethos, guidelines and strategic targets for family literacy... creates a degree of uncertainty... [which] means that family literacy has yet to develop its full capacity in adult learning.” (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 69). The Numeracy Report notes similar concerns about the lack of visibility of numeracy as a named priority in the services. The Intellectual Disabilities Report names “several areas of concerns, centring on issues of staffing and staff development, resources, partnerships and cooperation, learner assessment and progression and strategic planning” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 53). These remain constant tensions in the broader ETB system.

Adult Literacy Services as part of an inclusive interagency support system

As a consequence of this diverse organisational structure, there is concern expressed through the research reports about “duplication of funding, communication between interagency services and maintaining safe and accessible learning environments for learners and staff” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 57). Literacy staff call for better communications between the agencies who are supporting the same people. Learners have to navigate between the different requirements of the services and supports on offer, with duplication and gaps occurring. These inconsistencies need to be identified and addressed in order to develop a more strategic and holistic interagency support structure for the Adult Literacy Services.

This is not only in terms of education provision but also related issues such as:

- eligibility for student loans and funding for FET,
- entitlements for family supports, disability allowance, travel and other supports, and
- the impact of interruptions in study on progression.

These are also noted as key issues in other national research on FET (Scanlon and Kamp, 2015; Scanlon and Taylor, 2018).

While Briefing Paper Six explores the issues of collaborative partnerships in detail, the call for more cohesive planning for inclusive literacy practices across FET is relevant for this Briefing Paper. Such strategic planning will require all partners and agencies to work more strategically and cohesively in a learner-centred way.

Key to the organisational structures and practices is how they engage with partner agencies (such as community centres, schools, disability support services and other agencies). ETB staff spoke about how successful partnerships with local services had resulted in a more responsive and strategic development of literacy services and a tailored response to the education needs of adults (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 59).

ETBs play a central role in this in terms of their organisational capacity to make decisions and allocate resources based on local needs and priorities while aligning with their strategic performance agreements. As discussed in Briefing Paper Six, clear partnership and resource-sharing agreements are viewed as vital in this work.

Breadth of knowledge and roles to fulfil inclusion requirements

The breadth of knowledge required to fulfil inclusion requirements was evident in the three research reports. In particular, the Family Literacy and Intellectual Disabilities Reports describe how additional time and resources are needed to manage learning and organisational factors such as “what days might suit the learners, what transport is needed, and what individual resource requirements must be put in place” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 60).

A dedicated inclusion role working across the services was recommended in all of the research reports in terms of an inclusion development worker, numeracy coordinator or family learning coordinator. The Family Literacy Report describes this coordination role as a:

type of specialised ALO [Adult Literacy Organiser] who would be passionate about family learning and whose role would be to build a solid interagency approach to family learning provision... would include a human resource management role. They would support family learning tutors... [The role] should be given recognition as a skilled position that requires respect and status. (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 72)

This description highlights the specialised nature of this role and the wide responsibility for which adult literacy staff are responsible. Similar positions are evident in other education sectors which have existing support services such as:

- special education needs coordinators and home school liaison officers in schools
- access officers in higher education.

The research reports note how equivalent structures and funding for inclusive supports within FET are not systemically present or evident to learners. This effectively means that some students are excluded from access to education opportunities. Participants in the research reports describe gaps in knowledge amongst learners about their entitlement to student loans and funding for FET. Learners often struggle with the intricacies of how this might affect their other entitlements such as disability allowance, medical allowances, family allowance, travel and other supports.

In addition, current funding and grants schemes privilege a linear progression through Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) levels with little awareness of the journey many literacy learners experience. This journey can include:

- horizontal progression,
- going up and down levels, or
- interrupted progression.

This is described in Briefing Paper Four on Literacy Learner Engagement.

How to navigate the different requirements and procedures of partner agencies was not always clear to literacy staff or learners. Research participants called for greater clarity about the “the specific functions and responsibilities of the ETB and other agencies (e.g. state agencies, such as the [Health Service Executive] HSE and non-governmental agencies, such as Rehab)” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 56). The Family Literacy Report recommends that ETB staff have clearer information and clear communication of information sharing agreements about the “family literacy agenda of existing groups such as DEIS / HSCL staff, School Completion programmes, libraries, CYPSC, health nurses, SICAP and others.” (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 82). These can be complicated for staff and learner alike to navigate and require skilled guidance and organisational support.

Modelling inclusive literacy across learning organisations

How literacy learning is developed as an inclusive culture and practice throughout the organisation is crucial to consider. Integrated approaches are identified as useful where literacy and numeracy provision can be embedded in different FET programmes to support learners. This highlights the importance of consistency of provision across centres and the provision of ongoing assessment for this learning (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 9). This offers potential to develop inclusion across all FET programmes, including apprenticeships, traineeships and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) where literacy and numeracy can be integrated within the learning objectives of these programmes. The research reports recounted several examples of inclusive practice where literacy and numeracy were integrated into other areas and courses, such as cookery, horticulture, apprenticeships and sewing (see Briefing Paper Four on Literacy Learner Engagement).

The Numeracy Report highlights that “creating a comfortable and safe learning environment is especially important when working with adults who have developed a view of mathematics as involving memorisation of facts, formulas, and procedures” (SOLAS, 2021a, p. 61). The research reports emphasise how “inclusion should be modelled at centre and service level to create a learning environment where learner diversity is expected” (SOLAS, 2021, p. 79). This shift towards more inclusive models of literacy provision has led to increased emphasis on group rather than individual provision, reflecting international practices (ELINET, 2016; Tett and Maclachlan, 2008).

This is evident across FET and in the survey findings of the three reports. There was decrease of 1803 learners receiving 1:1 tuition; in 2015 there were 3,141 and 1,338 in 2017 (SOLAS, 2017, p. 31). This group approach is also evident in the emphasis on intensive tuition provision such as Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE) and through themed literacy approaches (Ward and Ayton, 2019).

The research reports acknowledge the need for awareness of cultural and social diversity through all levels and spaces in the organisation. This can be in terms of awareness of socio-cultural, political and economic diversity amongst learners, use of different modes of communication and a sensitivity to the diverse life contexts of learners. The repercussions

cooking was a well-liked introductory course in many places, [but] providers saw a dissonance or conflict for homeless family learners and for those in Direct Provision. Their children never saw their parents cooking. (SOLAS, 2020a, p. 66)

Hence awareness of difference and diversity need to permeate all aspects and levels of an organisation to create a fully inclusive culture. This level of awareness of diversity and inclusivity needs to be considered at all stages of the learning journey from initial assessment, engagement, assessment and progression as Briefing Paper Four on Literacy Learner Engagement highlights. Staff in the research reports highlight the time and care that it takes to develop this level of knowledge and awareness about learners in order to be responsive to difference and diversity ((Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 60). This is also relevant in terms of ensuring diversity amongst staff.

Consideration of environmental factors and inclusive supports

The cultural values and commitments of the organisation were acknowledged as essential in creating an inclusive environment. This is recognised at all stages of the learning process as “a service-wide commitment to inclusion begins with the initial ‘reaching out’ to potential learners, ensuring that adults with intellectual disabilities encounter a welcoming and inclusive environment from their first engagement with the Adult Literacy Services” ((Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 56). There was a strong consensus that being part of the everyday life of the literacy or community centre was a significant outcome for the learners. The research reports all emphasised how the learning environment needs to reinforce the adult learning ethos, creating a safe environment for learning (SOLAS, 2021a, p. 61).

This can be very challenging when the built environment or institutional structures do not suit learners’ needs – for example those with intellectual disabilities or families with childcare or eldercare needs. In some instances, centres or schools had “purpose-built family rooms while others found accessing adult seating or a consistent room allocation difficult” (SOLAS, 2020a, p. 67). For adults with disabilities, accessing and participating in an appropriate learning environment in literacy centres can be challenging. While ETB centres have put in place reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities, alterations to the physical environment draw on limited budgets. In some cases, this means Adult Literacy Services tutors travel to Intellectual Disability Support Services (IDSS) to deliver adult literacy classes rather than the learners coming into the literacy centre.

I know with the horticulture class, they [IDSS] did request that the horticulture class take place here because of a couple of learners who couldn’t leave the centre (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 62).

This goes against best practice identified by the Adult Literacy Services, Disability Support Services and the adults with intellectual disabilities who expressed a clear preference for learning in an education setting (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 62).

In other instances, a more neutral space can be attractive for learning, with the Family Literacy Report noting the use of libraries as neutral environments that take learning “out of the ETB and literacy and, you know, it maybe makes it more, I don’t know, attractive. Those [libraries] are very open and welcoming and maybe less threatening” (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 71).

Assistive technology is acknowledged by staff as very valuable for some learners, but many tutors feel they are not familiar or competent to support effective use of assistive technology. This points to the need to expand the Professional Development on Technology Enhanced Learning to levels 1-4 to support the use of technology in an inclusive environment.

ETB staff spoke about the importance of personal assistants in supporting learning. Some tutors highlighted their own lack of specialised training and their perception that more clarification was needed on what the tutor was expected to do where a learner had physical support needs as well:

We had to say that person’s carer has to be on site, at all times, because there were varying needs as well... and the lines were getting blurry on what was the role of the tutor. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021a, p. 62).

Research participants pointed out that Adult Literacy Services lack the additional resources and budgets available to other education sectors for special education needs and disability supports. This results in different expectations of new and upcoming learners. For example, those transitioning from secondary schools typically expect a continuation in access to a similar range of support services, including assistive technology, special needs assistants and other resources, that may not be as accessible in the FET sector. One AEO spoke about a:

discussion about supporting learners with intellectual disabilities and learners with autism who are used to a certain level of support in school and they come to FET or come to do an apprenticeship or an LTI and the same level of support is not there. How do we respond to those learners? (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021a, p. 62).

ETB staff acknowledged that many of these supports are in place in ETBs, but they are not systemically or easily accessible on the ground.

I think the challenges facing the ETBs currently are daunting. There are obligations to be adhered to at many levels but staffing and resources to meet these are not forthcoming. I think the commitment from the ETB is strong but the ability to deliver on the ground may be challenging. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021a, p. 63)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides an inclusive framework which supports accessible learning for all (SOLAS 2020d). It is based on the “concept of creating spaces where all students can be educated, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation” (Novak, 2017, p. 43 cited in SOLAS 2020d, p. 27).

In other instances, inequality of access to resources become key. This is particularly an issue in rural areas where many may not have access to travel (including those with a disability requiring specialised transport). This is also a broader issue in terms of the general lack of support services in rural areas where the:

urban rural divide, in terms of support services, are worlds apart. There is a huge service deficit here, and the needs are so high. It’s just frightening really. If you’ve a family in crisis in the city, you just take out a list of services you can refer them on to. If you’re living in rural Ireland and you’re a family that wants extra support and you do not have transport, you’re going nowhere. (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 64)

Creating supportive environments for social engagement and solidarity

The research reports all emphasise the importance of supporting learners in the formal spaces of the learning environment as well as the informal spaces which are vital for many aspects of learning. Creating environments for learning that are “a fun, informal and welcoming learning space” with a “more relaxed” and “supportive” approach was highlighted in the Family Literacy Report (2020a, p. 31) and Numeracy Report (2021a, p. 31). Learners in the Intellectual Disabilities Report identified the importance of social inclusion, independence and their enjoyment of social aspects of learning (2021b, p. 83).

The Family Literacy Report describes how “learner solidarity contributes significantly to retention” (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 63). It can provide key opportunities for community engagement and independent living for many adults with intellectual disabilities. Informal social instances provide a key feedback mechanism in all literacy contexts. The Family Literacy Report recounts how the cup of tea at the start of each class or at end of term is where a “lot of planning and feedback happens informally” (2020a, p. 90).

The learner-centred ethos of literacy and learner participation is also evident through levels of formal participation at an organisational level in ETBs. This was evident throughout the research reports in local and national spheres such as “learner forums, student councils, learner councils, NALA forum, AONTAS forum, learner feedback in evaluations and graduation ceremonies” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 52). It echoes NALA’s Guidelines on Good Adult Literacy Work (2012) which recommends learner inclusion at all levels of the organisation. The Family Literacy Report recommends involving “family literacy tutors, organisers and learners at all phases of the design, delivery and promotion” (SOLAS, 2020a, p. 15). It cites examples of parental involvement in schools as exemplary practice in family literacy. The Numeracy Report reminds us to place “the learner at the centre” of all aspects of literacy provision (SOLAS, 2021a, p. 61). This formal recognition and representation of learners in the ETB organisation is vital for inclusion.

Resources and funding implications

While there is a clear commitment to inclusion evident throughout the Adult Literacy Services, the research reports highlight challenges with the “perceived lack of specific, ring-fenced funding and resources and... the absence of a dedicated inclusion development post”. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 63). The reports describe the consequences of these gaps for learners and highlight organisational challenges arising from this.

The Intellectual Disabilities Report identifies the specific needs for assistive technology, reasonable accommodation and personal supports for learners (2021b, p. 62).

The Family Literacy Report describes the “lack of available childcare for younger children, the timing of activities and poor transport in rural areas made attendance at family literacy activities challenging” (SOLAS, 2020a, p. 12).

The local context of literacy provision is significant with issues such as geographical reach and transport being key in rural areas, while timing of activities and childcare is an issue for many learners.

All research reports highlight the need for literacy and numeracy coordination and delivery to be adequately resourced with a ring-fenced budget and delivered efficiently at a local level to maximise efficiencies. They acknowledge that:

additional supports for all tutors and learners... are needed to support adjustment to the changes which inclusion is bringing to the learning environment of the ETBs. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021a, p 79)

Briefing Paper Three on Tutor Identity and Inclusive Practice highlights the lack of recognition for adult literacy and the resultant precarious status of many tutors working in literacy.

The low status of the curriculum area is also reflected in the number of part-time tutors who staff family literacy provision. They and their colleagues see their working conditions as precarious. They may develop a new course in their own (unpaid) time without knowing if there will be sufficient numbers for the course to take place. (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p.68)

The research reports document the precarious nature, isolated working conditions and lack of professional support for literacy tutors; a point which is also evident in international studies of adult literacy (Coffield et al., 2007; Tett and Maclachlan, 2008). This precarity has implications for the professional identity of staff in the Adult Literacy Services as Briefing Paper Three discusses. The Numeracy Report calls for “greater emphasis to be placed on separate coordination and budgeting for adult numeracy programmes” (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 55). This is a call echoed in the recommendations of the other research reports.

Consideration of staffing is also relevant from the perspective of collaborating with staff from partner organisations. The Intellectual Disabilities Report calls for greater clarity about the specific functions and responsibilities of the ETB and other partner agencies (2021b, p. 56). The Family Literacy Report highlights the significance of having continuity of roles with partner organisations. They note how changes in the people working in partner organisations with the Adult Literacy Services can be difficult to transition. They suggest a handover period with Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) teachers would keep momentum in provision.

I feel if somebody goes like that and somebody new comes it takes them a year to grow into the job within the school and with the parents before they even think about us. (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 71)

While these type of staffing and partnership issues are common to all organisations, the specific forms and implications for staff working in the Adult Literacy Services needs to be recognised. Core in the recommendations are the need to:

- recognise and improve staff working conditions,
- create an inclusive coordinator position to work across services supporting learners, and
- establish clear processes for collaborative partnership work.

Conclusion

This paper considers how organisational structures and learning environments can support inclusion in the Adult Literacy Services. According to the three reports, the many different ways that different aspects of inclusive policies are being implemented in ETBs is leading to a lack of clarity amongst staff. Staff, already under pressure to support learners, must negotiate complex legislative requirements.

The reports recommend greater clarity and guidance for staff on how to implement inclusion policies in their local organisational structures and learning contexts. Respondents call for the creation of a more accessible learner data gathering portal rather than their current locally-based attempts to create plain English versions and support learner access to the forms. The creation of a more accessible national portal would show real support and commitment to inclusive practice at a national level, as currently considerable time and resources are invested locally to build literacy staff capacity, so they can support learners through the reporting system.



The reports show that gaps exist between national policy and management priorities on one hand, and local actions and needs on the other. These gaps are experienced in different ways at an organisational level with varied levels of resourcing of programmes, staff and additional supports.

An inclusive system based on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles needs to be introduced in the organisational structures, as well as in the learning and assessment processes of FET (SOLAS, 2020d).

The reports highlight how there is greater potential to integrate literacy and numeracy to improve inclusion across all FET programmes, including apprenticeships, traineeships and ESOL. Staff are keen to emphasise the current good practice that exists and to develop this inclusive culture across all areas of FET in a systemic and holistic manner. They highlight how inclusion needs to be considered at all stages of the learning journey from:

- initial assessment,
- engagement,
- assessment, and
- progression.

Staff highlight the time and care it takes to develop a high level of knowledge and awareness about their learners in order to be responsive to difference and diversity. They needed to be supported to do so.

The learning environment needs to be safe for learning and reinforce the adult learning ethos. (Numracy Report, 2021a, p. 61). This can be very challenging when the built environment or institutional structures do not suit learners' needs – for example those with intellectual disabilities or families with childcare. ETB staff acknowledge that many of these supports are in place in ETBs but they are not always easily accessible on the ground. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides an inclusive framework which supports accessible learning for all (SOLAS 2020d).

At an organisational level, there is a need for literacy and numeracy coordination and delivery to be adequately resourced with a ring-fenced budget and delivered efficiently at a local level to maximise efficiencies.

Currently many literacy tutors are in a precarious situation with isolated working conditions and a lack of professional support. While these types of staffing and partnership issues are common to all organisations, the specific form and implications for staff in the Adult Literacy Services need to be recognised by ETBs.

Core in the recommendations are the need to:

- recognise and improve staff working conditions,
- create an inclusive coordinator position to work across services supporting learners, and
- establish clear processes for collaborative partnership work.

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Briefing paper 6

Interagency collaboration and
partnerships

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About this briefing paper

This paper discusses interagency collaboration and partnerships with the Adult Literacy Services. We begin by defining what partnership and collaboration mean in the context of further education. The paper reviews the existing partnerships in the Adult Literacy Services to provide a sense of the diverse range of interagency relationships with whom it is involved. We discuss the value of these collaborations for inclusive literacy and identify key features of partnerships for inclusive literacy in the Adult Literacy Services.

This includes reviewing the significance of collaboration in the key stages of literacy provision such as recruitment and initial assessment. We consider how institutions engage in partnerships at organisational level and discuss key roles, relationships, and spaces and environments for literacy learning. The briefing paper concludes by considering the elements that contribute to collaboration as described in the literacy research reports.

Background context

There has been an increased emphasis on partnership between organisations in recent decades across all areas of the public sector including education. Collaboration and partnerships are encouraged to develop cross-cutting links between layers of government, organisations, communities and other stakeholders.

This can:

- widen access,
- increase participation and achievement in learning, and
- link supports and services for greater efficiency.

(Dhillon, 2009).

This is evident within the cross-society, cross-government approach adopted by the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy (2021). This strategy acknowledges that this approach can only be achieved through partnership and innovation at national, regional and local levels. It “will be driven by the passion and commitment from so many, who together can deliver the learning and support that transforms lives” (2021, p. 13). At an EU level, cooperation between different partners represents an important element of Upskilling Pathways and other actions of the New Skills Agenda for Europe (CEU, 2016).

The inclusive ethos and remit of the Adult Literacy Services give it a very broad role when aiming to meet the literacy needs of all adult learners in the population. This broad reach means that the Adult Literacy Services work in partnership with many agencies and people to facilitate a responsive and strategic development of literacy and numeracy supports throughout people’s lives. This briefing paper sets out to highlight the key processes, roles, relationships and environments which are part of developing and supporting partnership and collaboration across Adult Literacy Services.

Defining partnerships and collaborations in adult and further education

While discussion of collaboration and partnerships between organisations are commonplace across policy and research studies, these terms are often ill defined and blurred. At its basic level, partnerships between organisations are “strategic alliances that involve a sharing of resources and responsibility to achieve a common objective” (Caledon Institute of Social Policy, 1998, p. 2).

Partnership can also be defined in terms of shared values such as “joint commitment to long-term interaction, shared responsibility for achievement, reciprocal obligation, equality, mutuality and balance of power” (Fowler, 2000, p. 3). Brehn argues that it is the combination of the “organisational nature of partnership with its intrinsically relational – almost personal – dimension that gives partnership its distinctive characteristics” (2001, p. 14).

This briefing paper looks at how these organisational and relational elements are combined in adult literacy partnership. Martin et al offer a useful framework to understand partnerships. This framework outlines four dimensions encapsulating values and organisational elements of: purposes, values, tasks and conditions (1999, p.63). Partnerships can be understood as dynamic processes using “a life-cycle perspective that involves four phases: seed, initiation, execution and closure or renewal” (Caledon Institute of Social Policy 1998, p. 3). This draws attention to the changes during the different phases of partnerships; some of which are discussed later in this briefing paper.

Partnerships involve organisations with different values and structures who come together with common purpose to produce a synergetic effect and to achieve shared aims (Cardini, 2006). However, as Cardini points out the political and ideological conditions in which partnerships operate privilege some partners and disadvantage others (2006, p. 402). This is due to the asymmetrical power dynamics that exist between partners influencing their relationships and actions. Lack of clarity and confusion can occur about the specific functions and responsibilities of the agencies involved in a partnership as a consequence of the lack of appreciation of these different values and structures between organisations.

‘Collaboration’ is often used interchangeably as a term with ‘partnership’ as they share some similar features. In this paper, collaboration is used to describe the manner in which partners work together. Saltiel describes collaboration as “an intense relationship centered on mutual goals. It is the social and psychological aspects of working together” (1998, p. 6). Each collaboration has its own specific purposes and partnership structure, with partners drawing on different value structures and legitimization discourses (Cardini, 2006, p. 399).

As the discussion of collaboration in the EU and Irish national policy above reveals, collaboration has become a political strategy for widening participation and inclusion in a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach (SOLAS, 2021). Linked to this holistic perspective, the challenges of collaboration can be identified as:

- resources and aims;
 - language and culture; and
 - trust and power between and across the agencies collaborating together.
- (Cardini, 2006, p. 401).

Tett et al (2001: 14-15) offer a useful frame to understand collaboration in terms of four different types related to perspectives and institutional boundaries held by organisations.

Type	What the collaboration aims to develop	What the organisation focuses on	Level of institutional boundaries
A	A learner	Individual	High
B	A well-rounded citizen	Community	High
C	The whole community	Community	Low
D	An individual	Individual	Low

Figure 1: Pedagogic purpose and practice (adapted from Tett et al. 2001)

This framework gives a structure to understand and analyse the implications of the different perspectives and institutional boundaries held by collaborating organisations in a partnership. Tett et al. reminds us that for collaboration to be effective, organisations need to:

- 1) share, or have, complementary purposes;
- 2) be clear about the tasks that they are each undertaking;
- 3) have time to build up trust in each other;
- 4) operate under similar, or complementary conditions, especially in relation to resources of time, money and staffing. (2001, p. 12)

This framework shows how collaborating organisations can have different perspectives and institutional boundaries to each other. Tett et al. (2001) contend that adult literacy agencies tend to have a holistic focus with low institutional boundaries - Type C in figure 1 above). Adult literacy agencies are concerned with the holistic development of the community through education, and “more inclined to adopt closer partnership methods with each other and other sectors to deliver their aims and objectives” (2001, p. 19). Other organisations may have more individualistic focus on learners or clients and/ or higher institutional boundaries and structures. Understanding and appreciating these different aspects and approaches of each agency is key in collaborative relationships.

Who are the partnerships?

The three research reports all emphasise the importance of sustained and ongoing partnerships to support literacy learners in multifaceted ways across different spheres and time periods of their learning and lives. In organisational terms, the Family Literacy Report describes how:

engagement of those with unmet literacy needs in family literacy is a lengthy process that requires additional time and is greatly facilitated by working in partnership with other community stakeholders. The [Home School Community Liaison] HSCL teacher in a DEIS school is a pivotal partner in developing family literacy. Community action groups enable links to be made with the most disadvantaged learners. (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 63)

Literacy and numeracy activities are often offered in partnership with other groups or organisations. The relationships developed within these partnerships vary enormously. They lead to different organisational approaches to partnerships ranging from agreements about delivery of common objectives and tasks to carefully developed relationships of mutuality and collaboration. Notably across the reports is the diversity in the range and type of partnerships identified, with many different values, purposes, tasks and conditions. The Numeracy Report lists key partners as:

- local schools,
- community groups,
- special educational needs providers,
- mental health day centres,
- other areas of FET
- disability groups,
- local regeneration projects,
- libraries,
- direct provision centres,
- local credit unions and
- charitable organisation.

(Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 40).

The Family Literacy Report describes its partners as:

- Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Schools Teacher,
- Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinators,
- Children and Young Peoples Services Committee (CYPSC),
- local libraries,
- Roma and Irish Traveller groups,
- St Vincent de Paul,
- immigrant support services,
- family resources centres,
- support workers,
- local authorities,
- County Childcare Committee,
- women's shelters,
- Tusla - The Child and Family Agency,
- the local Partnership and local Leader groups,
- RESPOND and Focus Ireland,
- speech therapists, and
- local maternity units.

(Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 49, p. 87).

The Intellectual Disabilities Report highlights the importance of partnerships with Intellectual Disabilities Support Services, but also a wider collaborative network of the following who support adults with intellectual disabilities:

- families,
- community partners,
- health services,
- employment and training services, and
- welfare agencies.

This range of partners gives a sense of the scale of involvement of the Adult Literacy Services across many areas of community, social and statutory agencies. The emphasis on relationships and a values-based commitment to literacy is also evident in the Adult Literacy Services' relationship with government departments including:

- Department of Education and Skills (DES),
- Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD),
- Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP),
- Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), and
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA).

(We are using the title of departments as they were when the reports were written.)

Important relationships also exist with other government agencies with employment support services, Health Service Executive (HSE), Tusla, National Disability Authority, care organisations and social services. In addition, community-based organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), corporate social responsibility and philanthropic organisations play a role in supporting and partnering on literacy initiatives on a national and local level. The whole-of-government approach adopted in the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy (2021) attempts to draw these extensive existing collaborations and networks together in a “national, regional and local structures... with appropriate strategic oversight provided by Government agencies, bodies and departments” (SOLAS, 2021, p. 37).

The different scales, responsibilities and nature of arrangements and relationships between these existing partners is important to note. Some involve direct collaborations with ongoing primary relationships and clear collaborative arrangements to develop sustained responsive, needs-based literacy and numeracy strategies. Partnerships with other agencies in the field may be more distant, involving secondary relationships who “participate less frequently and as local circumstances dictate”. (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p.105). They are however vital in awareness raising and supporting learners to engage with the Adult Literacy Services.

How collaborative processes work in inclusive literacy learning

The research reports document the purpose of Adult Literacy Service partnerships as working in a holistic approach to meet learners' unmet literacy learning needs and to support a smooth transition into and through the Adult Literacy Services. This echoes the findings of international studies outlined in the earlier section defining partnerships and collaborations, which emphasise the impact of partnerships which:

enable professionals from different sectors to work together and create a holistic array of provision that would include [Adult Literacy and Numeracy] ALN and that would have the capacity to offer learning opportunities and other life skills that would enable people to make the desired changes in their lives (Crowther et al., 2011, p. 661).

The Intellectual Disabilities Report gives a detailed account of the collaborative process between Intellectual Disabilities Support Services (IDSS) centres and the Adult Literacy Services which is very useful in describing the collaborative process used. It outlines how these partnerships are often the first point of contact for learners with unmet literacy needs. Regular meetings are held between the adult literacy staff and IDSS staff to plan and prepare to engage new learners in literacy and numeracy. The Adult Literacy Services work with the prospective learner to determine each person's learning goals and needs and assess if the Adult Literacy Services has appropriate programmes. Literacy staff then work with the learner to develop an individual learning plan (ILP). In doing this, they draw on the Adult Guidance Service, Resource Workers, ALOs, literacy tutors as well as externally-based partners such as disability support staff, personal assistants, disability advocates and family members. The purpose is to ensure that:

the Adult Literacy Services facilitates the learner in setting realistic goals; taking into account the individual learner's existing skills, educational experience, interests, preferred learning style and external supports (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 61).

The Intellectual Disabilities Report emphasises the changing balance in these relationships over the course of the learning collaboration. Initial meetings are held with the learner, and their family members, advocate and/or support worker (as appropriate) to develop the individual learning plan. This initial meeting with the learner may occur in a familiar and accessible context such as the disability support centre where the learner is more comfortable. From there on the balance in the relationship shifts to primarily between the ETB and the learner, although ongoing contact between Adult Literacy Services and other partners is maintained to ensure consistent supports and progression (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 61).

The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Coordinator identified in a similar pivotal role in the Family Literacy Report. They are central in planning and organising family literacy activities that engage parents and schools, and support children. The cooperative ethos of this collaboration is identified as key as it changes “the relationship between parents and the school and ultimately opened the school up to true cooperative work with parents” (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 55). This echoes the findings of the HSCL review (Weir et al., 2018), which found that school principals and HSCL teachers identified increased parental involvement in schools as a central determinant in improving literacy and numeracy levels in DEIS schools (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 23).

Many literacy activities are described as emerging organically in these partnerships, indicative of the value of being learner-centred. This can come into tension with the different approaches and values of partners. Martin et al. (1999) note the different approaches of school and community education partners where tensions can arise between the focus of schools on their curricular and developmental goals with the broader community development of adult and community educators. From the perspective of adult education, “boundaries are perceived as permeable in order to achieve the flexibility required to support learning where it is most appropriately located” (Martin et al., 1999, p. 63).

Where these different focuses can be blended, they serve to develop literacy learning in a responsive and evolving manner. For example:

- The Numeracy Report notes the significance of “practical everyday maths that people need in terms of change and measuring and baking.” (2021a, p. 45).
- The Family Literacy Report documents how parents needed greater digital literacy to use apps for school updates. “And without them being set up [on the app] they were caught in the loop that they didn’t know what was going on within the school”. (2020a, p. 58).

These type of literacy activities can then evolve into other activities that respond to the developmental needs of the child and parent. Throughout this, parents also “come to recognise and enjoy their role as a primary learning influence in their child’s life” (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 58).

Those involved in collaborative processes spoke of their potential to equalise relationships within the partnership, indicative of the power dynamics which Cardini (2006) highlights as significant. For example:

- The Numeracy Report highlights how “collaborative planning that involves adults in their learning, is central to the work of ETBs” (2021a, p. 61).
- The Family Literacy Report notes that it “is not about parents learning to fit with schools, but rather schools, parents and communities learning to accommodate each other” (2020a, p. 33).
- Disability support staff spoke about the “choice” and autonomy that ETB partners give to their service users. They spoke of the importance of literacy “tutors that are so knowledgeable... and can align themselves so well to working with people with disabilities” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 59). The democratic nature of these collaborations is key, leading to more independence and autonomy for literacy learners.

Importance of collaborative expertise in recruitment and initial assessment

The research reports highlight how the work of partnerships is essential in the initial awareness raising and recruitment phases. The Adult Literacy for Life Strategy recognises this in its plan for a “full and comprehensive roll-out of a consistent initial and ongoing assessment approach to literacy and numeracy across ETBs and their education partners” (2021, p. 11).

Partners are very valuable in circulating information and raising awareness about the Adult Literacy Services, especially in knowing and linking with groups and individuals who may have unmet literacy needs.

Recruitment is achieved through the combined commitment of ETBs, community groups, disability support workers, health visitors, family resource centres and others.

It has to be a multiple approach... all these stakeholders have bought into it, and they are also involved in recruiting and transmitting this information, sending people along” (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 55).

Partners are acknowledged as key in linking with and encouraging potential learners. This occurs primarily through national and local connections (which is described below) as well as through social media networks. The Family Literacy Report describes how social media can be a useful point of information exchange and an important means of engaging new learners through a trusted community of practice (2020a, p. 96).

The research reports identified the key position of the Adult Literacy Organiser (ALO) who brings a “wealth of information and expertise to the table, but also has to manage multiple aspects of the entire literacy service” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 59). An Inclusion Development Worker was seen as means of further extending collaborative networking and partnerships as discussed in Briefing Paper Three on Tutor Identity and Inclusive Capacities and in Briefing Paper Five as key to developing inclusive organisations.

The Intellectual Disabilities Report discusses the importance of having staff who are aware of national inclusive guidelines engaged in initial and ongoing assessment of literacy and numeracy with learners. A careful and considered approach enables staff to put appropriate supports in place beforehand and paves the way for meaningful and inclusive engagement in the Adult Literacy Services (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 59).

There was a consensus that having experienced staff members, like the ALO, conduct these initial meetings is key as it means that the Adult Literacy Services do not promise what they cannot deliver. Such staff will be experienced in initial and ongoing assessment of literacy and numeracy and will be aware of the principles and conditions underpinning initial and ongoing assessment as contained in national guidelines. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 59).

In terms of developing an individual learning plan with a learner, ETB staff draw on support from Adult Guidance Service, ALOs and resource workers, tutors as well as external agencies. As described above, this collaborative process and sharing of knowledge enables a deep knowledge to be harnessed in a gradual and supportive process that places each learner's needs at the centre. This occurs throughout all stages of the learning journey from initial assessment to evaluation, with the Numeracy Report describing how inputs and collaboration are sought from what it describes as all stakeholders, clients, collaborators, and partners throughout the process (2021a, p. 64).

Developing such collaborative partnerships between services had significant advantages for learners and helps Adult Literacy Services identify, assess and enrol new learners.

I link mainly with an instructor in the IDSS centre and s/he would identify the new people to me and when the new people came in, we would get a feel for them and find out their strong points and where they would fit in. What we could deliver to meet their needs. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 61).

Individual learning plans are also developed for and with literacy learners who self-refer or approach the Adult Literacy Services themselves. Where learners do not have the support of a partner agency such as a key worker, IDSS staff or HSCL officer, individual learning plans are created by drawing on information from the learner and from key support figures they identify (such as family members, friends or disability advocates).

While they may not be formal partners, they do need to be considered as collaborators in the literacy relationship. This initial stage is vital in drawing together the network of people who know and support learners to assess their literacy needs and support their learning.

Partnership engagement at an organisational level

Fowler (2000) highlights how the organisational dimension of partnerships present important opportunities for mutual organisational strengthening and capacity building. Key to the organisational structures and practices of the Adult Literacy Services is how they communicate and engage with agencies. Successful partnerships enable the responsive and strategic development of literacy services and a tailored response to the education needs of adults (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 61). These partnerships require time and effort to build and sustain them.

The research reports highlight the need to recognise the “considerable work and time that is devoted to building and maintaining relationships [which] is not resourced and left very much to the good will of those involved.” (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 79). Those currently carrying out these roles are doing so as part of wider responsibilities and often feel overstretched and limited in their capacity (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 12). This highlights the need for greater recognition of the time and capacity needed for partnership building and relational work in the role responsibilities of literacy staff. Studies on partnership highlight the important role of key actors in forming, expanding, managing and sustaining partnerships. Their relational work helps to build trust, shared norms and values which serve as “social glue or bonding social capital to sustain a partnership” (Dhillon, 2009, p. 701).

Research participants acknowledge that a lack of clarity and understanding can occur about the specific functions and responsibilities of the ETB and partner agencies.

I would love to have a clear picture of all the provision, on the ground, for adults with intellectual disabilities. To have that clear picture and then we would all know that we’re providing the best of services (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 56).

Staff note that ongoing lack of clarity or resources can lead to misperceptions in external agencies around what the ETBs can offer adult learners with intellectual disabilities.

Sometimes we get calls from agencies about people who would benefit from being in here but we mightn't have the right programme for them and they may have issues beyond what we can deal with, but maybe they are coming from an organisation who cares for them but hasn't got the resources they need or they might be experiencing budget cuts and that is where we are mindful that we are delivering to the individuals to meet the needs that we can but not be a replacement service, a filler for another agency. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 56).

These concerns echo findings from the DES Review of the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Provision which recommended "better communication and coordination" between ETBs and IDSS to avoid difficulties arising around external pressures on Adult Literacy Services to provide literacy provision to IDSS clients (DES, 2013: 40). It also highlights how the resources of time and money act as a major constraint on effective collaboration (Tett et al., 2001, p. 13).

The Numeracy Report notes the importance of ongoing evaluation which engages and seeks input from all stakeholders. (2021a, p. 11). The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education identifies the development of strategic structures and processes for interagency partnerships to share resources, skills and expertise as key (NIACE, 2013).

Tett et al. (2001) highlight how it is important to acknowledge the different cultures, knowledge and professional basis of the partners. In their analysis of school and further education partnerships in the UK, they observe a range of orientations based on different values and institutional approaches. These range from a development focus on individual students and practitioners to a community-wide developmental focus (Tett et al. 2001, p. 14).

These different orientations can be challenging where partners differ. For example, the disability support services focus on the holistic care and general development of adults with intellectual disabilities while ETBs play more specific role in literacy and learning at an individual level.

In the case of the Family Literacy Report, it highlights the different institutional context where:

Both DEIS schools and ETBs have goals and targets to meet, and these may not be entirely congruent. Ethos particularly may not be shared territory and these things require attention in the interest of partnership development... diversity [has to be] recognised and accommodated" (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 74).

The Family Literacy Report calls for a balance to be maintained:

in multiagency partnerships where partners may have diverse and even competing objectives. The development of collaborative partnership strategic plans allows for a balance to be maintained between local cultural demands and the central strategy of the ETBs (2020a, p. 74).

Adult Literacy Services staff highlighted an uncertainty around the function, role, obligations and overall liability of its own services in relation to those of its partners in meeting inclusive requirements.

We need to decide where does each organisation come in? Where does each funding stream sit? Because the HSE funds keyworkers and instructors in their centres and then we are there as educational providers... I think there's a piece there that needs to be teased out. Where does SOLAS and the HSE meet in terms of 'should we give more?' And I would say yes but how does this get worked out in the bigger sphere where I don't have a whole lot of say. Where is the clarity? Where is our role defined as an ETB and a service provider? (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 56).

Consideration of the complexity of values and responsibilities in partnerships is equally relevant for the other partner organisations. The Family Literacy Report calls for "Continuing Professional Development (CPD) about childhood and adult learning [to] be available to core partner members so that they better understand the nature of their collaborative task" (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 106). This points to the need for explicit training and consideration of the issues in developing and maintaining collaborative partnerships. This needs to include recognition and appreciation of the complex and changing interplay of differing organisational values, defining shared purposes and ways of working within a partnership.

Key roles and strategic planning for successful collaborative partnerships

The need for a more structured long-term strategic planning which acknowledges the time and scope of engagement needed in literacy is emphasised in the three research reports. A key element recommended in the reports is:

an inclusion development worker in each ETB, working across services and in partnership with external agencies, [who] would help significantly to clarify these issues of responsibility and synergy, allowing each ETB and Adult Literacy Services to plan provision accordingly” (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 56).

This is envisaged as a type of specialised ALO role who is knowledgeable about and committed to inclusion in adult literacy and whose role would be to build a partnership approach to inclusive literacy provision. The Family Literacy Report calls for this role to be given recognition as a skilled position that requires respect and status (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 72). This role would include liaising with the diverse range of partners and ETB staff and managing the expectations of all stakeholders while keeping the adult learners’ literacy needs at the centre of the process. The proposed Regional Co-ordinators in the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy (2021) may have a role in advancing this type of partnership development.

To ensure that these relationships work effectively, clear partnership agreements are essential. They should name and agree each partnership’s:

- partners,
- values,
- purpose,
- tasks,
- structures,
- processes, and
- conditions of working and reporting



Consideration of context for partnerships is important with the Family Literacy Report identifying the most useful model as a school-based one where “family learning is located in the school and facilitated through resource sharing between DEIS, HSCL and the ETBs literacy staff” (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 72).

This idea of a partnership based on resource sharing models is echoed in the other research reports and is facilitated by the selection of a mutual context for the partnership.

Clarity about the balance of provision between different services offered by partners is needed, especially when there is a perception of potential overlaps.

We don't want to seem to poach students from a HSE centre who are also looking for numbers. We probably could fill a lot of our places with HSE centre students, but we don't want to. We want to be clear about roles and not overlap. (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 57)

National level of strategic planning and support for collaborative partnerships

Partnerships require a level of strategic planning and support on a national level, with the research reports noting the importance of having central resources and supports such as named inclusive support personnel in national agencies. They also recommend the establishment of central online repository and forums to share literacy-related experiences and resources (Numeracy Report, 2021a, p. 56). Related to this is the need for increased awareness raising about existing resources and forums.

The reports call for national agreements in terms of service level agreements (SLAs), cooperation agreements and protocols to be developed at agency and interdepartmental levels to support literacy work (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 82). This echoes the emphasis in the Adult Literacy for Life strategy on a coordinated and systemic approach to adult literacy which acknowledges the wide array of partners involved across government agencies (as outlined in figure 9 Key Mechanisms of Literacy Support in SOLAS, 2020d, p. 28).

This needs to include awareness of the power differentials between partners. Cardini usefully reminds us that:

The notion of partnerships constructs a vision of public policy that stresses efficiency, devolution and participation and that benefits everyone, though in practice some sectors and agents benefit more than others (2006 p. 411).

Key points to consider are:

- How to have clarity in all processes of communication
- How to overcome gaps that occur when personnel change

This calls for a continuity of responsibility in roles to avoid losing momentum in provision. These roles can include HSCL staff in schools or IDSS staff in disability support services (Family Literacy Report, 2020a; Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b).

Adult Literacy Services staff are conscious that while a holistic approach is beneficial, care needs to be taken around issues of privacy, informed consent and personal autonomy (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 61). Concerns are raised in the research reports about information sharing between partner organisations which have been complicated by the General Data Protection Regulation 2018 (GDPR). Agreement about what is relevant data and who should collect it need to be clearly agreed and understood. Organisational training and discussion at a national organisational level would be helpful in this area.

The significance of relationships in collaborative partnerships

Relationships are identified as vital for inclusive literacy learning in Briefing Paper Four on Literacy Learner Engagement. Relationships are recognised as equally important in the organisation and network structure of the wide range of colleagues, stakeholders and partners with whom the Adult Literacy Services work (Tett et al., 2001). The literacy research reports put a spotlight on the “considerable work and time that is devoted to building and maintaining relationships” in order to understand their significance for inclusive learning (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 79). Partnerships involve different organisations with “distinct and different relationships between one another, creating a complex web of links and interactions. Furthermore, these complex relationships and structures are dynamic” (Cardini, 2006, p. 397).

A careful and considered approach to partnerships paves the way for meaningful and inclusive engagement in the Adult Literacy Services (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 59). The ‘value-added’ of partnerships are crucial to consider, recognising that the individuals, and the organisations they represent, benefit from their participation in partnership processes. These benefits include “individual and organisational learning as well as developing formal and informal networks with other individuals and organisations” (Dhillon, 2009, p. 687).

For example, the ETB – DEIS school relationship is acknowledged in the Family Literacy Report as the core relationship in developing successful family learning through multilayered impacts such as the:

identification of parents who might benefit from joining the group and close networking about the activities in which the group engaged... the group had become a vital mechanism through which the school supported children whom they felt were struggling with some aspect of learning (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 90).

This is rooted in local contexts where the communities and people on the ground are involved and can guide development more effectively and timely. A significant outcome noted in the Family Literacy Report was the development of a more democratic and collaborative relationship between parents and school staff in these local contexts. Dhillon acknowledges that “benefits of ‘partnership’ may not be realised in practice or be equally distributed amongst the actors.” (2009, p. 688). Traditionally many parents see schools as somewhere they do not have a direct role. Schools can unintentionally reinforce this by not including parents in the learning processes. However, family literacy enabled this relationship to be re-orientated where:

the school saw the inclusion of the parent as the most effective way to enhance the child’s learning experience. Beneficial outcomes accrued to children, parents, teachers and the whole school where family literacy is intricately enmeshed in the life and practice of the school (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 60).

It takes time to build and maintain these relationships. Literacy staff pointed to the challenge of this in a system where disability or HSCL support staff can change frequently. The development of clear transition processes between staff would enable greater consistency in provision and momentum in relationships (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 71).

Collaborative spaces and environments for learning

The research reports highlight the significance of the context or environments for learning for partnerships, citing the example of libraries as learning spaces that “are very open and welcoming and maybe less threatening” for learners (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 71).

The environments for learning are also relevant looking at the actual location. The space where learning occurs brings different issues and resource implications into view. For example, literacy provision in rural areas may be needed in outreach centres in a way that is not relevant in an urban setting where ETBs are more accessible. This can be allied with resource implications where learners in urban or rural locations may not be able to get to the centre (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 58). Hence, travel and access is different depending on location and learner context, and this has implications on how relationships and collaborations can develop (Family Literacy Report, 2020a, p. 78).

Conclusion

Key elements for collaboration and partnerships

This paper has discussed the value of partnership and collaboration in the Adult Literacy Services. The findings of the three research reports document the different elements and aspects that occur in developing and maintaining partnerships. This holds significance not only for inclusion in the Adult Literacy Services but also across the FET system. Careful consideration of the organisational dimension of partnerships present important opportunities for mutual organisational strengthening and capacity building. Successful partnerships enable the responsive and strategic development of literacy services and a tailored response to the education needs of adults (Intellectual Disabilities Report, 2021b, p. 61).

Relationships are identified as vital for inclusive literacy learning through the range of colleagues, stakeholders and partners Adult Literacy Services work with. A careful and considered approach to these partnerships paves the way for meaningful, democratic and inclusive engagement in the Adult Literacy Services.

There is a clear need to develop agreed processes to work through the partnership's:

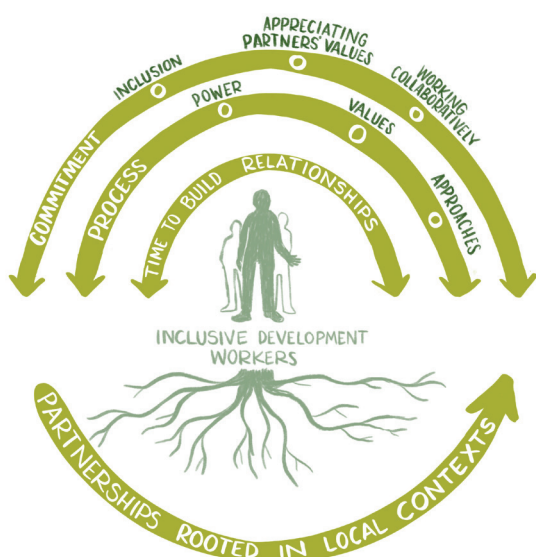
- ideological values,
- power dynamics, and
- approaches.

The research reports highlight the effort and time it takes to build and maintain relationships between partners. Key roles that are pivotal in this work are Adult Literacy Organisers and HSCL officers. There are vocal calls for inclusive development workers or coordinators to be established to support literacy inclusion work across FET.

These positions require a clear commitment to:

- inclusion,
- appreciating different partners' values, and
- nurturing ways of working collaboratively.

The research reports call for greater awareness of the time and effort this relational work requires and to ensure it is recognised and remunerated appropriately.



Collaborative work varies at different phases in the literacy process. Partners are very valuable in raising awareness and supporting the initial meeting about literacy needs, through their knowledge and existing links with groups and individuals who may have unmet literacy needs.

From an organisational perspective, collaborative partnerships require extensive initial planning and time to negotiate the purpose, task, roles and context of a partnership. This gives a basis to negotiate a formal agreement which includes awareness of values, resourcing, roles and conditions, as well as responsibilities. Institutional recognition of the relational and collaborative aspects of literacy roles and a consistency of staff in these roles is necessary.

Partnerships need to be rooted in locally-based groups who know the communities and people on the ground. Such partnerships can guide inclusive literacy development in effective and timely ways and ensure the construction of appropriate environments for learning.

This echoes the acknowledgement in the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy that the Adult Literacy Services need:

to be more connected to wider education, health, community development, employment and local government support to make a substantial and sustainable impact. If we can do this, there is a powerful support network available in every corner of the country which can make a real difference in people's lives (Government of Ireland, 2021, p. 9).

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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, numeracy and digital literacy 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 literacy skills.

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