The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education

The Adult Learner

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Editorial Comment

ROSEMARY MORELAND, EDITOR

I am delighted to introduce the 2024 edition of *The Adult Learner* journal. The journal has three sections. Section One – 'Perspectives on Community and Lifelong Learning' – features four articles which have a specific theoretical focus. Section Two – 'Case Studies on Improving Practice' – contains eight practice papers, which provide opportunities to learn from practice. Section Three contains a selection of Book and Policy Reviews.

Section One

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is a predominant theme in several of the articles. The first article examines issues facing traumatised adult learners, particularly refugees. Ní Ghraínne's piece explores the literature on language learning for traumatised learners, identifies a gap in research on this issue in Ireland, and calls for changes in policy to recognise the impact this has on learning and the need for this to be included in tutor professional development training.

The second article also focuses on ESOL, but this time from the tutors' perspectives. Sceeny's qualitative study on the experiences of tutors during and since the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the lack of 'a coherent strategy' on ESOL across the island of Ireland. He argues that language learning should be seen as a social practice, integral to concepts of belonging and identity. It therefore needs to be more closely aligned with agencies tasked with supporting the settlement of migrants.

The third article by Nuwagaba et al. provides an international perspective on adult literacy, analysing current adult literacy provision in Uganda. Drawing on the Adult Learning and Education System Building Approach (ALESBA), the authors use a case-study method to evaluate the extent to which institutions provide an enabling environment for adult literacy, opportunities for progression from non-formal into formal education, and the availability of funding to support adult literacy programmes. Their findings suggest that

despite the 'unfavourable environment' and limited staffing and funding, there are successes in adult literacy.

In the final article in this section, Lynch et al. explore the experiences and motivations of student teachers in Further Education and Training (FET). Acknowledging the rapid changes which have taken place in FET in Ireland over recent years, this study gathers data across two Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) from 16 mature learners retraining as FET teachers, using online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Lynch and colleagues' findings highlight the importance of intrinsic motivations for transitioning to this career. They recommend changes to policy and practice in this sector to remove the social stigma often attached to FET, and provide greater employment security and more flexible study and funding options.

Section Two

The FET theme continues in Section Two, where the first paper by Lavan, Threadgold, and Malone discusses an initiative by the Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board (WWETB) to actively address challenges faced by LGBTQIA learners in FET. Developed by the WWETB Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion team, this 'Rainbow Connection' programme saw 100 staff members gain greater awareness and understanding of the issues facing LGBTQIA FET learners.

The second paper by the same authors describes an initiative to engage adult learners with intellectual disabilities in higher education. This pilot programme sought to provide FET learners with a university experience at a level which was suitable to them. The authors highlight two important features of this programme: the collaboration between the university and FET, and the use of inclusive teaching strategies. Both of these features contributed to the success of the programme.

The theme of literacy and numeracy is taken up again in the practice section, where several articles discuss innovative practice which attempts to tackle some of the challenges in this area of adult learning. Prendergast et al. report on a professional development programme, which aims to support those teaching numeracy to vulnerable adult groups. Building on a previous iteration, this programme adopted a community of practice model, and included practitioners from higher education, ETBs, and other community and statutory settings. The authors' evaluation of the programme found that it is 'an effective and cost-effective approach for supporting adult numeracy

practitioners in Ireland'. They argue that such valuable cross-sectoral learning opportunities should be sustained, with the programme being offered on an annual basis.

The next paper highlights the importance of digital skills literacy and discusses findings from an evaluation of the 'Blended Learning' module delivered to adult learners on the BA in Adult and Further Education. Warren, McGarry, and Brett contend that introducing adult learning practitioners to new digital tools not only increases their digital skills literacy but can be adapted to increase the digital skills literacy of their students.

In contrast, the fifth paper from Cohalan and Crawford reports on a commissioned evaluation of the online learning service from the National Adult Learning Agency (NALA). The findings suggest that online literacy learning is attractive to those who wish for greater flexibility in times and venues of study. The study found that the course was successful in attracting a range of learners, including those from more vulnerable groups, thus demonstrating a demand for online adult literacy programmes.

McSweeney's paper on literacy focuses on the creation of individual learning pathways for young males seeking apprenticeships. The author outlines her challenge in navigating the qualifications' regulations in order to meet the needs of two young adult learners. Her reflections highlight the importance of a person-centred approach, collaboration, and creativity in finding solutions to overcome educational barriers.

The final two articles explore issues facing adult learning practitioners. Cahill's paper reports on a pilot case-study in leadership development in FET. Using a biographical lens, she analyses a pilot interview which explores the leadership journey of an FET coordinator. Themes arising from the interview are analysed using Ribbins' (2003) framework. This highlights how the FET coordinator's leadership practice has been impacted by her values, intrinsic motivation, and collaborative approach.

Finally, Kelly and Fenton tackle the thorny issue of retention, highlighting the barriers facing adult literacy learners both in accessing and persevering on adult literacy courses. They argue the need for a greater focus on retention and make several important recommendations for tackling this.

Section Three

Section Three comprises one book review, a book chapter review, and two policy reviews. Isobel Hawthorne-Steele reviews Fitzsimons and O'Neill's (2024) *Critical Perspectives on Further Education and Training*. O'Kelly provides a review of *The Routledge International Handbook of Equity and Inclusion*, edited by Downes et al. Austen-Gray and Lee outline the key themes and challenges arising from *Global Citizens 2030 – Ireland's Talent and Innovation Strategy* policy. This is followed by O'Grady and Brennan's review of the *Learner Support Framework*.

I wish to thank our reviewers for these important contributions to the journal. My thanks also to our Editorial Board, for all their hard work and commitment throughout the year to help realise the 2024 edition of the journal.

In particular, I would like to mention our dear colleague and Board member Luke Murtagh, who sadly passed away in September. His high level of commitment and enthusiastic contributions to our Board were a testimony to his passion for adult learning. We will greatly miss him. This edition of *The Adult Learner* journal is dedicated to him.

Finally, I would like to thank the Editorial Office at AONTAS, without whose support this would not have been possible.

I hope you will enjoy delving into the many themes explored in this year's edition and that the articles will enable you to deepen your own understanding of adult learning in all of its many and varied contexts.

Dedication to Luke Murtagh, Editorial Board Member, *The Adult Learner* (2013-2024)

MARIA SLOWEY AND ANNE RYAN

We were greatly saddened by the death of Luke Murtagh, a long-standing member of the Editorial Board of *The Adult Learner.* Luke was a visionary educator who dedicated his life to widening access and transforming the lives of learners of *all* ages.

With a background in teaching and as a school principal, his commitment to fostering the education of adults at local and national levels particularly came to the fore during his tenure as Chief Executive Officer of the Tipperary North Vocational Education Committee (1978-2005). His sphere of influence inevitably stretched beyond his local region. He made a national contribution to the transformation of the second level education system to become better equipped to prepare young people for the social and economic conditions in Ireland in the latter part of the 20th century. He recognised that it was essential for educational opportunities to be greatly extended to the adult population. He played a pivotal role in promoting Adult Education and the active engagement of educational institutions in supporting local and regional development.

He was closely involved in the establishment of the Rural Business Development Institute in Tipperary, where staff were recruited to perform the twin roles of teaching *and* engagement, driving local and regional development. From the beginning, this Institute advanced academic disciplines and a commitment to sustainability. It was truly innovative at this time, considering that neither the Millennium Development Goals or the Sustainable Development Goals had yet been articulated. Luke's involvement with the establishment of the Institute and his role as Acting CEO for its first two years in operation laid the foundations for a network of campuses which subsequently underpinned the establishment of the University of Shannon (US) in 2021.

It was typical of Luke that, as an early proponent of lifelong learning, once he had officially 'retired' from a senior position, he not only threw himself into a myriad of voluntary activities but also into his doctoral studies in the Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University. In his thesis (Murtagh, 2009) and in subsequent publications (Murtagh, 2014a; 2014b), he investigated the development of Adult Education policies in Ireland. He made the case that 'intense rivalry' at the time between the education and training domains complicated Irish public policy processes.

Beyond this, the thesis also tells a fascinating parallel story of his own personal journey:

> I set out on the research journey as an actor operating exclusively in one adult education domain. I had a strong feeling that the publication of the Green and White Papers on Adult Education was a very positive event and that the only contentious issue during their preparation was whether the Local Adult Learning Boards were to be located inside or outside the VEC system. The research journey significantly altered my initial intuition. I hope the lessons I have learned on my personal journey can inspire adult education stakeholders to become insightful policy makers in the future. (Murtagh, 2009, p.1)

This enquiring, open-minded, self-reflective perspective made Luke an invaluable member of our Editorial Board. He was always willing to go to the margins, both intellectually and as a practitioner. However, it was in the warm and supportive way he assisted prospective authors to reach their potential that the depth of his skills and commitment as an educator could be seen.

It was notable when the tributes poured in that so many came from people who had been students of his in many different circumstances and periods of his life, stretching from people who met him as Mr Murtagh, a teacher in the 1960s, to those in more recent times who encountered Luke as a lecturer in the Department of Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University.

On behalf of the Editorial Board, authors and readers of *The Adult Learner*, we extend our sincere condolences to Luke's family and numerous friends.

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Editorial Board

Contributors

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PAUL SCEENY is an independent adult education consultant, specialising in ESOL, literacy, and numeracy. For over 25 years, he worked in a range of roles with the qualifications body City and Guilds. In 2022-23, he took a career break to complete a Masters in Adult and Community Education at Maynooth University. Paul is also Co-Chair of the National Association for Teaching English and Other Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA), a forum and professional association for ESOL teachers throughout Britain and Ireland. He is currently working on an interim basis for the North West Migrants Forum, a Derry-based charity supporting minoritised communities.

EPHRAIM LEMMY NUWAGABA is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Adult, Community and Lifelong Learning at Kyambogo University, Uganda, and was a visiting Associate Professor at Haramaya University in Ethiopia. He holds a PhD and Masters in Adult Education from the University of KwaZulu Natal in South Africa, a Bachelors' degree from Makerere University, and a Diploma from the University of Zambia. He has over 30 years of adult education experience working with government, NGOs, and universities. He was Programmes Director of the National Adult Education Association of Uganda, Secretary of the Uganda Adult Education Network, and Head of Department in Adult and Community Education. His research interests include adult learning, microfinance, livelihoods, and persons with disabilities.

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CATRIONA WARREN is a lecturer and Programme Leader in the Literacy Development Centre (LDC). She mostly works in the areas of pedagogy, ESOL pedagogy, blended learning, and technology enhanced learning with FET practitioners on teacher education programmes. She is currently completing an EdD with a focus on Professional Learning and Teacher Education. Catriona is interested in ESOL literacy and active learning strategies.

CAROLINE MCGARRY is a lecturer in the Faculty of Education and Lifelong Learning in SETU Waterford. Caroline currently teaches on various programmes across the faculty, including the BA in Adult Further Education, the Postgraduate Diploma in Further Education, and the Masters in Education. Caroline has a background in primary education and worked as an assistant principal of a DEIS school for many years. She completed her PhD in Education and Masters in Education through Mary Immaculate College, Limerick and is particularly interested in the areas of educational disadvantage, language development, digital literacy, inclusion, and curriculum development.

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JOAN MCSWEENEY is a FET Adult Guidance Counsellor in Cork ETB. She has over 20 years' experience supporting learners on part-time QQI Levels 2-5 courses to access, transfer, and progress through education and training options. She is passionate about helping adults to achieve their potential, working collaboratively with FET colleagues and external agencies to advocate on behalf of learners and identify innovative solutions to barriers. She has recently completed a Masters in Education in Adult Guidance

Counselling with Maynooth University, which explored how adult guidance practice can be sustained in the current context of rapid FET and guidance policy developments.

ANGELA CAHILL is an Adult Education Officer working in the Further Education and Training (FET) sector. Angela has extensive experience of FET provision having worked over the last 18 years with the Adult Literacy Service, the Community Education Service and the Vocational Training Opportunity Scheme (VTOS). Angela is currently undertaking a Professional Doctorate (EdD) with the DCU Institute of Education. Angela's EdD research focuses on gathering the insights of FET coordinators in relation to how they conceptualise and experience their role, their attitude towards the strategic priorities guiding FET, and their perceptions of middle leadership.

TARA KELLY works as an Adult Literacy Organiser. She conducted the research for her piece in this journal as part of her MA in Management in Education from SETU Waterford.

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SECTION ONE

Perspectives on Community and Lifelong Learning

The Effect of Trauma and PTSD on Retention in Second Language Acquisition in Refugees and the Steps Educators Can Take to Mitigate

EDEL NÍ GHRÁINNE

Abstract

Many English language tutors have little training in working with traumatised students, especially regarding second language acquisition. A literature review was undertaken on work carried out to identify issues surrounding memory and retention in relation to second language acquisition in traumatised adult refugees, as well as the link between the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and memory and retention. The article looks at how a refugee is defined, how trauma can develop at various stages in the journey, the stress on reaching the host country and issues relating to interrupted childhood experiences in later life. How these stresses and anxieties manifest within a classroom is considered and how teachers and tutors can recognise symptoms for what they are, so as to avoid misinterpreting behaviours. Suggestions are made as to how to optimise learning for traumatised adults within adult learning settings both by creating a safe physical environment and through pedagogical choices.

Keywords: Adult Refugees, Second Language Acquisition, Trauma Symptoms, Optimising Learning

Introduction

This article reviews research carried out to investigate how the experience of trauma in adult refugees affects their retention of learning in second language acquisition, and what pedagogical methods can best be used to ameliorate this issue. The motivation behind this investigation is my experience as an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and Adult Literacy tutor working with three different refugee programmes in Carlow over the last 12 years. I worked with the Rohingyan Refugee Resettlement Programme (RRP)

from 2010, after they settled in Carlow, and the Syrian Refugee Protection Programme (RPP) from 2018. I am currently working with many newly arrived Ukrainian refugees, both in monolingual groups and as parts of larger groups where they are integrated into classes with previous refugee groups and voluntary migrants. It has been my experience that these students need frequent repetition of material for it to become ingrained knowledge, that is knowledge that is embedded firmly enough that its use can become automatic or unconscious, an important factor in fluency. Although individual anecdotes do not constitute evidence, I found that I was not the only one who had experienced this issue (Benseman, 2013; Al Masri and Abu-Ayyash, 2020).

Ireland has only in recent decades become a destination for major immigration, both voluntary and of refugees and asylum seekers (Central Statistics Office, 2022). As a result, the need for tutors and teachers qualified to teach English has risen. However, the specific language learning needs of refugees, which takes into account their history of trauma, is not addressed in the standard English language teaching courses. Research has been carried out on this topic internationally (Adkins et al., 1999; Kerka, 2002; Magro 2007; Khatri, 2016; Kartal et al., 2019). However, based on a literature search, there seems to be little research relating specifically to Ireland in the context of adult learning.

The aim of this literature review is to investigate how the experience of trauma in adult refugees affects their retention of learning in second language acquisition and what pedagogical methods can best be used to ameliorate this issue. This paper draws from a small literature review I conducted using a critical analysis of current literature relating to the topic and a further thematic analysis of the emerging themes within the literature; it draws from this analysis some suggested considerations for practitioners working in this field.

I achieved this through:

- conducting a critical review and analysis of literature, focusing on key words, concepts, and themes of adult refugees, namely trauma, retention, and language acquisition;
- using thematic analysis to review the qualitative data;
- comparing similarities and differences of cohorts represented in the literature review with the cohorts included in RRPs and RPPs in Ireland, and more specifically in Carlow;
- drawing conclusions as to the effects of trauma on retention as found in the literature;

- locating the teaching and learning methodologies judged as most effective in the literature reviewed, as to their efficacy in circumventing this difficulty;
- and producing a list of suggested methodologies for educators to employ in teaching adult refugees in Ireland.

I took an interpretivist approach to the research process, which involved a literature review conducted in which literature based on qualitative research was prioritised. Papers were selected which addressed key concepts of refugee trauma, adult learning, and second language acquisition in Western countries. The literature review also included any relevant papers published within the Irish context between 2010 and 2024, including for those refugees who have very low literacy levels.

Thematic analysis was used when selecting what literature to include in the review. The literature review led to the identification of a number of emerging themes – further thematic analysis of these themes identified a number of pedagogies and techniques used by tutors/practitioners when working with these groups.

Three themes were identified: refugee trauma theory; Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and trauma and its effects on cognitive function; and second language acquisition and the pedagogical methods that have been used by practitioners internationally to maximise retention in traumatised students.

I have been working with traumatised adults for over 12 years and have first-hand experience of their struggles with retention of language learning. This has undoubtedly coloured my view of the issues which are the focus of this research project. Prior to beginning my work with refugees, I had been an adult literacy tutor, both as a volunteer and as an employee of the Education and Training Board (ETB) for a number of years. My training for these roles was through the student-centred, humanist approach so integral to adult literacy work in this country for many decades. As such, my beliefs in the pedagogies of self-direction, transformative learning, and student directed activities (Knowles et al., 2005; Mezirow, 2009; Merriam and Bierema, 2013; Brookfield, 2017) are a possible influence on my choice of material to review and the conclusions I have drawn. I am also a strong advocate for intersectionality (defined as the way in which different types of discrimination are connected to and affect each other, such as race, sex, religion [Cambridge Dictionary, no date]) and always consider the implications of these issues both in the classroom and in my research (Crenshaw, 2017). For example, it is clear that a woman's experience of

trauma in a conflict zone would be different from that of a man; the experience of a woman of colour would also be different from that of a white woman.

The topic of this research has the potential to be of benefit in raising awareness among Irish educators of a problem which is recognised internationally but is becoming more of an issue in the classroom here as time goes on. Knowing what methods and techniques to use will help ameliorate these issues, leading to more successful students and teachers. I hope that this research can help provide a small insight to practitioners of how complex an issue trauma is for learners who are refugees or survivors of trauma in some other area of life. This will include recognition of how trauma can affect cognitive function and especially memory and ways of recognising some symptoms of trauma in students who are not gaining as much from classes as their peers. It also includes awareness of how to best set up classrooms and class activities to maximise the opportunities for long-term progress for these students. In this way, students can drive change in their own lives and tutors can drive change within the provision of ESOL to refugees in Ireland.

This paper is therefore divided into four sections, based on themes identified within the literature review: what is trauma, how trauma affects cognitive function, how symptoms of trauma manifest in students, and how pedagogical methods can be used to help these students. Within these four sections, the literature is critically analysed and conclusions drawn around these themes. The paper ends with a conclusion which summarises the key findings, draws attention to the limitation of the research, and makes recommendations for policy, practice and future research.

What is Trauma?

The foundation of the United Nations (UN) in 1950 and the establishment of the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) the following year gave the international community a working definition of the term 'refugee', emphasising the nonvoluntary aspect of their migration. This definition has changed over the years but currently defines a refugee as someone who:

> owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (UNHCR, 2024, no pagination)

Petersen (1958) began the process of distinguishing between economic migrants and refugees in terms of a sociological framework and was the first to differentiate between voluntary and nonvoluntary migration. This theoretical framework was developed further in the 1970s by Kunz (1981) when he distinguished the different phases of migration and considered the stresses affecting people from each of these phases. It was Kunz who recognised the various aspects of nonvoluntary migration and broke it down into the stages at which traumas might occur. He showed that trauma can occur in the first instance in the refugee's home or homeland, through political developments, and this may be the result of witnessing violence, destruction and loss of home and community, or it may be through torture or persecution. However, once the refugee has taken the decision to flee, the journey itself may inflict more trauma – physical privations, political interventions at borders, experiences in transitory refugee camps all add to the problem. It is important to note how long this second stage can be, with refugees often stuck in limbo for many years in 'transition' refugee camps. A case in point is the situation the Rohingyan people found themselves in, after fleeing violence and genocide (Nebehay, 2018), where more than 900,000 refugees live in a refugee camp that has been in existence for over 30 years. The third aspect of a refugee's situation is the arrival in their final place of resettlement, which has further trauma associated with it, from the problems of acculturation and socialisation, both for the individual and for their families, dealing with government and non-governmental agencies, family reunification issues and, of course, language issues. The Rohingyans again provide an example for this, where they discuss the difficulties they experienced in dealing with doctor's appointments, social welfare and school bullying during the early years of their resettlement in Carlow (Titley, 2012). Similar issues are noted internationally among various refugee groups (Fazel and Stein, 2002; Dryden-Peterson, 2011; McMichael et al., 2015; Bakali and Wasty, 2020).

Kunz (1981) also points out the differences there may be between the 'vintages' of migration. Those refugees who flee first after the onset of war are often those with the means to do so; they may come from a more privileged background, may be better educated, and may have different expectations from a host country than later arrivals, who may have been more reluctant to leave their homes due to poverty or lack of knowledge of where to go or how to achieve their escape. However, this belief that the refugees form a homogenous group due to a common date of arrival in their final host country may be false, especially if they have spent a long time in a refugee camp.

While this article addresses the issues pertaining to adult refugees, it is clear that the effects of trauma on children are also relevant. Firstly, due to the extended

periods of time which many refugees ultimately spend in so-called transitory refugee camps, many adult refugees began their journeys as children; who they are as adults is ultimately decided by their experiences as children. Secondly, the longitudinal aspect of the refugee experience means that there is a delay in achieving many of the standard milestones in life that we all expect. As Cerna (2019) points out, it takes refugees on average five to 10 years to be employed and 15 to 20 years to reach the same rates of pay as native born or economic migrants. This again means that the impacts of a childhood spent as a refugee has an ongoing effect on adult experiences in the host country (Koch, 2017).

As Khatri (2016) says, the longitudinal aspects of the refugee experience are also very relevant to where students are when they participate in education. These phases of the refugee experience range from an initial sense of overwhelming loss to gradually moving ahead, either acquiring the local language and culture or passing their aspirations on to their children, to finally reaching a point of stability, where they can begin to feel fully integrated into their new communities. Many refugees are resilient and may be able to deal with traumatic experiences better than others. It is even possible that some refugees can turn the skills they had to develop in response to trauma to positive methods of dealing with adversity within their new lives (Kroth, 2014). In the same way as educators should not ignore the huge potential impact that traumatic experiences can have on the progress of students in the classroom, it is important not to assume all refugees experience issues with their mental health in the same way (Söndergaard and Theorell, 2004).

George (2010) expanded the theory of trauma in refugees to include postcolonial and feminist viewpoints, making the point that many refugees struggle with multiple causes of their traumas. For example, the Syrian RPP which I taught from 2018 to 2020 included a number of Kurdish Syrian students, as well as those of the dominant Arab Syrian background, which led to tensions in the classroom initially as the two groups' long-standing distrust of each other became impossible to ignore. Over time, their differences seemed to diminish in comparison to their similarities. However, the Kurdish students undoubtedly experienced traumas in their lives prior to the war trauma experienced by all of the group. Equally, the women in the group would undoubtedly have had different life experiences, possibly traumatic, that their male counterparts could never understand. It is important to keep the ideas of intersectionality to the forefront when addressing these issues (Crenshaw, 2017).

It should also be understood that trauma and violence are not the same thing – violence focuses on individuals and social agents, while trauma focuses on the

individual's response to violence. Nor does the trauma have to necessarily be war-related – it can be personal (for example, rape, robbery, natural disaster) or can be a result of systemic violence (such as homelessness, hate crimes, poverty) (Horsman, 1999; Kerka, 2002). It is also important to accept that the concepts of trauma and PTSD are Western ideas and not all cultures accept either the terms or the concepts (Burgoyne and Hull, 2007). Educators should always try to be aware of their unconscious bias towards their own culture within a classroom, and this extends to presuming that their students view trauma in the same way as Westerners do. As Ketcham (2018) points out, many Muslim cultures respond differently to mental health difficulties, as compared to modern, Western interpretations of psychology. There may be a stigma attached to expressing weaknesses in this area and accepting help.

An over-simplification of all of these complex issues can lead educators to make unwarranted assumptions about a given refugee's mental health. For example, if a refugee arrives relatively quickly into the Irish education system, as many Ukrainians have in the first six months of the war, it is easy to dismiss their trauma as not resulting from torture and long-term residence in a war zone and therefore assuming that their mental health has not been affected. Equally, not knowing how trauma can be experienced at different stages of the migration process can lead to assumptions, such as not acknowledging the continuing trauma being experienced by students still trying to arrange safe passage for family members or adjusting to the changing power dynamic in a family when the children can speak more English than the parents can (Ketcham, 2018). In fact, Ketcham (2018) points out that many refugees, the majority of whom are women and children, are at more risk of abuse due to poor language skills on arrival in their final host nation than they may have been in transitional camps, either within their own borders or in neighbouring countries. Educators should be aware of these complexities before they jump to conclusions, including that the refugees must be finding their host country to be a place of healing and growth.

While the UNHCR was set up to deal with the issues associated with the increased numbers of refugees post–World War II, it is not considered an agent for refugee education by many other organisations (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). For example, it routinely does not spend its target budget and has only two appointed Education Officers worldwide. While it states that it takes a 'human rights approach to education', this 'does not align with its current practice' (Dryden-Peterson, 2011, p.9). Within this context, the impact that the UNHCR has had on Adult Education is far less than it might be and its problems within primary and secondary education for refugee children

are many – not enough teachers, not enough teacher training, not enough emphasis put on quality education. This issue has been referenced in recent publications produced jointly by the UNHCR and UNESCO (Calaycay, 2023). Consequently, those children who end up in refugee camps for a large proportion of their formative education bring many of these issues to their host country and to their adulthood.

There is a broad range of literacy levels within refugee populations but the large numbers of refugees with low literacy levels as defined by the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021) frequently find the problems of integration into their host countries particularly challenging (Benseman, 2013). For many of these students, learning to learn is a major hurdle to overcome. When their literacy issues are compounded by trauma-related memory problems, it is easy to see why many find it easier to disengage with the education process and accept a power reversal within the family, relying on their children to steer them in an unknown world. This becomes a trauma in itself (Kunz, 1981).

How Trauma Affects Cognitive Function

According to Gordon (2011), between 30% and 86% of refugees are thought to experience trauma-related symptoms. Wilson et al. (2013) agree that this figure may be representative of those refugees in Ireland also. The definition of trauma and its effects are often conflated with PTSD, and over time, it has become the systemic belief that only those diagnosed with PTSD have trauma-related language acquisition issues. However, research indicates that this is not the case (Saigh et al., 1997; Qureshi et al., 2011). As with any study of brain disorders, the issue is complicated and a full understanding has not been reached in the field. A lot of studies on PTSD sufferers have been carried out in the United States on war veterans and, as such, are less likely to be relevant to issues around second language acquisition (Kartal et al., 2019).

One key question has been whether or not it is the onset of PTSD which causes the cognitive issues around memory and retention or whether the cognitive issues are caused by the trauma, after which a diagnosis of PTSD may or may not be made. Up to 80% of severe trauma sufferers go on to manage their issues without developing the symptoms that lead to a diagnosis of PTSD, but this does not mean that they have not had the trauma responses that cause cognitive damage (Saigh et al., 1997). Overall, it would appear that the experience of trauma itself has an impact on cognitive function, memory, and

executive function that is separate from a specific diagnosis of PTSD; with those who have a diagnosis of PTSD, it is the symptom load rather than severity or duration that is seen to have a detrimental effect on cognitive function (Söndergaard and Theorell, 2004).

Krashen (1982) differentiates between two different models of second language acquisition, those of acquisition (natural, as a baby picks up language) or learning (through formal education). He concludes that the only sure way to learn a second language is through the first model and advocates communicative activities as the only way to truly learn a language. The grammar learned in a class will therefore not be something that a student uses to initiate communication but may act as a monitor or editor in continued conversation. He posits that personal issues such as anxiety, low self-esteem, poor self-image, introversion, and inhibition can have a filtering effect on how a student both learns and uses a second language. All of these personal issues can be associated with the mental health problems associated with traumatic experience (Khatri, 2016) outside of a diagnosis of PTSD. Therefore, educators may need to accept that many refugee students are likely to struggle with their learning of a second language, whether there are any obvious signs of trauma or PTSD being displayed or not.

How Symptoms of Trauma Manifest in Students

As Adkins et al. (1999) point out, mental health has two components: psychological, which is the internal experience of wellbeing, and behavioural, which is observable by others. Educators need to be able to recognise the symptoms of a trauma response in their students, and observing their behaviour is a good place to begin. Such symptoms include unexplained absences from classes, withdrawal from participation, lack of attention, sleeping in class, frequent crying, or changes in progress. Hidden signs of trauma include an inability to be totally present or involved in their learning, a lack of comfort with ambiguity, and a tendency to see everything as 'all or nothing' (Horsman, 1999). Kerka (2002) explains the 'all or nothing' response as a number of binary reactions: control/abdication of control; defensiveness/lack of boundaries; heroic efforts/neglect of regular tasks. She points out that many behaviours can occur because of a lack of trust, due to traumatic experiences of the worst of human behaviours.

Taylor (2017) talks about the symptoms of stress in children as including anger, avoidance, social withdrawal, poor boundaries, and the inability to listen, while Magro (2007), in speaking about adult learners, includes irritability,

headaches, and stomach pain. Educators can use their awareness of all these possible manifestations of a trauma response in maintaining their empathy and extending their unconditional positive regard to students who are not easy to engage with (Rogers, 1959).

Once educators are aware of how their students may have experienced trauma in many ways and over long periods of time, from childhood through to adulthood, and may be continuing to experience trauma in their attempts to acculturate to their host countries, the inevitable question must be: how can we help?

How Pedagogical Methods Can Be Used to Help Students

The first thing to note is that many researchers in this area consider the core tenets of adult literacy practice to be ideally suited to working with traumatised refugees. Examples of these include the humanist methodologies of unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1959), andragogy (Knowles et al., 2005), and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). Bringing positivity and warmth into a classroom is a necessary starting point to building trust with wary students, as Rogers encouraged. Ensuring an atmosphere of respect and dignity for all is also key, and teachers modelling this behaviour will go a long way to bringing this atmosphere about (The Center for Victims of Torture, 2005). Refugees with poor English skills often have low self-esteem, and this is often exacerbated if it is accompanied by poor literacy skills, often not just in English. A willingness to work with basic literacy skills, such as holding a pen, without judgement, is important here (Benseman, 2013). Giving students choices around class content can foster a sense of control of their environment, along with encouraging the development of self-directed learning goals (Knowles et al., 2005). Social constructivism is already a key component of many ESOL classes, where students carry out communicative activities as a way of building meaning out of language. Scaffolding activities and providing a most knowledgeable other in the form of a stronger student helping a weaker one (Vygotsky, 1978), self-discovery of grammar rules, and role play are all key components of adult ESOL classes already. Therefore, most adult educators can at least feel that their normal class strategies are on the right track to helping their most vulnerable students to gain as much as possible from their classes.

Benseman (2013) points out that not all tutors are willing or able to deal with the extra needs of a class of refugees. Frequently, tutors are given little extra training before being asked to teach these groups and if the tutor is unaware of their extra needs, this can lead to poor retention rates and high staff turnover.

Quite often the ESOL strategies that are used in private language schools for privileged students are not going to work with refugee groups. Tutors may become disillusioned with the slow rate of progress, and students may feel that they are failing their teacher. No blame should be attached to those tutors who feel their talents are better suited to different groups. However, for those tutors who continue to teach these higher need classes, a new mindset needs to be instilled.

Before starting work with a new RRP or other refugee group, tutors should make time to learn a little about the culture of the students. Magro (2007) points out that teachers need to be aware of the lack of context many new arrivals have of common cultural and social norms in the host country. What Irish people take as universal in terms of body language, for example, may not be that at all. As a simple example, the Rohingyans in Carlow explained to their tutors after a full year of classes that the 'thumbs up' gesture was considered rude in their culture. Equally, some of the Rohingyan women had very different ideas of personal space with female tutors than they had with male tutors. While no offence was taken in these situations on either side, it would make a lot of sense to pass this learning on to new tutors before they begin working with these groups.

Embedding culturally relevant material in class materials is a very good way to make students feel included and empowered, as they see their own culture represented. This is also a way to incorporate the wealth model of learning into the ESOL classroom, as opposed to the deficit model which can feel so prevalent in language learning contexts (Freire, 1970), validating students' strengths, improving their self-esteem, and providing opportunities for transformative moments for everyone (The Center for Victims of Torture, 2005). Food and festivals are great topics in any ESOL class and can be particularly good for finding common ground in mixed groups (Ketcham, 2018). In a mixed class of Syrian, Kurdish, and Ukrainian refugees, I have seen personal friendships in class grow out of a sharing of recipes, traditions surrounding fasting and festivals, and discussion of where to shop for ethnic ingredients to recreate favourite meals. Allowing students to take socialisation breaks is just as important to cement these new friendships, which can also be a great incentive to use their newly acquired language skills outside the classroom.

The physical surroundings of a classroom can have a huge impact on traumatised students. For example, a closed door can feel a lot like a locked door to someone who has experienced a period of captivity. Simply asking if people are comfortable with a closed door can help these students. If a student

finds that the class is too much for them, making it clear that they can absent themselves for a break and/or providing a space they can retreat to can make the difference between retaining a student and losing them from the class altogether. It is also important to respect boundaries, both physical and mental – recognising the difference between encouraging a student to use their own experiences as a basis for language learning and prying into uncomfortable past events is crucial (Kerka, 2002). Physical boundaries and a sense of personal space are things that differ between cultures and teachers should be very aware of not making students feel uncomfortable, both in their own close proximity and in the way groups are seated or chosen for pair activities. For example, many Muslim women and men would feel uncomfortable if paired up with someone of the opposite sex for one-to-one work. Teachers can ask students what arrangements are more comfortable for them, again providing a sense of control and personal choice in the classroom (Brookfield, 2017).

To aid with retention, repetition is crucial – review, revisit, recycle (Benseman, 2013). While not a standard humanist methodology, rote learning and drills should not be ignored, as they definitely play a part in language learning in general, in particular, for low literacy students. Constant revision is important, in conjunction with varied strategies to avoid boredom setting in. Therefore, a combination of pair work, mingles, small group work, projects, discussions, role plays, walking debates, worksheets with matching exercises, gap fills, puzzles, drills, and quizzes can be utilised (Benseman, 2013).

Since progress is often slow in these groups, any strategies which recognise small increments or advances are ideal. Portfolios of work and journals are ideal for this, as long as no pressure is put on students to complete work – extended time should be allowed for work, without censure (Kerka, 2002). Using art, whether photographs, painting, writing, song, poetry, collage, can be very beneficial in extending language use and allowing students to tell their own story in their own way. These activities can be particularly beneficial to low literacy students, making it easier for them to engage with class content (McMichael et al., 2015). A holistic approach is necessary with this, so that the students who want to share and disclose their stories are facilitated, while those who cannot bear witness are protected. The classroom needs to be a safe space for all students (Kerka, 2002). Encouraging all students with praise is a good route towards self-efficacy (Benseman, 2013). When using strategies that include a student's own story, it is important to remember that consent must be ongoing (McMichael et al., 2015). Teachers should not assume that because a student is willing to share their own story once, that they have consented to this story being shared continually. This request for ongoing consent is another

way to promote trust and provide a safe classroom space. Equally, storytelling must be handled sensitively, with a well-planned strategy, lest it descend into a 'limiting, tokenistic and condescending' performative exercise (Piazzoli, 2021, p.1), which may just end up enforcing power inequalities in the classroom, through students feeling obligated to share as a sign of respect to the tutor (Brookfield, 2017).

The classroom not only needs to be a safe space for students, it also needs to be a safe space for tutors. While some tutors are comfortable with personal stories being told, even if traumatic, it is important to maintain boundaries so that inappropriate sharing is not encouraged. Tutors may find themselves unable to switch off after class and may need to debrief for their own mental health. Many large educational organisations have employee counselling services available, and tutors constantly working with traumatised refugees should consider accessing these services to ensure they do not burn out.

It is a good idea for tutors who are working with refugees to become familiar with local providers of counselling and mental health services. Networking with other tutors in the same line of work is important, as long as personal information it kept out of any discussions, so that no individual is identifiable when asking peers for support (Ketcham, 2018). Tutors should also be aware of the chain of command in their centres, so that they know who to report to if they wish for themselves or their students to avail of services beyond their classroom. Many organisations provide training for their educators around trauma; it is obviously useful for teachers to avail of these supports.

Finally, regarding the international research surrounding best practice for English language provision for refugees, many countries recommend that bilingual classroom assistants should be available for all classes (Bigelow and Schwartz, 2010; Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Benseman, 2013). The practical benefits of this are clear: far less time is wasted trying to issue instructions; problems can be dealt with more quickly; and students feel less anxious. However, as funding is a major issue in adult education in Ireland, this may remain aspirational for most providers in the near future. There is also an assumption within ESOL mainstream provision that using a student's L1 (first language) within the classroom is counter-productive. However, this idea has been questioned (Morahan, 2010; Carson and Kashihara, 2012; Zulfikar, 2019) and in the specific context of refugee classrooms, the benefits in terms of supporting mental health would appear clear. Immersion language teaching is a core tenet of constructivist theory (Zulfikar, 2019; Szabó and Csépes, 2023) but this does not take into consideration the considerable stress such a method

creates for adult refugees already dealing with many other issues in their new lives (Benseman, 2013).

ESOL provision in Ireland has had an unusual history for English-speaking countries, in that it has existed in a country that officially only recognises English as a second-tier language, with lower status than Irish, on a par with French, although it is the first language of the vast majority of the country (Walsh, 2023). Often ESOL provision was through private companies using a deficit model to provide a service to wealthy, educated professionals. As this century began, with the arrival of mass immigration to the country, initially as a result of the accession of new states to the European Union in 2003 and later as a result of Ireland's decision to participate in the European Union Resettlement Programme in June 2015, ESOL provision became more formalised (Gusciute et al., 2016). It moved into the adult literacy sector, where a philosophy of humanist, holistic teaching with a focus on a wealth model has traditionally prevailed (Sheridan, 2015). This humanist approach contains many strategies that work well with refugees and traumatised people in general, as outlined above. It is worth noting, however, that this approach is under constant threat from the increasingly managerialist constraints put in place as progressive governments follow a 'labour market activation' policy, seeing adult education as a means of upskilling individuals to make them more employable (Lynch, 2014). As such, the holistic vision of adult education can be lost in the scramble for certification and upskilling, and this can be seen in ESOL provision also, including for refugees (Lynch, 2014). Lifelong learning as a means for transformative learning and personal development has been a hallmark of adult education policy in Ireland for decades (Department of Education and Science, 2000) but is being replaced by a purely economic model that measures educational success in terms of labour market activation and economic potential (Shannon, 2019), which does not take into account the social practice of literacy and language and the value of learners engaging with their community (National Adult Literacy Association, 2012).

However, Ireland treats refugees and asylum seekers from different places differently. Those who enter under a UN programme are considered to already have international protection status and are brought into a complicated interlocking system of education, health, and housing provision, overseen by the Department of Justice and Equality (Ní Raghallaigh et al., 2019). This system provides them with formal English classes, among many other benefits. However, those who arrive into Ireland unofficially to claim asylum are delivered into the Direct Provision (DP) system, where they are housed in large hotels or hostels for many years and are unable to access many local services, including

English classes (Arnold et al., 2021). Many of these asylum seekers may be in Ireland for up to a decade before they can avail of local English classes, when they are released from DP and can relocate to more suitable surroundings. The differences in how people are treated in Ireland depending on whether they are part of a recognised resettlement programme or not can lead to resentment and bitterness for many asylum seekers (Arnold et al., 2021). DP conditions are typically unsatisfactory for meeting an individual's needs, are considered to be below international human rights standards (Arnold, 2012) and add to the trauma being experienced by many people. Since the length of stay in these centres is so long, the traumas experienced by children growing up becomes part of the adult learning classroom, as these children grow into adults, bringing their traumas with them (Gusciute et al., 2016). It is clear that the lack of English language skills can affect job prospects and life choices in later years (Guscuite et al., 2016) and that refugees are more susceptible to issues surrounding language, especially those who have lived in DP for an extended period of time.

The Intercultural Education Strategy of 2010–2015 (Department of Education and Skills and the Office for the Minister for Integration, 2010) mentions refugees in passing but doesn't seem to recognise them as having any special needs above and beyond general migrants (Katz, 2012). There is no mention of trauma or any indication that refugee families living in DP might have extra problems, or that the family dynamics in these situations may prove disempowering to already traumatised people. Instead, the strategy often labels them as hard to reach and disregards the place of their mother-tongue within the family (Devine, 2013; Martin et al., 2018). The other major government policy documents that deal with Further Education and Training (FET) provision do not acknowledge that the needs of refugee ESOL learners might differ substantially from those of other users, apart from possible issues of literacy. In fact, the only mentions of ESOL are in terms of upskilling for the workplace (SOLAS, 2014; 2020; 2023).

While plenty of research has been carried out on the experience of refugees in Ireland, it seems that none of it focuses specifically on the effects of trauma on language acquisition and the need for specialised pedagogical approaches to mitigate these issues. Watters et al. (2022) feels that the attention paid to trauma is at risk of overshadowing refugees' post-migration experience and points to the unwillingness of refugees to dwell on the painful experiences of the past. Ćatibušić et al. (2019) refers to the traumas ongoing for students in their resettlement phase in relation to worries over family, education, and other day-to-day issues, but does not specifically see trauma as impacting the pace of

language learning. Other studies refer in a limited way to trauma, whether in the subjects' past or present (Titley, 2012; Carson, 2016). Bowe (2016) in fact appears to suggest that it would be unethical to treat refugee ESOL students as different from other ESOL learners based on their political situation – at least uniformly. She refers to a number of ESOL teachers in her study as backing up this opinion. However, she also points to many international studies that show this attempt to find a one size fits all curriculum can have a negative impact on learners with different needs, with a tendency to medicalise people's experiences.

Conclusions

The number of refugees in Ireland, both those with formal recognition and those awaiting final decisions on their status, has never been higher and the need for specific studies on their needs has never been greater (Central Statistics Office, 2022). While the individual experiences of people coming to Ireland are wide-ranging, and there can be no excuse for treating everyone as if they have the same traumatic past, an acknowledgement by educational institutions, or staff within them, that time spent preparing for the possibility that learners may be impacted by cognitive and memory issues in their language learning is never time wasted. Tutors should be encouraged to learn something about the cultural background of their refugee students and to incorporate culturally relevant material into their classes. Classrooms should be set up to be safe spaces, with allowances made for students with issues around attendance, punctuality, focus, and retention.

In an ideal educational situation, tutors would be supported by classroom assistants, ideally with bilingual skills, to support those students with extra needs. Tutors would have the resources to arrange a mixture of traditional, vocational, and extra-curricular learning. Plenty of opportunities would be provided for learners to socialise, both within their own refugee group and outside it, forming connections that will ground them in their new community while giving them opportunities to practise their new language skills in real life contexts. Even without all the resources from this ideal world, tutors can provide excellent learning environments for their refugee learners.

There is a significant gap in the research carried out to date in Ireland in considering the possible implications of trauma-related learning difficulties for refugees. Given the now substantial range of nationalities who call Ireland home, there is definitely scope for further research to be carried out, with a longitudinal aspect, to assess the opinions of learners, current and past, on ESOL provision in Ireland and to take the opportunities to improve our

performance with new groups arriving on our shores. This topic is deserving of more study, involving primary research through talking to the many students and ex-students of ESOL providers who undoubtedly have plenty of lived experience to share with researchers.

A clear policy change is needed whereby statutory bodies recognise the specific needs of refugees and asylum seekers in terms of their traumatic past and the present difficulties that this causes. Not recognising that refugees may need special consideration within ESOL provision is not going to achieve the stated aim of fully integrating new arrivals into this country, in terms of both their own personal development and their economic engagement.

Within this statutory ESOL provision, tutors should be given the opportunity to learn about this issue as part of their continuing professional development. I undertook research into this area because I recognised the need, as a tutor, to learn about this issue, and I am sure there are many tutors, like me, who have seen these problems in their students and would be relieved to know that there are steps that they can take to help. I hope that this article shines a light on this issue in an Irish context and provides a positive path to improving the outcomes of many students around the country.

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‘I Have to Know. I Have to Understand How to Do This!’ Personal and Professional Experiences of ESOL Practitioners in Ireland During and Since the COVID-19 Pandemic

PAUL SCEENY

Abstract

This article draws on a qualitative study of insights and reflections from the COVID-19 pandemic completed for a master’s thesis. It centred on the experiences of seven English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) practitioners in Ireland, considering the practical ways they responded to the public health measures, but also how they felt, how far they were supported and who they collaborated with. These personal stories are set within the broader context of Ireland’s publicly funded ESOL provision, which has experienced significant growth in recent years yet been subject to relatively little research or distinct public policy attention, especially when compared with the much more high-profile and cross-government Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) strategy.

Keywords: Advocacy, Collaboration, COVID-19, ESOL, Learner Engagement, Language, Literacy, Migration, Policy, Policy Discourses, Practitioner, Professional Learning Communities

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on how many educators performed and perceived their roles. For teachers and managers of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), the disruption of lockdown restrictions introduced in March 2020 was quickly followed by an imperative to try to maintain contact with learners and begin to facilitate online teaching and learning where possible.

With ESOL provision throughout the island of Ireland having grown significantly in recent years while having been subject to relatively little specific research, I was keen to explore more about the experiences and perceptions of ESOL practitioners and how they are situated within Ireland's Further Education and Training (FET) landscape. The disruptive effects of the pandemic provided an almost unique set of circumstances for doing so; viewing the perceptions of ESOL practitioners and the position of ESOL through the lens of a crisis where they had needed to improvise and adapt quickly to a highly unusual set of circumstances.

The study centred on seven ESOL practitioners who had worked during the pandemic. It sets out a collective story of their experiences, in particular:

- how they had adapted professionally and personally during the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic
- how, and with whom, they might have communicated, collaborated and sought mutual support
- any enduring changes to their practice as a result of the pandemic.

While the study was primarily concerned with the participants' individual and shared experiences, it would be difficult to evaluate these meaningfully without also reflecting upon the position of ESOL within Ireland's FET landscape. Language acquisition is intertwined with wider questions of migration, integration, and belonging (Simpson and Whiteside, 2015), and as de Kadt (1991) states, 'language pervades every aspect of our lives, is never neutral, it empowers and disempowers' (p.1). This is especially pertinent to Ireland, where dominant languages, language acquisition, and language suppression have all at times been contentious (McGrath, 1990; Kallen, 2012).

As Simpson and Whiteside (2015) observe, it is not uncommon for migration policy responses in English language dominant countries to be 'uneven and contradictory' (p.1), and Ireland is not unique in lacking a coherent strategy for ESOL (in either part of the island). Nevertheless, it is notable that alongside an ambitious cross-government strategy to improve adult literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy (Government of Ireland, 2021), just one paragraph was dedicated to ESOL within the SOLAS *Future FET* strategy for 2020–2024 (SOLAS, 2020, p.47).

Nevertheless, a number of initiatives to develop and enhance ESOL provision have emerged over the last few years, including resources developed by a

number of Education and Training Boards (ETBs) (SOLAS, 2018; 2021). This might reflect what Simpson and Whiteside (2015) describe as ESOL policies emerging in 'local contexts of practice' (p.1).

I encountered examples of what could be termed 'quietly getting on' among ESOL practitioners while undertaking this study. For the most part, this appeared to be pragmatism and resilience in the absence of explicit direction from policymakers, although the concept of quietly getting on might also involve aspects of resistance such as those discussed by Tett and Hamilton (2019), especially where the specific circumstances and needs of ESOL provision conflicts with structural and other features of the wider FET infrastructure.

I am drawn toward the collective emancipatory principles of learning advocated by Paulo Freire (1970) and recognise that language learning is an inherently political act. I am also sympathetic to characterisations of Adult Education in Ireland having become increasingly 'neoliberal' in character in recent years, focusing more narrowly on labour market activation and serving the needs of the economy rather than a more collective social purpose that involves empowering individuals and communities (Connolly, 2014; Murtagh, 2014; Fitzsimons, 2017; Magrath and Fitzsimons, 2019; Glanton, 2023). Even the adoption of the term FET, rather than Adult and Community Education, might be instructive here (Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2024). That said, I appreciate that not all ESOL practitioners necessarily share these perspectives, and I was careful not to assume them of this study's participants. Nevertheless, I was keen to understand how they might have felt supported or otherwise by their institutions and whether they might have collaborated with other ESOL practitioners beyond their immediate colleagues. I had been inspired by examples of informal and self-directed professional learning in England (Tremayne, 2021) and whether similar examples of informal collaboration and praxis might have been replicated among ESOL practitioners in Ireland.

Setting the Scene: My ESOL Background

In the 25 years before embarking on this study, I had worked in various roles for a large UK-based qualifications awarding body looking after its ESOL, literacy, and numeracy qualifications. These qualifications had initially been shaped by the British Government's *Skills for Life* strategy (DfEE, 2001) that sought to improve levels of literacy, numeracy, and later, ESOL among the adult population in England in response to the Moser (1999) report. They had been developed alongside nationally determined core curricula and standards; while ESOL had its own core curriculum, the standards for adult literacy also

underpinned the ESOL qualifications. This conflation of first language literacy and ESOL has been a recurring source of tension among many within the sector (Shepherd, 2024), and one of the criticisms levelled at the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum is the extent to which it centralises control of what is taught and discourages more dialogical and problematised approaches (Simpson, 2015, pp.208-209).

The British Government also began to phase in minimum English language requirements for settlement and naturalisation from 2005, which further highlighted the interplay between ESOL and questions of migration, social cohesion, and integration. These had a noticeable impact on the profile of learners and their reasons for accessing ESOL *Skills for Life* qualifications, along with far greater concerns expressed by qualifications regulators and others about the potential for malpractice. Most of those concerns abated when the Home Office later began accepting only its own licensed Secure English Language Tests (SFA, 2015) for immigration purposes, although a lingering perception remained among some of my colleagues and others working within the arena of Further and Adult Education in England that ESOL was 'high risk' and 'troublesome'. The generous funding arrangements and workforce support that had been central to the *Skills for Life* strategy were also wound down after 2010 when the incoming conservative-led government actively sought to repudiate *Skills for Life* (BIS, 2012) and deprioritised funding for ESOL provision.

Looking Beyond England

While the policy drivers behind ESOL *Skills for Life* originated in England, these qualifications were also used in Wales and later in Northern Ireland. In the latter two cases, I had worked with regulators and officials within the devolved administrations as they developed their own literacy and numeracy strategies and qualifications criteria, inspired by Moser (1999). Neither had sought to devise discrete ESOL qualifications, although the Welsh Government published its own ESOL Policy in 2014 (Welsh Government, 2014). The Scottish Government had developed a much more ambitious ESOL Strategy from 2007, although this has more recently been subsumed within a broader adult learning strategy (Brown and Sheridan, 2024).

Relocating to Derry in the early 2010s impressed upon me how far England-based organisations and individuals often struggle to see beyond their own Anglocentric policy discourses and expectations. While I attempted to challenge some of these within the awarding body where I worked, I found

differences in what were commonly referred to as 'the devolved nations' even harder to explain for ESOL, with qualifications the same as in England (albeit with different funding and other arrangements), than for adult literacy, for which discrete qualifications had been introduced.

Another motivation for undertaking this study was a desire to deepen my knowledge of FET structures and discourses within the Republic of Ireland. I had already gained some insight since becoming individual member of AONTAS, the National Adult Learning Organisation, and of the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) in 2018, and especially since helping to establish an island-wide branch of the National Association for Teaching English and other Community Languages to Adults (NATECLA) after 2020. Nevertheless, I was conscious of having had less direct contact with ESOL practitioners than I had with the jurisdictions where I had worked more extensively.

Coming from a job role and environment that was heavily focused on qualifications, quality, and accountability measures, my initial impression of Ireland's FET landscape was that it seemed more learner-focused and less overtly neoliberalist than I had experienced in England.

Defining and Understanding ESOL

The term ESOL is generally used within the islands of Ireland and Great Britain to describe the teaching of English to adult (aged 16 years or older) migrant learners. That might include people seeking asylum or international protection, as well as those with refugee status or who might have settled in an English language dominant country for other reasons; it might also include individuals within settled migrant communities where English is not widely spoken (at least not by all within that community). ESOL is also sometimes described as 'English as a Second Language', more commonly within Australia, Aotearoa – New Zealand, Canada, and the United States.

Schellekens (2007) provides a thorough and nuanced definition of ESOL, including differences in emphasis between ESOL and other forms of English Language Teaching (ELT), such as English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The latter normally describes ELT within countries where English is not the dominant language or where it involves short-term attendance at private language schools. That distinction is helpful in some respects: for example, ESOL learners living within an English language speaking environment tend to be motivated to learn the dominant language for reasons of survival and integration, whereas EFL learners attending a private language school within an English language dominant country are more likely to have relocated

temporarily, at their own expense (or that of an employer), for the specific purpose of learning English.

Gakonga (2021) provides a more accessible guide to some of distinctions and similarities. Like many with experiences of both ESOL and EFL, she is keen to avoid overstating the differences, noting, 'In both cases, after all, what you are trying to do is to help people to learn a language' (Gakonga, 2021, no pagination). Distinctions become more significant in the extent ESOL learners might also be processing broader disruptions to their lives as a result of (often forced) migration and possibly trauma (Palanac, 2022), while in some cases simultaneously having to navigate issues around their migration status, housing, and employment situations. With this in mind, ESOL might be perceived as more of a social practice than EFL within a fee-paying language school.

ESOL Within Ireland and Elsewhere

From Emigration to Immigration

To set the rapid growth in ESOL provision within Ireland into context, especially in light of recent 'Ireland is full' discourses from the far right (McDaid and McAuley, 2023), it is worth reflecting that the island of Ireland's overall population is still more than a million less than it was in the 19th century (Ó Gráda and Fernihough, 2018) and that there was net emigration for much of the 20th century (CSO, 2022). While there has recently been more substantial immigration, the first national policy pronouncements about English language provision for migrants were little more than two decades ago (DES, 2000). That contrasts with much of Great Britain, where ESOL can be traced back at least as far as the mid-20th century (Simpson and Hunter, 2023).

Sheridan (2015) identifies the initial development of ESOL in Ireland with the reception and integration of refugees in the late 1970s, most notably from Vietnam. Touching upon a theme to which I will return later, she notes an initial response to adult new arrivals was to 'confound or conflate language learning with literacy' (Sheridan, 2015, p.150). When ESOL provision was subsequently set up within an outreach centre, funding came from the same budget allocation as that for adult literacy. Subsequent growth in the number of people seeking asylum in Ireland, especially during the 1990s, prompted an interdepartmental working group on the integration of refugees and a commitment in the *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* to free access to English language supports for people seeking asylum (DES, 2000).

Both of these seemed to frame language learning from a 'deficit' perspective, with migrants positioned as 'beneficiaries of something bestowed upon them rather than being active agents involved in shaping their lives' (Sheridan, 2015, p.151). This chimes with a more recent evaluation by Ćatibušić et al. (2019) of the Irish Refugee Protection Programme, in which the authors highlighted a lack of clear national guidelines for supporting the language and intercultural needs of Syrian refugees and a tendency toward setting inappropriate goals and having unrealistic expectations about learner progress. Nagy's (2018) description of intercultural competence within Ireland as 'the ability to do, see and even feel things the way the Irish do' (p.649), is instructive in its assimilationist framing, appearing to value learning to be like the Irish over building upon learners' existing backgrounds and experiences.

The war in Ukraine since February 2022 prompted further immigration, with nearly 75,000 Ukrainians having settled in Ireland by February 2023 (CSO, 2023). In contrast with its existing efforts to support people seeking international protection and asylum in Ireland, the government's response appeared to have been more coordinated and visible to the general population. Regional Education and Language Teams (REALT) were set up across all 16 ETBs (SOLAS, no date), each offering a range of support, including assistance with school places, as well as access to English language and literacy support. One key function of the REALT teams has been to support information flows between local and national support services.

The presence of REALT and other specifically tailored support for people fleeing the war in Ukraine has prompted uncomfortable comparisons with the treatment of people seeking asylum and protection in Ireland from other areas of conflict (Wilson, 2023). While this might reflect similar patterns in other European countries, it suggests a need to explore Irish attitudes toward identity and migration a little further.

Irish Identity and Attitudes Toward Immigration

Ireland's relationships with migration and language are complicated. Both Sheridan (2015) and McCarthy (2019) describe a common characterisation of Ireland for much of the 20th century as largely homogenous.

Kitching (2015) outlines how it might be problematic to apply transatlantic frameworks of critical race theory within an Irish context, especially the way '"Irishness" becomes recruited to become an actively benign representation of whiteness' (Kitching, 2015, p.164). He suggests this fuels complacency and

denial about the existence of racism in contemporary Irish society. McCarthy (2019) similarly detects an exceptionalism and latent suspicion of 'the other' (p.33). In particular, he cites a report compiled by McGinnity et al. (2018) for the Economic and Social Research Institute which examined attitudes toward diversity in Ireland and found nearly half of respondents believed 'some cultures to be superior to others' (McGinnity et al., 2018, viii). Sheridan (2015), similarly, describes a persistent 'them and us' perspective within public discourses. She notes the prevalence of narratives about 'welfare tourism', and particularly how the influence of some of these discourses and tropes, such as those about 'pregnant African women', were influential in the successful 2004 referendum to remove the automatic right to citizenship for children born in Ireland (Sheridan, 2015, p.155). More recent tropes from the far right about 'military-age men' might also be viewed in similar vein (O'Connell, 2023).

Positioning ESOL: Practice and Pedagogy

ESOL as Social Practice

Norton (2016) argues that learners are more likely to commit fully to learning a language if they 'anticipate acquiring a wider range of symbolic and material resources that will increase the value of their cultural capital and social power' (p.476). Through the lens of a policymaker lacking appreciation of ESOL contexts, it might be tempting to be drawn toward concepts such as 'good' or 'challenging' language learners alongside those of 'good' and 'bad' immigrants. Much as these concepts can be debunked (Norton and Toohey, 2001), it is understandable that they might persist in some of the dominant narratives around immigration.

There are examples of more participative and dialogical practice within Ireland. Doyle (2015) describes the *Getting to Grips with the English Language* project developed within Portlaoise Adult Education Centre (AEC) from 2007. While tailored specifically to the needs of ESOL learners, Doyle describes the ethos as strongly learner centred (2015, p.164), incorporating intercultural awareness and strategies to help learners challenge instances of racism (2015, pp.165-167).

Getting to Grips with the English Language is a solid example of practitioners 'quietly getting on' despite, rather than because of, national policy. There are obvious downsides to relying solely on local initiatives, especially if their presence is not reflected in the budgeting process, though this project provides a refreshing example of what might be possible.

ESOL, Critical Pedagogy, and Freire

Given the inherent politicisation of language and the extent to which ESOL practice is commonly felt to have a broader social purpose, the emancipatory principles of learning advocated by Paulo Freire (1970) seem relevant and appealing. It is pertinent to consider how far these principles might be seen as more than just 'aspirational' given the range of organisational and other constraints in which ESOL practitioners operate.

London-based English for Action (EFA) is an example of what might be considered Freirean participatory ESOL (Bryers, 2015). EFA came to prominence during 2012–2013 when it mobilised ESOL learners to protest about austerity-related cuts to ESOL provision. Such approaches are sometimes criticised for being more interested in recruiting activists than addressing learners' immediate needs and wants, although here was an instance where there was a clear intersection between these.

Another cautionary counter argument is what Brown (2019) terms comfort radicalism. He noted the Scottish Government's 2016–2020 ESOL strategy contained explicit emphases on critical pedagogy, yet found when studying ESOL practitioners' actual perceptions that they appeared to value individual empowerment over social emancipation (Brown, 2019, p.183).

Too Late to Have Benefitted Fully from Emancipatory Ethos?

On the face of it, the emancipatory ethos that characterised the emergence of Ireland's community education sector (Connolly, 2014) would seem a good fit with ESOL. However, support for migrants' language acquisition has so far not featured prominently in the sector's advocacy activity. One reason for this might be ESOL's relatively recent emergence as a significant area of activity within the FET landscape, as well as the relatively limited involvement of the independent community sector compared to statutory provision through the ETBs. Sheridan (2015) notes the unfortunate timing of the 2008 financial crisis, when many existing programmes lost funding, followed by further disruption when Ireland's FET structures were reformed in the early 2010s (Sheridan, 2015, p.150). Grummell (2023) suggests an ethos of emancipation and participatory methods has persisted within adult literacy provision, although the development of ESOL as a distinct area of provision might have come a little too late to have benefitted fully from when the community sector's advocacy within Ireland was at its most effective.

The continued conflation of ESOL with adult literacy might also be a problem. Even where literacy practitioners are positively disposed toward dialogical and participatory approaches, the positioning of ESOL as a basic skill arguably fuels a deficit model perception of ESOL. Another factor might be the high proportion of the current ESOL workforce in Ireland that joined within the last decade and has therefore only known the current ETB-based structures. Many of these are likely to have either taught literacy previously or worked in EFL settings.

However, there are examples of adult literacy organisers and literacy practitioners becoming involved in ESOL provision and advocacy. The 2022 research report commissioned by the Adult Literacy Organisers' Association highlighted a crossover between literacy and ESOL provision, particularly the challenges in balancing resources between the two (Grummell, 2022). It is plausible to assume the regional literacy coordinators appointed to support the Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) strategy may face a similar 'quietly getting on' dilemma over whether or how they might be able to incorporate support for migrants' language acquisition within their remit.

Methodology

I approached this study as an experienced professional and specialist in adult literacy and language education. I considered myself an 'ESOL ally', invested in the study rather than a neutral observer and determined to be reflexive. Berger (2015, p.220) describes reflexivity thus:

> The process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome.

Qualitative interviews were arranged with seven ESOL practitioners, which were then subjected to reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). I assigned the participants the following pseudonyms: Julia, Geraldine, Alicia, Ciara, Zabel, Marie, and Lauren.

By focusing on the pandemic, I was asking participants to recall an exceptional period when much of their reality had been turned on its head. The conversations were framed as a 'safe space' where they could speak candidly; indeed this might even have given them 'permission' to admit vulnerabilities and shortcomings in a way they might not feel comfortable doing when reflecting more generally

on their practice. Conversely, it could also have been a context where they might feel expected to talk about resilience and 'overcoming' the challenges.

All seven participants had taught ESOL within an ETB setting for at least part of the time that pandemic-related public health measures were in force. Four had worked in AECs serving largely suburban populations, while the other three had worked in more rural locations. My conversations with Julia and Zabel were slightly different in tone from those with the other five participants, as both had a coordinating role and could speak from the perspective of a manager as well as reflect on their practice.

The interviews were not heavily structured, although each covered the following:

- events of March 2020, and the immediate period thereafter
- later periods, for example when restrictions were lifted and then re-imposed
- collaboration and communication.

Coding and Analysis

Interview transcripts were reviewed, with participants' contributions assigned a series of code labels and sub-codes using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). These were grouped into four broad themes:

- equity and learner engagement
- practicalities of lockdown and using technology
- collaboration and communication
- enduring changes.

While these themes undoubtedly helped with the initial organisation of data, they were problematic at times when it came to analysing more deeply what the participants had told me. This was especially noted with cross-cutting issues such as tensions between institutions' preferred technology platforms and ways of working versus alternatives that were more readily accessible to learners.

Summarising the Four Themes

Equity and Learner Engagement

All seven participants described changing or adapting what they had previously planned to teach, with some indicating they had concentrated on trying to consolidate existing language rather than teach new vocabulary. Where learners had been due to complete ESOL accreditation, this was also largely abandoned during at least the early stages of the pandemic, seemingly with at least the tacit support of their respective ETBs.

In all cases, it had taken a number of weeks for online classes to be established, though in the meantime the participants had prioritised trying to at least maintain some level of contact with their ESOL learners. Most had commented on the haphazard nature of this communication, with a sense that attempts to distribute learning materials to learners were made more in hope than expectation that these would be completed (especially if the materials were sent by post rather than electronically). There was concern about the number of learners with whom they either lost contact or who were unwilling or unable to engage with online learning. Marie, especially, found this frustrating and indicated that it was a factor in her decision to take a job in a secondary school in the autumn of 2020 (although she later returned to teaching ESOL after the pandemic).

Practicalities of Lockdown and Using Technology

> We assumed at the beginning it would just be a few weeks, so we thought, 'well, so we cancel for two, four weeks, maybe five at max, and that will be that and then everybody will come back'.

This comment from Zabel reflects widespread uncertainty during the early stages of the pandemic about how long it might last and the dilemma she faced as an ESOL coordinator about when to move from simply trying to keep in touch with learners to instead finding solutions for online delivery. The other participant with a coordinating responsibility was Julia; she recalled online delivery starting to happen after Easter of 2020. In neither case did there appear to have been direct pressure from their ETBs' senior management to resume classes, although Julia mentioned that part of her initial motivation for introducing online classes was to ensure those of her team members retained continued to be paid.

It was apparent all seven participants had felt a sense of responsibility for their ESOL learners and were keen to embrace anything that might help keep at least some of them engaged. Some had struggled to adapt to teaching through a technology platform, and Ciara especially remarked on the amount of time she had spent completing online Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses to try to improve her own digital skills.

Zabel decided to organise her tutors into groups of three that would each work as a team to support a group of learners. This was partly motivated by her own desire to see tutors cooperating and collaborating, although she also felt it would lessen the risk of online lessons being disrupted if one tutor experienced connectivity problems.

Another issue raised by several of the participants was an ongoing tension between the technology platforms that were readily accessible to ESOL learners and those preferred or deemed more secure by the ETBs. The latter (e.g. Microsoft Teams) tended to require institutional email accounts which learners typically had not set up on their own devices prior to the pandemic. While a majority of learners had access to at least a smartphone, their preferred method of communication would typically be through WhatsApp or FaceTime.

Nevertheless, the participants all seem to have felt well supported by their line managers and ETB management, and they were impressed by the speed with which resources such as laptops and books for learners had been made available. This might reflect a broader perception that the ETBs had adapted relatively well to the challenges of the pandemic, rather than necessarily a sense that ESOL provision had been singled out for support.

Collaboration and Communication

A number of the participants recalled finding the second period of lockdown (from the autumn of 2020 until the spring of 2021) especially challenging, and it was apparent some had fared better than others in terms of their personal wellbeing. Most recalled communicating more extensively and frequently with their immediate colleagues while working remotely, although there did not appear to have been any significant contact with ESOL practitioners in other settings.

Enduring Changes

While it was clear that all seven participants had been glad to return to in-person teaching once pandemic restrictions had been lifted, each of the participants gave examples of how they had become more confident and familiar with using technology in the classroom or within other aspects of their role. Alicia, for example, was grateful that most of her team meetings now took place remotely as it saved her the 150 km round trip she had regularly had to face for in-person meetings before the pandemic. Others described how the use of technology had become more 'normalised', with messaging through Teams now more common than phone calls as a means of communicating with colleagues. Zabel also indicated that capability and comfort with technology had become more of an expectation in recruitment.

Further Analysis

Setting the Conversations in Context

At the end of my conversation with Julia, she remarked how useful she had found it to spend time reflecting on the pandemic as there was a lot she had since forgotten about. I was initially concerned it might have stirred up uncomfortable memories, although she quickly reassured me it was just a case of having since moved on to tackling other challenges.

Ciara's admission that she spent significant amounts of time completing online CPD is perhaps a case in point: she was open about how difficult she had found this, and it was her exclamation, 'I have to know. I have to understand how to do this!' that provided the title for this study. Similarly, Marie's admission that she had found the experience of trying to teach ESOL learners online almost futile had seemingly influenced her decision to leave her AEC in the summer of 2020 to work in a secondary school.

Differences Between Suburban and Rural Settings

There was a noticeable difference in perceptions between the four participants who worked in suburban AECs (Julia, Ciara, Zabel, and Marie), who were each part of a larger team of dedicated ESOL practitioners, and the experiences of Geraldine, Alicia, and Lauren who either worked alone within an AEC or in outreach locations. The latter three mostly seemed more accustomed to working alone, although Geraldine expressed some frustrations about a lack of regular interaction with colleagues compared to a previous role working in a private language school.

With most of her other literacy classes cancelled, Alicia spent much of the pandemic working with one family of Syrian refugees. That level of personalised support is unlikely to have been replicated within a suburban context, and it is easy to understand why ETBs and centres with differing volumes of demand for ESOL are likely to organise their provision accordingly. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a case for much greater national coordination, networking, and sharing between practitioners and settings.

Implications for Accreditation

The four participants based in suburban AECs all indicated they were able to be pragmatic about discarding planned curriculum content and accreditation once pandemic restrictions had been introduced. Where accreditation did go ahead, this sometimes involved working toward more generic awards at a lower level than planned.

Within the more rural settings, there seemed to have been less of an explicit acceptance of the need to move away from planned teaching and accreditation, though in Lauren's case she seemed sufficiently empowered to take that decision herself. Alicia likewise seemed able to do as she felt appropriate to support the family she was working with. Geraldine's experience seemed to have been different, although it is important to note she only began teaching in an ESOL setting during 2021–2022 when most restrictions on education settings had been lifted yet her ESOL classes were still largely online. She explained that she had found it easier to organise and oversee some of the assessment activities remotely (especially for speaking and listening) than it had been to complete them in a classroom once they returned to in-person teaching. Several participants raised the suitability of accreditation for ESOL learners more generally, especially the use of awards intended for literacy learners.

'Chatty Group' or 'Treasure Chest': Sharing and Collaborating

At one point during my conversation with Zabel, she had described ESOL tutors as 'a very specific type of teacher [who] do not specifically like to cooperate'. This might be an exaggerated characterisation, although it could also reflect ESOL practitioners having become accustomed to working largely independently: in other words, 'quietly getting on'. While Zabel oversaw two largely suburban AECs, that pattern of practitioners working alone and largely on their own initiative was even more apparent in the settings described by Lauren, Alicia, and Geraldine.

Ensuring learners are appropriately prepared for accreditation assessments, and with this a sense of feeling accountable for any who are unsuccessful, might also be a factor in some ESOL practitioners preferring to collate their own resources and schemes of work. Geraldine recalled that when she first began teaching ESOL she was given a large box of material by one colleague which mapped almost every moment of every lesson to Quality and Qualifications Ireland Award module descriptors. On the one hand, she felt she should be grateful that this 'golden egg' had been entrusted to her, yet she also felt uncomfortable about how over-engineered these materials were and how little room they seemed to leave for any spontaneity or reflexivity.

Zabel's decision to reorganise her team into groups that worked together to develop and deliver online classes had resulted in at least some initial resistance from the team, although it ultimately seemed to have had a positive impact on learner engagement. It might be interesting to explore how far being 'forced' to collaborate has had a lasting impact on their practice and whether they are still as willing to share and co-produce lessons now that they don't have to.

All seven participants described undertaking a lot of online CPD during the pandemic. This seemed mostly to have been sessions organised for them with external presenters or trainers, rather than self-directed learning. Julia and Zabel had also participated in some of the online webinars and modules organised by NALA, and it might be significant that they as coordinators seemingly felt inclined and able to attend these sessions.

The pandemic seemingly brought about more communication between immediate colleagues, especially among those based in suburban settings, although Ciara remarked that her fellow practitioners had, 'always been a very chatty group [that are] here for the students and each other'. Julia described conversations with colleagues during the pandemic as having become more personal and more focused on wellbeing.

Status of ESOL Within Wider FET Structures

One thing that was immediately apparent was the speed with which ETBs made additional resources available during the pandemic. This included laptops for learners as well as funds to buy books and other resources that could be distributed to learners though initiatives such as the Mitigating Against Educational Disadvantage Fund (MAEDF) (DFHERIS, 2020).

While specific additional funds such as MAEDF were intended for learners, there seemed to be some issues with the availability of additional resources for

practitioners, as well as differences in attitude and approach between ETBs. Prior to the pandemic, Lauren had requested a work mobile phone she could use to keep in touch with learners in remote settings, as she was reluctant to give out her personal phone number. While most of her colleagues had used WhatsApp to communicate with learners during the pandemic, she had to travel to the centre and make calls from the office phone. Even in these changed circumstances, her managers remained unable or unwilling to give Lauren a work phone. She described this as reflecting a lack of ESOL expertise among the senior managers within her ETB, observing, 'you're having to "sell" them things all the time'.

Relations with Learners and Underlying Values

All seven participants expressed frustration that their interactions with learners when teaching online felt more stilted and that there was less scope for spontaneous conversations; as Ciara observed, 'banter was lost'. While there was a general sense that providing online classes, and sending learners materials to work through, was better than nothing, they saw this as suboptimal and appropriate only as a temporary emergency measure.

Painter-Farrell (2023) describes the role of the ESOL practitioner as one of, 'ally, advocate, activist and agent of change' (no pagination). While I did not ask participants directly about their guiding philosophies or theoretical bases, it was apparent that they all tended to regard teaching ESOL as more than just a job, although it would be harder to deduce whether Ireland's ESOL practitioners typically see themselves in those terms. Nevertheless, however it is framed, supporting migrants to develop proficiency in the dominant language is an inherently political act.

Attitudes Toward Online Learning: All About the Blend?

While this study has not sought to look in detail at e-learning pedagogies and theories around these, it is worth remarking that all seven participants expressed relief about being back to in-person teaching and all felt it had been difficult to replicate online the level of interaction and incidental conversation that would typically take place within (and around) an in-person ESOL classroom

Geraldine was the most vocal of the participants in wanting to maintain some form of online learning and interaction, although she was clear this should complement rather than replace the in-person classroom. Others, such as

Lauren, talked about how they now routinely make lesson content available for learners to access online afterward.

Considering the Broader Landscape of ESOL in Ireland

Uncertainty about ESOL's place within Ireland's wider FET landscape was not discussed directly with the participants, and it should be noted that in the immediate context of the pandemic they were broadly complementary about their managers and the ETBs generally. Nevertheless, given how far migrants' language acquisition is intrinsic to broader questions of integration and belonging, the lack of a distinct national strategy for ESOL, especially the absence of cross-government coordination, underlines a sense of ESOL being a 'Cinderella' when compared with the level of public policy commitment to improving adult literacy exemplified through the 10-year ALL strategy (Government of Ireland, 2021). ALL is positioned as 'cross-government, cross-society and cross-economy' (Government of Ireland, 2021, no pagination), and there would seem to be even more of a case for coordinating ESOL provision more closely with other state agencies responsible for migrants' settlement and support.

Another fundamental point for policymakers and others with an interest in facilitating migrants' English language acquisition to understand is the need to see ESOL as a social practice, rather than a matter of individuals overcoming 'deficiency'. Language is intrinsic to broader questions of integration, inclusion, and belonging; it empowers and disempowers people. Becoming more proficient in the dominant language can help individuals progress into work or study, but it also enables communities to gain agency and voice, as well as protecting vulnerable people from exploitation.

This further illustrates why ESOL's continued situation alongside, and conflation with, literacy for first language English speakers can be unhelpful. For example, AECs generally do not offer courses above Level 5 of the National Framework for Qualifications and are not necessarily able to respond to demands for English for Specific Purposes programmes with more recognisable accreditation that might enable migrants to seek employment in the profession in which they worked before migrating or gain entry to higher education.

Conclusions

Learning from the Pandemic

With ESOL in Ireland having been subject to relatively little specific research, this study aimed to provide some qualitative insights into the position of ESOL and how practitioners regard themselves within that context. It could not claim to present a definitive picture, and indeed there will almost certainly be other ESOL practitioners working within the ETBs whose experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic were different.

All seven participants had found this period disorientating and challenging, and in one case had opted to move temporarily away from teaching ESOL rather than continue to teach online. Alongside regrets about the numbers of learners who were unable or unwilling to remain engaged once in-person classes ceased was a sense that the improvised online provision they delivered was sub-optimal and a case of 'something' being better than 'nothing'.

They had each been glad to see the return of in-person ESOL provision, yet also indicated they had become more comfortable with a selective use of technology to support their work within the classroom as well as to support other aspects of their role, such as attending team meetings, sharing resources with colleagues, and making materials available to learners outside of classes. They had each kept in touch with immediate colleagues during the pandemic, although only four participants (two of whom also had coordinating roles) described having contact with other ESOL practitioners outside their immediate setting.

The Case for More Collaboration

One thing that was apparent from this study was the relatively little communication or collaboration between ESOL practitioners in different AECs and ETBs. Greater collaboration, networking and praxis between ESOL practitioners is likely to improve flows of information and ideas between settings, as well as facilitate better advocacy by those directly involved in supporting ESOL learners. While NALA has no specific remit to support ESOL, it currently facilitates an annual conference for ESOL practitioners and has sought to offer a number of other ESOL-related support events and resources

As the co-chair of NATECLA, it would be remiss of me not to also mention the vital role it could play as the principal forum and professional association

for ESOL practitioners. Originally established in England in the 1980s, NATECLA has over four decades' experience in supporting and advocating for ESOL and community language practitioners (NATECLA, no date). Since it was established in 2022, NATECLA's Island of Ireland branch has been able to draw on some of these perspectives and insights, applying them to the context of ESOL provision in both jurisdictions on this island.

There is further work to do here, although the more that practitioners are able to engage and share with each other, the better placed they might be to learn from each other and advocate more effectively for high quality, sustainable, and transformative ESOL provision.

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An Assessment of the Enabling Environment and Institutional Preparedness of the Adult Literacy Learning System for Uganda: Implications for Practice

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Abstract

Adult literacy provision globally and in Uganda has, over the years, undergone changes because addressing the learning needs of adult learners in a wide range of contexts requires innovative programming. This paper uses the Adult Learning and Education System Building Approach (ALESBA) to analyse the operational environment and institutional preparedness for adult literacy provision in Uganda. A key finding of the study is that, despite the lack of what we term 'enabling environment' at national and local government levels, in practice, institutional arrangements allow for delivery of adult literacy programmes that can meet the needs of adult learners.

Keywords: Adult literacy, ALESBA, Implementation Guidelines, Management, Partnerships, Policy, System building

Glossary of Terms

ALE	Adult Learning and Education is the process through which adults acquire knowledge and skills.
ALESBA	Adult Learning and Education System Building Approach is a new system-based approach that is used to guide planning, implementation and evaluation of adult learning and education interventions.
CEG	Community Empowerment Groups are formed in communities to empower members through provision of knowledge, skills, financial and other support.
CLC	Community Learning Centres are centres located in communities where adults and youth congregate to acquire knowledge and skills.
DVV	Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband e.V International is a German Adult Education organisation that supports adult education in Uganda and other parts of the world.
ICOLEW	Integrated Community Learning for Wealth Creation is an adult literacy programme implemented in Uganda by the Ministry of Gender and Social Development with support from DVV International.
LAMP Scale	This a UNESCO five level tool used to measure progress of literacy learning.
MoGLSD	Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, the ministry responsible for adult learning and education programmes in Uganda.
VSLA	Village Savings and Loan Associations are groups of individuals in the same community who come together to save together and lend to each other. Adult literacy learners in Uganda form these groups to generate finances for their income generating activities.

Introduction

Adult literacy was introduced to Uganda by Arab and later European missionaries and its provision has had ups and downs; it was at its best in the late 1990s to early 2000s (Okech, 2004). The programmes developed over the years have promoted the acquisition of functional literacy and numeracy skills integrated with livelihood skills relevant to the community (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development [MoGLSD], 2014). However, according to MoGLSD (2023), citing Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) (2018), there is a challenge as adults aged 18 years and above who are not literate constitute an estimated 10 million out of a total population of 37.7 million. Unfortunately, the same source indicates that financing is at less than 1% of the education budget, which falls below the recommended international benchmark of 6%.

In an effort to reduce this high rate, government and development partners have provided adult literacy programmes for out-of-school youth and adults who have no or limited literacy and numeracy skills, aimed at enhancing their personal wellbeing and the country's socio-economic transformation and wellbeing. Blunch (2017) affirms that the benefits of adult literacy programmes include improvements in household income and income-generating activities. It has also been accepted that improving adult literacy can help get people out of poverty (Okech, 2004; Abott et al., 2023). Uganda government, in collaboration with Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband e.V (DVV) International, has since 2016 piloted the Integrated Community Learning for Wealth Creation (ICOLEW) programme, which replaced the Functional Adult Literacy Programme. ICOLEW was piloted initially in three districts: A, B, and C, followed by D in 2018. Letters are used to name the districts to hide their identity because districts whose performance was wanting (as per results) may not be comfortable being identified. The total population of each pilot district and the percentage of non-literates is shown in *Table 1*.

District	Population	Percentage of non-literates
A	215443	Unknown
B	339311	31.6%
C	250548	20.2%
D	133506	38.3%
National average		19.5%

Table 1. Population of the districts and that of non-literates. Source: UBOS, 2022

ICOLEW is built on five pillars: literacy and numeracy skills enhancement; village savings and loans association promotion; livelihoods skills training; business skills training; and community development. Like most government programmes, ICOLEW is implemented following a decentralised governance system comprising three levels, national, district and sub-county, each level with political and technical leadership.

Over the years, the adult literacy sector in Uganda has faced some successes and challenges. The successes include: 'increased adult literacy rate', 'improved financial practices', 'emancipation of women and improved gender relations', and, 'increased community participation in government programmes' (MoGLSD, 2023, p.6). The challenges include: limited access to adult learning services, non-inclusiveness, limited capacity of educators, non-recognition of certificates of non-formal adult learning, weak coordination, partnership, and networking mechanisms, inadequate research, and inadequate financing (MoGLSD, 2023). These are likely to negatively affect provision.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the operating environment and institutions influencing the successes and challenges facing adult literacy provision, we conducted a study with a view of redesigning appropriate and relevant adult literacy programmes. One of the justifications for this is that not enough is known about what works and what does not work when it comes to adult literacy (Blunch, 2017). The aim of the study was to assess the current status of the adult literacy system at national level and in the districts focusing on the environment and preparedness of the institutions involved in adult literacy provision. The objectives of the study were:

1. To describe the environment and its influence on the provision of the adult literacy programme at national and district levels.
2. To analyse the preparedness of the institutions involved in the provision of the adult literacy programme at national and district levels.

The intentions for objective one was (a) to find out whether there is a policy guiding provision and whether it addresses the adult learners' needs, with well-defined stakeholder roles; (b) to investigate whether there is a strategy for achieving short- and long-term goals or implementation guidelines that clearly spell out all the steps to be followed by all stakeholders during implementation; and (c) to determine whether there was a qualification framework that describes the competencies, assessment, equivalency, and transfer mechanisms as well as a legal framework that regulates provision.

The intention of objective two which was on the institutional arrangements that facilitate implementation were (a) to find out the status of the implementation structures and the availability and quality of human resources for implementation at all levels; and (b) to determine the status of the leadership and management that provide guidance on the mandate, direction for implementation, accountability mechanisms, and procedures as well as partnership and networking structures.

Theoretical Framework

The Adult Learning and Education System Building Approach (ALESBA) framework (Belete, 2020), a systems conceptual framework, has been used for this study. A system 'is an orderly combination or arrangement of interdependent parts that adds up to a whole' (Bhola, 1994, p.157). The ALESBA framework is organised according to four elements: enabling environment, institutional arrangements, technical processes, and management processes; each element comprises five building blocks. The building blocks for enabling environment are: Adult Learning and Education (ALE) policy, ALE strategy, ALE implementation guidelines, qualification framework, and legal framework. Those for the institutional arrangements are: ALE implementation structures, human resources, leadership and management, accountability mechanisms, and partnership structures between state and non-state actors (the term 'non-state actors' includes non-governmental organisations [NGOs], community based organisations, and faith-based organisations). The building blocks for management processes are: participatory processes, appropriate budget and resource allocation, monitoring and evaluation system, management information system, and coordination and cooperation processes. Those of technical processes are: localised curricula, clear ALE programme design and methodology, capacity development at all implementation levels, material development and learner assessment.

The ALESBA framework is implemented in five phases. These are: consensus building, assessment and diagnosis, alternatives analysis and design, implementation and testing, and reviewing, adjusting and up-scaling the intervention. Each phase includes a series of activities and steps.

Consensus building, as the first phase, is expanded here because it forms the foundation on which other phases are built. Consensus building involves:

- analysing the scope and context of the ALE system and the challenges affecting the system and service delivery;

- conducting visioning exercises that highlight what the new ALE system will look like and its contribution to national goals and service delivery;
- analysing stakeholders and their current and potential future roles;
- orientation into the ALESBA framework, its principles, objectives, phases, tools, and methods;
- development of a plan with major milestones, activities, and responsibilities for the implementation of the five phases of ALESBA.

It is important to note that these elements, buildings blocks, and processes are interconnected. When each of them are healthy and working well, the adult literacy programme will run smoothly and achieve its objectives. But any weakness in an element or building block will affect another building block or element, or the whole system, ultimately negatively affecting programme implementation and success. It is therefore necessary to assess the system so that corrective measures are taken.

The ALESBA framework comprehensively addresses all aspects that are important in ensuring the success of adult literacy learning programmes. The framework also addresses issues of continuous learning as it illuminates issues of progression and transfer to formal education system by proposing a qualifications framework. This feeds well into the ideals of lifelong, life wide, and life deep learning and resonates well with the aspects highlighted in the adult literacy benchmarks of 2005, which view literacy acquisition as a continuous process rather than a one-off activity (UNESCO-UIL, 2009). It also views adult literacy provision as part of a lifelong learning system (UNESCO-UIL, 2022). Although the model has four elements, only two of these – enabling environment and the institutional arrangements, with their building blocks – have been used for this analysis of the two research objectives because they are the most relevant.

Another systems model (Bhola, 1994), which has been used to analyse how adult literacy interventions are planned and evaluated, could not be used because it ignores the importance of strategy and implementation guidelines, qualification frameworks, and legal frameworks to guide practice. It also overlooks leadership, accountability mechanisms, partnerships, budgets, management information systems, coordination, and assessment. This is despite the fact that these are critical if adult literacy programmes are to succeed. In addition, there is little detail when it comes to the processes involved in the implementation of adult learning and education programmes. Unfortunately, due to space limitations, these processes cannot be considered here.

Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative orientations of the case study approach were employed in assessing the adult learning and education system. This approach was used as it can investigate many perspectives as well as complex and unique situations using various data sources (Chilisa and Preece, 2005; Simons, 2009; Rule and John, 2011; Yin, 2018). In support, Walter (2009) and Nuwagaba and Rule (2016) argue that case studies can also be used to investigate education issues and processes in adult education. Only qualitative data has been used for the analysis of this article because it can explain participants' points of view using words (Bryman, 2008; Rule and John, 2011), and this was appropriate for answering the two research questions.

The sample for the study included participants from the national government ministry responsible for adult learning and all four local government districts in which ICOLEW is being piloted. The participants from the national government ministry and local government districts were purposively selected based on the likelihood that they would have more in-depth information regarding the research objectives (Simons, 2009). *Table 2* shows the categories and number of the sampled participants per study area.

Study Area		**Participants**		**Total**
		Civil servants	**Politicians**	
National		5		5
District	A	1		1
	B	1		1
	C	1		1
	D	1		1
Sub-county	A1	2	1	3
	A2	2	1	3
	B1	2	1	3
	B2	2	1	3
	C1	2	1	3
	C2	2	1	3
	D1	2	1	3
	D2	2	1	3
Total		25	8	33

Table 2. Sample of participants per study area

Data was collected using documentary reviews, in-depth face-to-face and telephone interviews, and focus group discussions conducted by a team of technical officers (peer review) supported by three consultants from academia and civil society. The team was trained in data collection and handling techniques. Data was collected from senior technical staff as well as political leaders of the MoGLSD, districts and sub-counties, and Community Learning Centres (CLCs), because they were responsible for implementation either as technical or political leaders. The questions centred on the status of the various conditions regarding each of the elements and building blocks. Focus group discussions were conducted mainly with the political leadership at the district, sub-county, and CLC levels (one focus group discussion at each level). Although issues related to all the elements and building blocks were discussed, the focus of this article is on the elements enabling environment and institutional arrangements, with their building blocks. IIn addition, a wide range of documents were reviewed. These included policies and guidelines provided by the ministry; programme documents provided by DVV International; documents provided by the districts and sub-counties; and learning materials at CLCs.

One of the limitations of the study was that some of the political leaders involved in the data collection were not familiar with the programme, as they had just been elected. In addition, the study coincided with the swearing-in ceremony of newly elected political leaders. As most of the technical staff at the districts were very busy managing the transition, they had less time to engage with the research team, who as a result, were less able to ask probing questions.

Findings

The findings are first explained according to each of the research objectives, after which they are discussed as they relate to the ALESBA conceptual framework.

Operational Environment at National and District Levels

Assessment of the operating environment focused on the existing policies, strategies, programme implementation guidelines, and qualifications framework as well as the legal framework, which comprises laws, ordinances, and bylaws, and how they influence ALE provision.

The views of two national level civil servant participants regarding the policy framework are presented thus, starting with participant 1:

> The Uganda National Adult literacy policy approved by cabinet in 2014 and published in 2015 and the Uganda National Community Development Policy approved in 2015 are the two cardinal policy frameworks that provide an overall framework for operationalizing of ICOLEW aspirations.

National level participant 3 remarked:

> The adult literacy policy is narrow and doesn't address all the ICOLEW programme components. Its focus is on basic adult literacy. Also, stakeholder dissemination workshops were organised at regional levels but local governments and communities were left out.

Participant 4, who was also a civil servant at national level noted 'The current policy lacks adequate funding. The current ALE programmes are being implemented without an ALE strategy'. The views of another civil servant at national level on the issue were expressed by participant 2 who commented:

> Other supporting policies include gender policy, white paper on education, and National Development Plan (NDP) III. We disseminated at regional level. Resources could only make us cover up to the regional level and the districts were not reached.

Participants from the national and local governments were aware that the main policy guiding adult literacy provision is the *National Adult Literacy Policy of 2014* supported by the *National Community Development Policy of 2015*. However, the *National Adult Literacy Policy* has a narrow focus on basic adult literacy; it ignores post literacy, as confirmed by the analysis conducted for this study. At the time of the study, there was no strategy guiding provision, but at the end of 2023, a strategy was approved. Other policy documents like NDP III, annual ministerial statements, and budgets shape the adult literacy learning programming.

When asked about implementation guidelines, participant 1 who was a civil servant at national level responded:

> We have ICOLEW implementation guidelines, CLCs guidelines, Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA) guidelines and Livelihoods Skills Training/Business Skills Training (LST/BST) guidelines. All are

> aimed at giving direction to implementers on how to implement the programme.

Another civil servant at national level (participant 3) added:

> There are implementation guidelines for ICOLEW, those on CLCs, those on VSLAs and LST/BST guidelines and they give direction on how to implement the programme. These guidelines have been disseminated widely (at all levels) in the four ICOLEW implementing districts and shared with all local governments of Uganda in readiness for programme rollout.

A civil servant at district level (from district C) was supportive of the views expressed by national level participants and said:

> Well-structured programme implementation guidelines exist, they have a well-defined ALE education methodology, with clear implementation steps. The guidelines were disseminated.

Our observations revealed two sets of guidelines specific to the implementation of the ICOLEW adult literacy programme which were developed in 2020. The main guideline, according to our analysis, gives direction for programme implementation and targets stakeholders at all levels. It provides standards and procedures for government and non-state actors for the delivery of ICOLEW. It also explains the programme goals and objectives, its components and implementation procedures and frameworks, and the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders. It provides guidance on information management and how to start and manage CLCs, Community Empowerment Groups (CEGs), and VSLAs.

The second guideline, the GLOServe/ICOLEW Implementation Guideline, is specific to livelihood and skills development and targets facilitators, commercial officers, and Community Development Officers (CDOs). It describes the skill sets required to manage income generating activities (IGAs), how to collect baseline data on group members' income generating activities at family level and current skills levels, and how to plan and design livelihood skills training. The guidelines were disseminated in the pilot districts and shared with all CDOs in the local governments. However, there is no evidence that the guidelines were shared with non-state actors. In addition, the guidelines did not specify when the livelihood skills training component begins. They also do not clearly distinguish between the roles of some stakeholders nor explain adequately how resources generated by the CLC are to be used.

With regard to the existence of a qualification framework, participants 2 and 3 at national level responded as follows respectively:

> We don't have a National Qualifications Framework. We use Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP) scale but no thorough training for the LAMP Scale use has been conducted. We need to describe the level descriptors competences very well.
>
> At the moment, the skills aspects are relying on the Uganda Vocational Qualifications Framework (UVQF) provided for in the Business, Technical, Vocational, Education and Training (BTVET) Act of 2008. However, this doesn't provide for literacy and numeracy skills. The Programme is entirely using the UNESCO LAMP Scale to measure the learning achievements of learners across the levels.

There is evidence that no qualification framework exists for addressing minimum competencies, curriculum assessment, equivalences, and transfer directives for non-formal learning, although the need for one was identified during the adult literacy policy development in 2013 (MoGLSD, 2023). The lack of a qualifications framework makes it difficult for adult learners to progress to formal education.

In the absence of a national qualifications framework, the UNESCO LAMP Scale is used by facilitators to measure literacy learning achievement and determine progression. The LAMP Scale is used to assess progress of learners from level 1 to level 5 (MoGLSD, 2020) and by officials at district and national level for monitoring assessment and progress. The UVQF provided for in the BTVET Act of 2008 (GoU, 2008) is used to assess vocational skills in ICOLEW but unfortunately doesn't provide for assessment of literacy and numeracy skills.

This study revealed that there is no thorough training on how to use the LAMP Scale. In addition, the descriptors and competencies for each level in the LAMP Scale are not detailed, which this makes it difficult to specifically measure and separate the different competence levels. There was no evidence that adult learners who complete ICOLEW progress to the formal education system.

With regard to a legal framework, findings indicated that there was no specific law governing adult literacy programmes in Uganda. A participant who was a civil servant from district A expressed the following, common view: 'There are laws related to education and other forms of non-formal education – but not adult learning and education specifically'.

Participant 3, who was a civil servant at the national level, explained the general legal laws guiding provision as the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, especially Article 30, which stipulates that all citizens have a right to education irrespective of age, gender, disability, and social status. He added that other laws include the *Education Act 2008* and *BTVET Act 2008*. Analysis of the constitution and these two acts confirm the findings of the participants regarding the relevance of some aspects these legal frameworks to ICOLEW.

It was discovered that there are no laws governing non-formal adult learning and education. Fortunately, some districts had formulated byelaws that support adult literacy provision, a sign that adult literacy is appreciated. This practice also shows some hope that the districts are embracing the programme, and this is likely to enhance its sustainability. The enactment of byelaws is also proof that the political leadership appreciates the programme, which is likely to make budgeting and fundraising for ICOLEW easier.

Districts A and D had enacted ordinances and byelaws (copies were seen during data collection) while districts B and C had not. The ordinance relating to adult literacy that was passed by the district A council under Minute 5/01/NDC/2-018 was on food security and that under minute 13/10/NDC 2020 was on child protection. The ordinances and byelaws enacted by district D were on adult literacy, alcoholism, food security, and gender-based violence. District B was in the process of developing byelaws on adult literacy and food security.

One challenge districts faced during the drafting of laws is the lack of technical expertise, especially regarding non-formal learning. Low funding poses another challenge as a small team from one ministry does the drafting, with limited consultations and stakeholder engagement, instead of all relevant sectors working jointly during the drafting process. The requirement for extensive consultations with a wide range of stakeholders and consensus building delays formulation of the required legislation to guide implementation. In addition, inadequate funding has made it difficult to inform the public and enforce some of the byelaws enacted.

Preparedness of Institutions at National and Local Government Levels

Successful adult literacy programmes require supportive institutional arrangements. The government structure comprising MoGLSD and district and sub-county local governments is responsible for implementation of adult literacy programmes. The departments of community development are specifically in charge at all the respective levels. The key roles for MoGLSD

include formulation of policies and guidelines, resource mobilisation and allocation, setting service delivery standards, capacity building, planning, budgeting, implementation, programme reviews, monitoring and evaluation, technical support, backstopping, and supervision. A civil servant from district A explained the preparedness of different institutions that play a role in adult literacy provision thus:

> The adult learning and education implementation structure cuts across all tiers of governance and incorporates other sectors responsible for different adult learning and education components (e.g. skills training). These structures are adequate although some staff positions are vacant.

These structures are sufficient to provide technical and political leadership and support, although some of the technical structures do not have adequate staffing as some positions are vacant. This results in some officials being overwhelmed by their workloads. At the sub-county level, some offices have not been established, so that district-based officers support sub-counties. This arrangement makes it difficult for the district-based officers to reach to all the pilot sub-counties, and this will become even more difficult when ICOLEW is rolled out to all sub-counties.

The structure at national level is adequate to deliver ICOLEW, but with difficulty due to vacant positions. Within some structures, there are weekly, monthly, or quarterly meetings. Issues discussed in these meetings inform action points for implementers. District structures that implement ICOLEW were judged to be effective. The technical leadership is headed by the District Community Development Officer who reports to the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), the top technical leader at the district. The CAO reports to the council, the top political leadership at district level. The structure at district level is replicated at sub-county level, but the technical team at that level is headed by the Sub-County Chief, or Town Clerk if it is a town council. At community level, there are CLCs, CEGs, and VSLAs, and the person in charge is the parish chief who reports directly to the sub-county chief.

Various committees are responsible for ICOLEW implementation at various local government levels, which include the District Technical Planning Committee, Sub-County Council, Sub-County Technical Planning Committee, Parish Development Committee, Community [Learning Centre] Management Committee, and Village Council CEG.

Another institutional issue that contributes to the success of adult literacy provision is having sufficient and qualified human resources available to

implement the adult learning and education programme at all levels. The approved staff establishment specifically for ICOLEW implementation in MoGLSD is seven positions. Five positions are filled; the two Senior Literacy Officer positions are vacant. However, the whole Department of Community Development and Literacy has 14 positions, 11 of which are filled while three are vacant.

The district and sub-county structures were sufficient. Staffing at district level includes the District Community Development Officer, Senior Community Development Officer, Senior Probation Officer, Commercial Officer, and others in line with district structures.

At sub-county level, the Senior Assistant Secretary, Community Development Officers and their assistants, Veterinary Officer, Sub-County Agricultural Officers and Health Assistant, Fisheries Officer, and Forest Officer among others are critical in the implementation of ICOLEW. The staff filling those positions had relevant qualifications; their job descriptions were clear and in accordance with government mandate for particular departments. The higher institutions of learning provide appropriate courses relevant to ICOLEW implementation, which is backed up by on-the-job training.

The challenge is the current staffing status at MoGLSD, with vacant positions, especially at the senior level, and conditions in the districts were similar. The message from all the participants in the districts was similar to that from a civil servant in district B, who said: 'Human resources are made available for adult learning and education but not in sufficient numbers.'

In the districts, Community Development Officers are overwhelmed with workload because they are expected to handle community development, ICOLEW, disability, culture, gender, and elderly issues and to oversee many community development programmes and councils. This overload may affect staff efficiency in coordinating adult literacy programmes. Also, most staff implementing the ICOLEW programme have not undergone specialised training in ALE. This was attributed to limited opportunities for in-service training both in and outside the districts. The opportunity for professionalisation in ALE has not been localised despite the presence of national higher institutions of learning, which offer academic programmes in adult and community education.

In addition, staff establishment at the sub-county level does not provide for certain positions, like those at district level, so that the few district-based staff overstretch themselves to provide livelihood and business skills training and

advisory services at CLCs. Another challenge is limited resources for capacity building.

Another institutional issue is the leadership and management that provide direction, mandates, and instruction related to the implementation of adult literacy programmes. The following views regarding leadership and management were expressed by civil servants from district A and district B respectively:

> Leadership and management translate adult learning and education strategies and long-term plans into operational plans and tasks with time, responsibilities, and resource and budget allocation.
>
> Leadership and management personnel inform related adult learning and education sectors and stakeholders about their responsibilities in the programme, strategies, plans.

The political and technical leaders at all levels demonstrated good knowledge and understanding of the ICOLEW programme; they knew it had succeeded the Functional Adult Literacy Programme and were aware of their roles and responsibility in programme implementation. They were involved in monitoring, mobilisation, and approval of budgets and work plans.

Leadership for the programme at national level is through the Community Mobilisation and Mindset Change Programme Working Group that comprises ministries, departments, agencies and non-state actors. In addition, this group is involved in ICOLEW activities such as policy formulation, resource mobilisation, curriculum development and review, and materials development among others. The technical leadership discusses programme reports and provides appropriate guidance based on technical expertise. At district and sub-county level, the Department of Community Development is responsible for ICOLEW and raising community awareness about government programmes including adult literacy programmes and increasing the uptake of the same. In the districts and sub-counties, technical leadership resides in the Technical Planning Committees, as ICOLEW is implemented across sectors. At the sub-county level, the technical teams' roles are monitoring and support supervision of CEGs, CLCs, and financial management, provision of feedback to the district, and general administration of activities at the sub-county level.

The technical leadership is involved in the development of byelaws and budget proposals, monitoring, and support supervision. Records show that district councils make resolutions strengthening the implementation of ICOLEW.

Political leaders mobilise communities through meetings, participate in the recruitment of facilitators, and provide airtime and participate in radio programmes raising awareness about ICOLEW. The leadership at sub-county level knew that ICOLEW was a government program which assists non-literates to learn reading and writing, helps communities to improve their livelihoods, and CLC to be a one-stop centre for community activities.

Budgeting, planning, and coordination are conducted in a participatory manner, from the village to parish, sub-county, district, and finally national levels. The same system is used for accountability.

Technical and management leadership teams face two challenges: limited documentation to establish the extent of the district and local level contributions to ICOLEW. Additionally, new political leaders, along with those in the sub-counties where the new rollout is occurring, have not yet been oriented on the programme. This may compromise programme receptiveness and quality.

Accountability mechanisms and procedures are important if an adult literacy intervention is to succeed. These mechanisms and procedures relate to the allocation of responsibilities and follow-up on tasks to ensure that they are completed as expected.

Accountability mechanisms and procedures followed by ICOLEW are *Government of Uganda Standing Orders and the Public Finance Management Act 2015*, *Public Finance Management Regulations Act 2011*, *Local Government Act cap 243*, and Partner Guidelines from DVV International. The mechanisms include budgets, requisitions, audits, reporting, mass media publicity, public functions, and a public relations office. The reporting and feedback mechanisms for ICOLEW include compilation and discussion of periodic activity reports, programme planning and review meetings, follow ups, monitoring and support supervision, feedback meetings with the core team and implementers at all levels, and writing circulars to stakeholders highlighting required actions.

The following response from a civil servant from district C captures the state of the accountability mechanisms and procedures: 'Formal accountability mechanisms exist and have the necessary formats and guidelines. Steps are taken to address poor performance'.

Findings revealed that accountability is achieved through functional management committees that provide oversight and additional support to check performance at national, district, and sub-county levels. Internal audit

departments review reports, which they submit to public accounts committees that review and submit them to parliament and district councils.

Corrective measures employed to address poor performance at national level include mentoring, coaching, and attachments for officers who have knowledge and skills gaps. Indiscipline is handled by the disciplinary committee provided for in the public service standing orders. There are sanctions for delayed accountability in accordance with audit and public accounts committee guidelines.

Effective partnership and networking structures between different state and non-state actors are necessary for the successful implementation of ALE programmes. The Uganda *National Adult Literacy Policy of 2014* provides for the engagement of different stakeholders in the implementation of adult literacy programmes, which include ministries, local governments, civil society organisations that include NGOs, faith-based organisations and cultural institutions, the private sector, development partners, institutions of higher learning, adult literacy instructors and their associations, and village and parish committees, as well as learners and learner organisations.

Under government policy, at national level, the Community Mobilisation and Mindset Change Programme Working Group is responsible for engaging with non-state actors. Its role is to oversee, plan, implement, and review activities of the ICOLEW programme. This structure is official, as it was put in place by government. DVV International is the main non-state actor providing technical, material, and financial support to ICOLEW. Others include UNESCO, Uganda Literacy and Adult Learners Association, Unbound, Raising the Village International, and Adventist Relief Agency. Unfortunately, the Association of Professional Adult Educators of Uganda, the network that brings together professional educators, and Uganda Adult Education Network, which brings together non-state actors in ALE, are not strong enough to engage the state.

With regard to structures for implementation, three districts mentioned that these were formal and one district mentioned they were informal. One of the districts reported that these structures met regularly and implemented agreed upon positions. The rest of the districts reported that the structures were not being used to engage partners and review activities on a regular basis. The District NGO monitoring committee which is established by law and is mandated to monitor the activities of non-state actors is not very active. NGOs, including DVV International, Icelandic Aid, and The AIDS Support Organisation, provide financial support, capacity building, infrastructural development, and

policy formulation. A civil servant from district D acknowledged the existence of structures saying, 'Formal networking and partnership structures with non-state actors exist, meet regularly and implement agreed-upon agendas to meet objectives'. This was confirmed by another participant from district B who remarked, 'Informal or ad hoc networking and partnership structures with non-state actors exist'.

Discussion

In discussing the findings, we first describe the environment and how it influences the provision of the adult literacy programme at national and district levels. This is followed by a discourse on the preparedness of the institutional arrangements for implementation. We then explain the findings using the ALESBA conceptual framework.

The Operational Environment at National and Local Government Levels

A conducive environment is a prerequisite for the success of adult literacy programmes, and this depends on the policy framework. The policy should have funding mechanisms because as UNESCO-UIL (2022) argues, although global spending on ALE has increased, it remains largely underfunded. In regard to the enabling environment, the findings reveal that the country has a policy which in addition to being outdated, has a narrow focus. In addition, non-comprehensive policy dissemination has resulted in adult literacy programmes that also have a narrow focus and some stakeholders who lack guidance from the policy. The absence of a strategy at the time of the study means that adult literacy provision is guided by implementation guidelines. Wide dissemination of the guidelines in government but not among non-state actors means differences in adherence to these guidelines by implementors. However, the guidelines do not explain when the skills component begins, or the roles of some stakeholders, and how the resources generated at the CLCs are to be used. Fortunately, at the time of writing this article, a non-formal adult learning and community education strategy for Uganda (NALCES) 2023/24 – 2027/28 is in place (MoGLSD, 2023).

The mechanism for implementation includes a partnership model involving national and local governments. National level government is responsible for creating a conducive environment for ALE through improving policy, structures, strategies, management, planning, monitoring and evaluation, budgeting, and quality assurance. It also provides a link between development

partners, districts and sub-county local governments, CEGs, and VSLAs. The districts provide technical support to the sub-counties, CEGs, and VSLAs. The sub-counties, where the CEGs and VSLAs are based, are responsible for learning and implementation of other activities at that level.

There were two sets of implementation guidelines, but these are silent about progression, and therefore advancement from one learning unit to another is often done haphazardly, which compromises the quality of the assessment process. The absence of a qualifications framework undermines progression in learning processes. It also makes it difficult to certify and accredit the certificates awarded to those who complete adult literacy programmes, which in turn makes it difficult for learners to transfer to the formal education system. This is despite the UNESCO recommendation that, 'Learning and using literacy skills is a continuous, context-bound process that takes place both within and outside explicitly educational settings and throughout life' (UNESCO-UIL, 2013, p.83). UNESCO adds that this understanding calls for cross-sectoral policies. This is another piece of evidence that weaknesses in any of the elements negatively affect other building blocks in other elements.

Since there is no law on non-formal adult learning and education, non-participation and inefficiency may not be easy to deal with, as there are no stipulated legal measures for non-compliance. Some districts have byelaws to guide implementation, and the fact that some have formulated some byelaws is proof that adult literacy provision is appreciated and streamlining provision is important. This also shows some hope that the districts are embracing the programme, which enhances its sustainability. It is also proof that the political leadership appreciates the programme, and this is likely to make budgeting and fundraising for ICOLEW easier.

The findings relate well with guidance provided in the adult literacy benchmarks, which emphasise having effective leadership, favourable policy frameworks, an enabling environment, and adequate resources for policy implementation (UNESCO-UIL, 2009). The benchmarks propose that governments should dedicate at least 3% of their national education sector budgets to adult literacy programmes. It is also important to note that policies and governance go hand in hand, as advocated by UNESCO-UIL (2019, p.83): 'Policies may not achieve their full potential if they are not accompanied by appropriate governance measures.'

Preparedness of Institutions at National and Local Government Levels

The government structures comprising the ministry, district, and sub-county local governments are responsible for implementation of adult literacy programmes, and these are sufficient to provide technical and political leadership, support, and oversight roles. This is in line with the UNESCO-UIL (2013, p.61) recommendation that 'Good governance should facilitate the implementation of adult learning and education policy and programmes in ways that are effective, transparent, accountable and equitable.' The departments of community development are specifically in charge. In addition, the different technical committees at the different levels provide guidance to the staff of the community development department. These structures are benefitting from the professionalisation opportunities in adult learning and education academic programmes that exist in universities and other institutions of higher learning. It is argued that 'governments must ensure good governance mechanisms at national, sub-national and community levels' (UNESCO-UIL, 2013, p.73). These mechanisms need to be effective and should include governmental and non-governmental actors and facilitate continuous consultation and coordination among different stakeholders.

Unfortunately, some of the technical structures do not have adequate staffing as some positions are vacant, so some officials are overwhelmed by their workloads. Another challenge is that the structure at the sub-county level does not include the establishment of some offices at district level, leaving district-based officers to provide support to those in sub-counties. While this may provide results now, it may be difficult for the district-based officers to reach all the sub-counties once the adult literacy programme is rolled out to all of them. In addition, non-state actors are not very visible in these structures.

The political and technical leaderships have embraced the adult literacy programme as reflected in the financial contributions and other supports made available to the programme, especially at district and sub-county levels. However, the extent of the support provided by the districts and sub-counties is not systematically documented. In addition, most of the leaders lost the recent elections, and the new leaders are largely not knowledgeable about the programme.

There are accountability mechanisms in place, which are the government offices institutionalised and mandated to enforce accountability. In addition, development partners and the ministry have accountability mechanisms in their cooperation agreements. Such strong accountability mechanisms can build confidence among government and development partners and make

fundraising easier. Timely accountability enhances partnerships, another building block in this element, and planning processes, which is a critical building block in the element of management processes. Unfortunately, these mechanisms had not been digitised and are therefore slow.

The structures for building and sustaining partnerships at national and district levels exist, but they are not very active. This is not a good development as best practice dictates that structures should ensure cooperation across all relevant ministries and links to all relevant development programmes, as well as systematic collaboration and links with relevant civil society organisations at local and national level (UNESCO-UIL, 2009). Their inactivity may mean that support programme activities, such as policy formulation, planning, and networking, may not be as effective as they should be. There is no structure for this purpose at sub-county level, thus making it difficult to start and maintain partnerships and collaborations at that level.

There are informal implementation partnerships between existing structures including development partners, ministry, districts and sub-counties, civil society organisations, the private sector, and academic institutions, and each provides unique contributions to the programme. This is a global phenomenon, and in most countries there has been increased engagement with civil society (UNESCO-UIL, 2022). There is a realisation that:

> effective cooperation among stakeholders to complement and even amplify adult learning efforts can be a win-win for achieving policy goals and inclusive, equity-driven development that does not leave certain groups behind. (UNESCO-UIL, 2022, p.23)

The process review of the adult literacy programme revealed that the partnerships and collaboration were largely ad-hoc (Okech and Zaalyembikke, 2007), and the findings of this study show that situation has not changed much.

These partnerships have helped the programme to be well aligned with the priorities of the government in general and of the ministry in particular, as revealed by the evaluation of the DVV programme in Uganda (Nandago et al., 2019). The evaluation explains that the programme is well aligned with Uganda's NDP III through the Community Mobilization and Mindset Change Programme (CMMC). The programme contributes to CMMC outcomes, which include an informed and active citizenry, competent implementers, improved community participation in development programmes, increased household saving, improved morals, positive mindsets and attitudes, and strengthened patriotism. It also helps reduce corruption and negative cultural practices and

increases the competencies of implementers. However, the same evaluation reveals that at the macro level, the programme faces challenges, including policies that have a narrow focus, inadequate financing, and institutional inability to upscale the programme to more districts and sub-counties, as well as monitoring, evaluation, and management information systems that are manual and not well aligned with each other, thus compromising quality.

Framing the Findings Using the ALESBA Framework

The ALESBA framework is based on system thinking. As explained earlier, the framework has four elements each with five building blocks, all of which have to be working well if an adult literacy programme is to be successful. Since this study's focus was on the environment and institutional preparedness, only two elements and the five building blocks in each element were used to explain the status of each element and building block.

The environment is not as enabling as it should be, and this is likely to compromise the quality of the programme. An outdated policy that was even not well disseminated and had a narrow focus meant that the adult literacy programmes had a narrow scope. On a positive note, the implementation guidelines that were disseminated widely, except for non-state actors, were providing the necessary guidance to implementors. However, the absence of explanations on when the teaching of skills should begin, the roles of some stakeholders, and how resources at CLCs should be used are likely to cause disharmony and/or conflicts during implementation. The absence of a qualification framework for non-formal learning was not only affecting adult learners' progression to formal education and curriculum content, but was also likely to affect motivation to enrol in the programme. The negative effect of the absence of specific laws on non-formal adult learning is minimised by the existence of byelaws in some local governments. Unfortunately, enforcement of these byelaws is affected by inadequate finances.

On the other hand, the government institutional arrangements in place can deliver the programme, with minor challenges. Sufficient structures for implementation exist, although some do not have adequate staffing. The technical and political leaderships in these structures are competent and aware of their roles except that some political leaders had just assumed office after election and have inadequate knowledge about the programme. The accountability mechanisms are robust, with mentorship options and sanctions for wrong doers. This in turn is making fundraising for the programme easier and strengthening partnerships. Although the partnerships are ad-hoc rather than formalised, in practice, they provide synergies that enhance programme

planning and implementation. Generally, these findings illuminate how strengths and weaknesses in the elements and buildings blocks affect the other elements and building blocks.

Therefore, the ALESBA framework can be used not only to identify weaknesses of certain aspects in an existing programme but also to identify the effect of the weaknesses on other aspects of the programme. These can then be used as entry points that can lead to planning a phase of a programme that addresses specific aspects, starting with those with the greatest influence across the entire system of elements and building blocks. It is noteworthy that ALESBA addresses the components of best practices suggested by Moretti (2016) such as involvement of political authorities, stakeholders, and partners using clear terms of reference; strengthening coordination and funding mechanisms; having a good communication strategy; building effective partnerships; strengthening capacities of human resources; and being innovative.

Conclusion

The adult learning and education system assessment suggests that an unfavourable environment is constraining the implementation of the programme. Fortunately, the existing and tested government structures that are effective have made it possible to implement the adult literacy programme successfully despite gaps regarding staffing, funding, and assessment. Using ALESBA can therefore open doors for understanding adult literacy provision as part of the lifelong learning systems (UNESCO-UIL, 2022).

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‘Becoming’ and ‘Being’ a Teacher in Ireland’s Further Education and Training Sector

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Abstract

Irish Further Education and Training (FET) is presently undergoing a period of transformation after years of experiencing issues related to identity and precarious employment, among others. This paper explores the experiences and motivations of 16 student teachers who, despite the sectoral challenges, have chosen to teach in FET as a second career. Interestingly, many turned to teaching in FET only after facing barriers to employment in other educational sectors. However, their motivations for becoming a teacher were highly altruistic as they assumed a pastoral-facilitator approach in their work with adult learners and were motivated by social justice values of inclusion and equality.

Keywords: Further Education and Training, Motivations for Teaching, Professional Identity, Teaching as a Second Career

Introduction

In Ireland, Further Education and Training (FET) offers a wide array of educational opportunities which occur after (or as an alternative to) post-primary education, but which fall outside of the Higher Education (HE) sector. Programmes of study include initial, continuing, professional, vocational, lifelong and ‘second-chance’ opportunities (DFHERIS, 2023). Today, the sector supports nearly 200,000 diverse learners throughout the country (SOLAS, 2022) and has a long history as a grassroots response to educational needs in local communities (McGuinness et al., 2014).

In recent years, the sector has witnessed a period of rapid change, hallmarked by the publication of the national strategy, *Future FET: Transforming Learning* (SOLAS, 2020), which aimed to expand the role and influence of the sector,

while also addressing perennial issues related to the identity and positionality of the sector, among others. The launch of this document also coincided with the creation of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), which marked a strategic move toward creating a more unified tertiary system in Ireland (DFHERIS, 2022). This was a significant move for the sector, which previously developed largely in 'isolation from the rest of the education system' (Grummell and Murray, 2015, p.434).

Yet, despite these advances, research literature on the Irish FET sector remains underdeveloped (McGuinness et al., 2014). Extant works focus largely on learner demographics (Conor and Guerin, 2019; Dulee-Kinsolving and Guerin, 2023a), target student cohorts (Dulee-Kinsolving and Guerin, 2023b; 2023c), and assessing performative metrics (Dulee-Kinsolving and Guerin, 2023a; Glanton, 2023). As such, very little is known about those who chose to become registered teachers in FET (Grummell and Murray, 2015; Fitzsimons and O'Neill, 2024).

In response to this gap, this paper presents the findings of a study that explored the motivations and experiences of 16 mature student teachers, aged 23+ years, who were completing an initial teacher education (ITE) programme with the aim of starting a second career as a qualified teacher in FET. The guiding research questions were:

1. What are student teachers' motivations for choosing to teach in the FET sector?
2. What are student teachers' experiences of ITE training?
3. How do student teachers understand and conceptualise their role adult educators?

Findings illustrate that most participants transitioned to a career in teaching after years of working in industry, and of these, the majority originally desired to teach in post-primary and HE, and thus only considered FET after facing barriers to employment within these sectors. Their motivations for teaching were highly altruistic and intrinsic, but also shaped to a lesser degree by extrinsic factors. Furthermore, social justice values of inclusion and equality were important to these educators and influenced their practice as they assumed a holistic and pastoral-facilitator approach in their teaching. We argue that, while teachers' career motivation can influence retention in the profession (Alexander et al., 2020), in order to attract and retain aspiring educators to FET, changes must also be made to related policy and practice, particularly in relation to raising awareness and the profile of the sector.

Motivations for Choosing a Career in Teaching

The motivating factors related to why teachers choose a career in education have long been studied in the literature, and altruistic, intrinsic, and extrinsic motivations are cited as the most influential determinants of this choice (Jungert et al., 2014; Gore et al., 2015; Alexander et al., 2020). Altruistic motivations include the enjoyment of working with students (for example, adolescents or adults), wanting to make a difference in their lives, and contributing to society through teaching; intrinsic motivations refer to one's level of interest and enjoyment in teaching; while extrinsic factors include elements indirectly related to the role of teaching, such as work-life balance, renumeration, and flexible working arrangements (Heinz, 2015).

Research suggests that pre-service teachers are largely influenced by altruistic and intrinsic motivations such as the satisfaction of teaching, having a positive impact on certain cohorts of students, and making a meaningful contribution to society (Alvariñas-Villaverde et al., 2022; Simonsz et al., 2023). Similarly, an international study of career motivations among pre-service teachers using the FIT-Choice Scale (a psychometrically validated assessment commonly used to examine teachers' motivations) reported that intrinsic values, perceived teaching ability, desire to make a social contribution, and positive prior teaching and learning experiences were the most significant motivational factors for choosing a career in teaching, while in comparison, extrinsic motives are significantly less influential in this regard (Jungert et al., 2014).

Additionally, there is a growing body of literature considering the motivations of those who choose to teach in Vocational Education and Training (VET), the equivalent of FET in Europe. Most of these individuals tend to be older adults (Alharbi, 2020) whose motivations combine:

> Social-altruistic drives (the desire to work with young people, to shape their future) […] the passive motivation to become a teacher (the opportunities that arise) and intrinsic values (the appreciation of one's teaching abilities and the vocation) (Mičiulienė and Kovalčikienė, 2023, p.411).

Yet, extrinsic motivations related to increased salary, work-life balance, and flexible schedules have been found to exert a small level of influence on why females in particular, pursue a second career teaching in VET (Kristmansson and Fjellström, 2023). In summary, the literature illustrates that regardless of sector or age of the teacher, altruistic and intrinsic motivations likely exert a strong influence on why people choose a career in teaching.

Professional Teaching Identity

The process of developing one's professional identity as an educator is a crucial aspect of becoming a teacher (Friesen and Besley, 2013). While the understanding and definition of professional identity varies, it is typically recognised as encompassing multiple dimensions related to 'perceptions, views, beliefs, emotions, motivations and attitudes that teachers have about their own role' (Suarez and McGrath, 2022, p.8). It is important to consider teachers' professional identities, as their identity often influences numerous domains of their work, including the methodologies they utilise, the subjects they choose to teach, and the quality of their relationships with students (Beijaard et al., 2004).

The literature also emphasises that teacher professional identity is a 'complex and multifaceted concept' that changes over time because of their personal and professional experiences (Suarez and McGrath, 2022, p.8). For example, when entering ITE, aspiring teachers likely hold predefined beliefs about what it means to be a teacher which are largely based on their prior educational and life experiences (Chong, 2011). These beliefs may include 'naive and idealistic perceptions of teaching' (Hong, 2010, p.1530), along with memories of teachers they wish to emulate. As they progress through their training, multiple factors continue to influence the development of pre-service teachers' professional identities including psychological feelings of appreciation, connectedness and competence, as well as their level of commitment, thoughts regarding a future teaching career (van Lankveld et al., 2016), and even cultural and societal expectations regarding teachers and education (Beltman et al., 2015). Given these multiple influences, during this early phase of teacher training, it is crucial for the individual to also develop a sense of themselves as an effective educator (Chong et al., 2011).

Yet, the development of professional identity is not a simple process (van Lankveld et al., 2016) and can be wrought with difficulties and struggles, as pre-service teachers often hold solid perceptions of themselves and their ability as teachers, and yet observations and assessment of practice can sometimes differ from this view (Devine et al., 2013). Additionally, the development of teacher identity can be quite stressful for those transitioning to teaching as a second career, as these individuals may 'experience dilemmas and tensions as they attempt to reconcile their identities as experienced professionals and newcomers to student teaching' (Williams, 2013, p.100).

Interestingly, it has been suggested that older student teachers tend to have higher levels of teacher identity than do younger student teachers (Friesen and

Besley, 2013)—and this fact may yield positive benefits for mature entrants to the teaching profession as their stronger teacher identities may act as a supportive element during their career transition (Cobb, no date). However, ITE programmes also play an important role in supporting the development of teacher identity (Beltman et al., 2015) and should provide student teachers with ample opportunities for reflection, along with time to develop their own teaching practices, behaviours, beliefs, and values (Cobb, no date).

ITE for Further Education and Training

Teaching is a highly regulated profession (Heinz, 2014) in Ireland governed by The Teaching Council which aims to improve the quality and standards of teachers (Government of Ireland, 2001) within primary, post-primary, and FET (Teaching Council, 2011). However, ITE for FET is a relatively new development, as Teacher Education Qualifications (TEQ) were not officially instituted for the sector until 2011 (HEI-FET Forum, 2017), and even today, there are many learning practitioners working in roles within FET that do not require a TEQ, such as tutors, instructors, and adult educators.

When it comes to the training of qualified teachers for FET, ITE is offered mainly at the postgraduate level (with the exception of two institutions which also offer undergraduate routes), with flexible options for study in full-time and part-time programmes, along with weekend and evening provision. The Postgraduate Diploma in Education (Further Education) (PDE-FE) is one such example of ITE provision that aims to equip aspiring teachers with the 'knowledge, skills and competencies to […] carry out their teaching role and responsibilities' (Teaching Council, 2011, p.5) specifically within the FET sector. The PDE-FE recognises entrants as subject specialists by virtue of their prior studies and life experience, and focuses on educating student teachers about the how of teaching, while including practical and theoretical modules on topics such as educational psychology, history and philosophy of education, group management, technology enhanced learning, and teaching methodologies, among others. A module on reflective practice is also included in the programme to help develop students' sense of criticality regarding their practice, and to support the development of their professional identities. To put theory into practice, all ITE for Further Education (FE) programmes require student teachers to complete 30 hours of observation and 100 hours of teaching practice in state approved FET providers (Teaching Council, 2011).

Individuals wishing to register as a qualified teacher with the Teaching Council under Route 3 Further Education must hold a Bachelor's Degree worth 180

European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits; this can be at a Level 8, or Level 7 when accompanied with a minimum of three years relevant experience (Teaching Council, no date). Additionally, all candidates must possess a TEQ for FE that has been accredited by the teaching council (Teaching Council, 2016), such as the PDE-FE. The Teaching Council will grant conditional Route 3 (FE) registration to applicants prior to completing their TEQ, which provides them with a registration number and allows them be paid by state funds, should they become employed in the sector. Such conditional professional registration is not available in other sectors. This conditional registration is temporary, and contingent on the individual completing their TEQ for FET within a three-year timeframe (Teaching Council, 2016).

Methodology

This joint research project was conducted at two Irish HEIs (HEI-A and HEI-B), both of which offered the PDE-FE ITE programme. A total of five researchers took part in this study (three from HEI-A and two from HEI-B), and ethical approval was granted from the lead institution (HEI-A) prior to engaging participants in the research.

This study utilised a concurrent mixed-methods design consisting of an anonymous online questionnaire and a semi-structured interview schedule, and was situated within the interpretive paradigm. All students then enrolled in the PDE-FE at both HEIs (n=82) were invited by email to participate in the study by completing an anonymous self-administered online questionnaire. Participants were also informed of the additional opportunity to complete an optional online semi-structured interview. All were provided with a detailed study information sheet and were assured of both confidentiality and that agreeing or declining to participate would have no bearing on the outcome of their PDE-FE results or qualification.

Both measurements used in this study explored participants' demographic characteristics, prior educational experiences, motivations for teaching in the FET sector, understanding of professionalism, conceptualisation of being an adult educator, and plans for future employment. The online questionnaire was hosted on Microsoft Forms, contained 29 open and closed questions, and was completed by 16 participants, which equates to a response rate of 19.5%. Of these, 56% (n=9) opted to engage in a semi-structured interview (five from HEI-A and four from HEI-B). To ensure consistency in data collection, two

of the researchers assumed responsibility for conducting the interviews, and to support participants' openness and transparency, each of the researchers interviewed participants from the cooperating HEI who were unknown to them. All interviews were held on Zoom for a duration of 60 to 90 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded to ensure accuracy of transcription.

The questionnaire data set was cleaned prior to analysis, and the remaining quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics, while the qualitative data within the questionnaire was organised and sorted according to comparable properties to illuminate majority and minority responses. Thematic analysis of the interview data was informed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Audio recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai and checked to ensure verbal accuracy. The team of researchers analysed each transcript through close reading and memoing, line-by-line coding, and organisation of codes into emergent themes. Through collaborative discussion, the key themes from both datasets were identified and interpreted. To produce the final report, each member of the team assumed responsibility for particular sections, with collegial interpretation of the findings and analysis ongoing.

Pseudonyms have been used throughout when reporting quotes from the interview data to support participants' confidentiality. Quotes drawn from the anonymous questionnaire are labelled simply 'Questionnaire Respondent'.

Participant Demographics

The demographic characteristics for all participants in the study are shown in *Table 1*.

Demographic Characteristics	Results
Total number of participants	n=16
Age	Mature (aged 23+): 100% (n=16)
Gender	Female: 87.5% (n=14) Male: 12.5% (n=2)
Nationality/Ethnicity	White Irish: 81.2% (n=13) Any other White background: 12.5% (n=2) Asian or Asian Irish: 0.06% (n=1)
Attended FET previously as a student	Yes: 50% (n=8) No: 50% (n=8)
Highest Level of Educational Attainment	Level 9 Master's: 43.7% (n=7) Level 8 Honours Bachelor's Degree: 31.5% (n=5) Level 8 Professional Qualification: 18.7% (n=3) Level 7 Ordinary Bachelor's Degree: 0.06% (n=1)

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participants held a wide range of subject specialisms; the five most common were accounting, early childhood, education, languages, and psychology (see *Figure 1*).

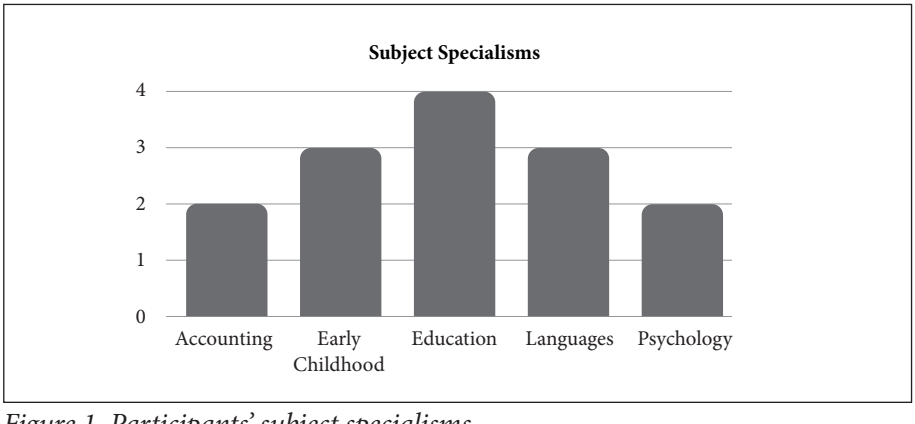

Figure 1. Participants' subject specialisms

In addition, participants indicated specialisms in the following areas: architecture (n=1), chemical engineering (n=1), business (n=1), economics (n=1), law (n=1), occupational therapy (n=1), philosophy (n=1), politics (n=1), social care (n=1), and surveying (n=1).

Becoming an FET Teacher

One hundred percent of the participants in this study (n=16) were transitioning to teaching in FET after completing careers in other industries. Among the interview participants, only 22% (n=2) had a longstanding desire to be a teacher, such as Rose who came from a family in which 'everybody is a teacher', while Mairead explained that when it came to teaching, 'there was never anything else I wanted to do really'. In contrast, the remaining 77% (n=7) of interview participants believed their interest in teaching developed out of their previous careers: they had often assumed leadership roles and found themselves training fellow colleagues, which they greatly enjoyed. It was often this experience of mentoring adults in the workplace that served as the impetus to consider a career in teaching. For example, Desmond said that, 'monthly professional supervision with the staff […] was really my first toe in the water of that teaching kind of role'. Thus, for the vast majority of participants, teaching in FET naturally evolved from their earlier career experiences. However, for a minority of others, the journey to teaching was more unplanned, as Bridget 'just fell into' teaching, but soon found that the profession was a good fit.

Participants were attracted to working in FET for a wide variety of reasons. Some were drawn to the sector because of their genuine passion for 'working with people' (Questionnaire Response) and teaching mature learners. As Ashling explained, 'I just loved the interactions with the adults'. Others believed that within FET, they could 'help people realise their potential' and 'support them on their journey' (Questionnaire Responses). Still, others commented on the benefits of teaching in voluntary education (as opposed to compulsory) with adults who want to be engaged in education or 'want to work in the industry' they were experienced in (Questionnaire Response).

Several participants wanted to teach in FET because of the values they associated with the sector and the impact they believed it has on learners and the broader society. This was the case for Kieran who explained, 'What drew me to Further Ed over other sectors was that it's more inclusive and accessible, and […] more egalitarian'. Indeed, several participants commented on how they believed these values extended not only to students, but to teachers working in the sector as well: 'FE appeared to me as having a broader viewpoint in terms of the scope of students as well as that of teachers' (Questionnaire Response).

Similarly, some participants also believed the sector provided them with an opportunity to 'give back to society' and be an agent of change.

For many of the participants, the attraction to working in the FET sector was also initially practical and instrumental. Within the questionnaire, a few respondents mentioned considerations like the sociable nature of the job, wanting more variety in their work-life, and that FET was 'just another avenue to use my skills'. Kate admitted that her initial attraction to the sector was due to 'logistics', as she was not ready to cease full-time employment in industry and there was a FET centre located 'across the road' where she could teach. As a busy mother, Bridget found the working hours suitable and enjoyed 'having the holidays […] and free time' to pursue her own interests; however, she was the only participant to mention holidays as a motivating factor in her choice to teach in FET. In contrast, Desmond admitted: 'There's this common perception that teaching's a handy number […] the summer holidays [and] since I've started doing the placement hours, I've realised that's not the case.'

Interestingly, the majority of participants originally desired work in other sectors of Irish education, but they commonly faced multiple barriers which denied them employment. A questionnaire respondent explained that they were a qualified primary school teacher in another country, but their credentials were not recognised for teaching in Irish primary schools. 'When I moved to Ireland, I lost a bit of myself by not being able to teach primary school, but I found a new way to help and share my knowledge [in FET]' (Questionnaire Response).

Others wanted to teach in post-primary but often found their subject specialisms were not included in the curriculum, as was the case for Rose who explained, 'I don't see philosophy as one of the [post-primary] subject areas', while others discovered they didn't meet the ITE entry criteria. As a Questionnaire Respondent explained, 'Secondary teaching would have been my first preference, but [it is] very rigid in requirements'.

Others had considered teaching in HE, but found they lacked the required level of qualifications. This was the case for Rose, who explained, 'I don't have a PhD degree so I'm not eligible to teach in a university' and for Miriam who recalled, 'I didn't know what Further Ed was […] I thought I'd go into Higher Ed […] they're looking for PhDs and I'm not going down that road. I've done my time'. Similarly, Ashling also considered completing her PhD, but decided that it 'would put me under a lot of pressure with my family and kids' along with noting the 'financial constraints' that such a programme of study would impose.

Thus, for most participants, FET was a sector where they could teach their subject specialisms and share their industry 'experience and knowledge' (Questionnaire Response) with students. Given that all of these individuals were transitioning to teaching as a second career, FET was also viewed as the 'quick route as a mature student to re-train' (Questionnaire Response), while the opportunity to 'teach straight away' in FET, prior to earning their NQT, was a draw for those like Miriam. In summary, for most participants, qualifying and teaching in FET was simply more attractive, accessible, and realistic than other sectors.

Being the FET Teacher

When asked to articulate their conceptualisation of professionalism as related to teaching in the FET sector, a minority of participants commented on the importance of fulfilling the duties of the teaching role, such as setting deadlines and covering content. For Isabel, professionalism in FET was about 'having taken your duty and your responsibility seriously […] to execute your job as best possible'. Additionally, several individuals equated professionalism with being knowledgeable and experienced in their subject specialism. As Bridget explained, being a professional means, 'I am an expert […] that I will keep up to date […] that I have a wide variety of experiences in the area'.

However, while expertise and attention to duties were recognised as principle elements of their role, most participants strongly associated professionalism with assuming a pastoral and 'student centred approach' (Questionnaire Response) in their daily work. A key element of this approach included getting to know learners personally and forming genuine and respectful relationships with them. Isabel opined that such relationships were 'absolutely critical' in the teaching and learning process and could directly contribute to better levels of student engagement and more positive outcomes. Part of getting to know students also included coming to 'understand your learners' challenges' (Questionnaire Response) and responding to these. Similarly, Miriam explained how her reasons for entering teaching changed from when she first entered the profession: 'I wanted to teach what I was an expert in, and I'm an expert accountant […] but now […] it's not really the goal. It's more about the learner and the individual learning needs.'

Participants also believed the pastoral nature of their work, and the level of responsibility they felt toward their learners made them different to educators in other sectors; they typically lived out this role in the classroom by becoming a 'facilitator' of learning, rather than a 'teacher' or a 'lecturer'. Participants

commonly defined facilitation as being a 'guide and support', believing 'in everyone's potential', while assisting learners 'in achieving their goals and experiencing educational success' (Questionnaire Responses). As a facilitator, they no longer controlled the classroom, but instead aimed to give students 'ownership of the learning process' (Desmond) and tailored the classroom environment to the needs and desires of the learners. As Ashling explained: 'You are the facilitator of the environment. You are the one guiding it from their interests and their beliefs, and what they want to learn and how they want to learn.'

As pastoral-facilitator educators, the participants were also highly social justice oriented and espoused the values of diversity, equality, and inclusion in their work: 'I aspire to include all, accept and appreciate diversity, and encourage an all-inclusive learning environment' (Questionnaire Responses). Accessibility and inclusion were typically achieved in the classroom by utilising a wide variety of differentiated, active, practical, and collaborative teaching methodologies. Some also mentioned the importance of supporting learners' 'sense of belonging' in the classroom and reinforcing the message that learners 'belong there and deserve to be there' (Questionnaire Responses).

Furthermore, it is important to note that 50% (n=8) of questionnaire respondents had formerly attended FET as students, and these individuals commonly felt they were well-positioned to teach and support students given their own similar life experiences and backgrounds. They noted, for example that, 'the barriers the adults face, I have also faced them. I understand the barriers and how to overcome them', and similarly, 'I was and am that adult learner, and I can relate to them. I understand the barriers they face, as I have faced many of them too'. Thus, numerous participants clearly believed the role of pastoral-facilitator enabled them to positively influence the lives of others by 'empowering the marginalised', 'disrupting the status quo', and even 'changing the world' (Questionnaire Responses).

Discussion

This research illustrates the motivations and challenges which influenced student teachers to consider a career in FET, as well as delineating their conceptualisation of their teaching role and the associated values they espouse. Interestingly, before entering the sector, none of the participants aspired to work specifically in FET, and they all turned to teaching as a second career after working in other industries. While their industry experiences often introduced them to the idea of teaching, their trajectories raise concern regarding why ITE entrants are not typically attracted to teaching in the FET sector at earlier

stages of their careers. In the UK context, the average age of entrants to ITE for FET is 37 years, and for school-based ITE it is 24 years, which indicates that 'individuals are coming into FET teaching at a later career stage than other types of teaching' (The Education and Training Foundation, 2022a, p.9). The situation appears to be similar in Ireland where entrants to concurrent (post-primary) ITE are on average 17 to 22 years of age (Quirke-Bolt and Purcell, 2021). While there are no official data for age of entry to Irish ITE for FET, the participant demographics in this present study concur with the UK findings, suggesting that applicants to Irish FET teacher training are also typically older than those in ITE for compulsory education.

There are numerous reasons why aspiring educators of all ages may not typically consider a teaching career in FET. A key issue relates to a lack of promotion regarding the FET sector and related opportunities for future study and employment among post-primary students, as research has shown that schools in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland consistently orient students toward HE (Smyth et al., 2022). This trend is also clearly evidenced in statistics from 2020 which illustrated that within the Republic of Ireland, three times as many students transitioned from post-primary to HE as to FET, while transition rates to FET also showed a slight decrease year on year in the three years preceding (Government of Ireland, 2023).

Although recent years may have witnessed 'heightened societal recognition of the sector' (Rami and O'Kelly, 2021, p.277), this lack of awareness and promotion of FET within post-primary schools may largely be related to another key issue—persistent social stigma which commonly positions the sector as a 'second-best' option (Smyth et al., 2022, p.viii) when compared with the more prestigious HE sector (Sartori and Demir Bloom, 2023). Educators working within FET have echoed similar concerns regarding the level of stigma toward the sector that exists within schools, arguing that 'information [about FET] was not being provided in [post-primary] schools and that a 'certain element of snobbery around FET' exists' (Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017, p.29). Students attending FET in Ireland have reported the same, attesting that teachers 'expected us to go to college [Higher Education] as soon as we finished school' (Sartori and Demir Bloom, 2023, p.26).

It also appears that students who attend the sector feel 'stigmatised for doing a FET course despite the potential for graduates to progress into Higher Education' (Mooney and O'Rourke, 2017, p.29) and have experienced anxiety, low self-esteem and 'embarrassment for having "ended up" attending an FE college as opposed to a university' (Sartori and Demir Bloom, 2023, p.47).

Given the pervasive nature of stigma toward the sector and its students, it is also worth considering whether stigma surrounds teaching within the sector as well. For example, Irish society has long held primary and post-primary teaching in 'high regard' (Keane et al., 2023). However, societal stigma may have lessened the level of career prestige afforded to teaching in FET, thus making the sector potentially less attractive to aspiring educators, while encouraging them to turn their attention to other sectors, like post-primary and HE. As there is a dearth of literature exploring stigma as related to teaching in FET, this is an area that merits further consideration in future research.

Beyond stigma and profile deficits, the FET sector also faces numerous other issues that may in turn negatively impact teacher recruitment and retention. At present, many European countries are experiencing teacher shortages, with issues related to wages, working conditions, professional development, and class size all impacting the supply of effective teachers (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022). While class sizes are generally small within the Irish FET sector (Sneddon, 2021), the precarious nature of employment, combined with low pay and unstable work, can have a profoundly negative impact on those teaching in the sector (O'Neill and Fitzsimons, 2020). According to Fitzsimons et al. (2021, p.12), 'non-permanent, unsatisfactory working conditions have been a feature of Further Education and Training in Ireland for many years'. Additionally, graduates of PDE-FE programmes in Ireland report high levels of occupational precarity as 'a significant proportion […] many of whom are mature students, are struggling to find stable and secure work and very few are in permanent, full-time positions' (O'Neill and Fitzsimons, 2020, p.15). As Nally (2017, p.2) explains:

> A professional qualification to teach in FET is not enough to gain secure employment. Those who are deemed lucky enough to gain employment in the sector, are faced with insecurity, uncertainty, and unsecure work.

Many scholars link these aforementioned issues in FET directly to the influence of neoliberalism on Irish educational policy and practice (Nally, 2017; Fitzsimons et al., 2021). Nally (2017, p.57) cautions that neoliberalism is the 'dominant discourse in FET' which if left unchallenged, will result in continued precarity for educators within the sector.

Interestingly, within the present study, none of the participants discussed concerns around employment as influencing their decision to teach in the FET sector, which is somewhat surprising given their status as mature students, with

many also caring for families. This also raises important questions regarding whether they were aware of the difficulties faced by PDE-FE graduates in securing permanent employment, whether their understanding about the realities of teaching within the sector was 'naïve' (Hong, 2010, p.1530), or whether they were willing to overlook these issues for a chance to become a teacher.

More so, the data in this study supports the conclusion that participants' decision to pursue a career teaching in FET was shaped and influenced by a unique set of extrinsic motivations and rewards which are less commonly reported in the literature, namely:

- FET was chosen because the sector recognises their area of expertise as a teachable subject;
- They could avail of conditional Teaching Council registration for FET (unavailable in other sectors) which would subsequently enable their employment as a teacher before obtaining a TEQ;
- ITE for FE programmes offered more flexible provision and were shorter in duration, as compared to ITE for compulsory education which typically requires additional financial and time outputs.

These factors were likely attractive to many of the participants due to the additional life responsibilities and roles they occupy as mature adults. Furthermore, these findings align with previous research reporting that extrinsic factors can influence the decision to enter teaching as a second profession (Chambers, 2002; Heinz, 2014). They may also suggest that extrinsic factors and practical considerations exert a stronger influence on mature students' decision to enter teaching, as compared to younger cohorts of aspiring educators.

In comparison to their extrinsic motivations, participants in the present study were more highly motivated by altruistic factors, as evidenced in their pastoral and student-centred practice and desire to help learners overcome barriers and experience educational success. These findings show that the pastoral element of teacher professional identity is central to how these participants conceptualise their role. Similarly, altruistic motivations for entering the teaching profession are commonly reported among both pre-service teachers (Kwok et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022) and qualified FET professionals (The Education and Training Foundation, 2022b). Additionally, intrinsic factors such as enjoyment of working with adult learners, a long-standing interest in teaching, and a desire to share their industry experience and knowledge were

also important influencers for participants in the present study, and similar motivating factors have been reported among both pre-service (Kwok et al., 2022) and second career teachers (Hunter-Johnson, 2015). Taken together, these findings of this research concur with previous studies reporting that while extrinsic motivations do influence the decision to enter teaching as a second career, altruistic (Kristmansson and Fjellström, 2022) and intrinsic factors (Hunter-Johnson, 2015) are more influential in this regard.

Participants in the present study were also attracted to FET because of the social justice values they feel the sector espouses, and which policy similarly identifies as being central to the work of the sector (SOLAS, 2020). However, given the influence of neoliberalism within FET, some like Glanton (2023, p.787) argue that the reality of teaching and learning in the sector may be far different as:

> A theme of performativity is now prioritised while the wider benefits of learning are mentioned, but not actioned […] and the identities of teachers and students are being reduced to producers and consumers of learning outcomes.

Given their social justice orientations for teaching, it is clear that participants in the present study strongly valued the 'wider benefits' of learning for their students far more than meeting any 'performativity metrics' (Glanton, 2023, p.787). As such, the reality described by Glanton (2023) starkly conflicts with how participants conceptualise their role and purpose as educators, as they clearly see themselves as far more than 'producers […] of learning outcomes' (2023, p.787). This division may threaten their long-term retention in the profession if they come to find the overarching philosophy of the sector is too opposed to their own vision of teaching and learning. In summary, while research suggests that teachers' altruistic values are positively associated with work satisfaction (Chiong et al., 2017; Song et al., 2020, p.22) and that such motivations can support future retention in the profession (Kwok et al., 2022), only time will tell if the motives that initially attracted these participants to teaching in FET will be enough to sustain them in the face of sectoral challenges that may come.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to existing knowledge gaps by exploring the career motivations of student teachers completing ITE for FET within the Irish context and highlights the influence of altruistic, intrinsic, and extrinsic motivations in attracting them to the sector and shaping their conceptualisation of their role as teachers. Such insights hold important implications for a wide variety of areas, including ITE, teacher recruitment, and policy decision-making (Watt and Richardson, 2007, p.167). Given persistent issues faced by the sector, it is clear that changes must be made to both policy and practice to raise the profile of the sector while making FET more attractive to aspiring teachers, particularly those transitioning to teaching as a second career. As such, we recommend the following:

1. In post-primary schools, increase awareness of FET as an equal option for future study and employment—with a special focus on teaching in the sector as a career. The creation of additional partnerships and transition pathways between post-primary, FET, and HE should also be prioritised, along with public awareness campaigns to raise awareness and understanding of the sector.
2. The use of casualised and precarious employment in the sector must end, so that more permanent full and part-time positions are available for staff, which would increase the attractiveness of the sector for aspiring educators, particularly those mature candidates who wish to transition from industry into teaching as a second career. This also requires rethinking and limiting the influence of neoliberalism within the sector (Nally, 2017).
3. To enable aspiring educators to qualify in their preferred sectors, the creation of alternative and flexible ITE routes is required for all sectors in Ireland, with increased evening, weekend, online, and part-time provision, and increased recognition of prior learning. Additionally, student finance should be made more flexible and extended to include students enrolled in part-time study, while individuals completing a Level 8 or Level 9 TEQ should not be denied funding if they already possess a qualification at the same level, given that a TEQ is a professional award they must obtain in order to enter the profession.

By implementing these recommendations, we believe the profile of the sector would substantially increase for both students and aspiring educators alike, while also addressing some of the key and persistent challenges faced by the sector in recent years. This study has illustrated that mature students who

choose teaching as a second career are commonly empowered by extrinsic, altruistic, and intrinsic motivations and possess a strong desire to positively impact the lives of those they teach. Given the diverse nature of FET student cohorts (Dulee-Kinsolving and Guerin, 2023a), these are the very educators that learners and the sector need in order to flourish. Therefore, the importance of attracting passionate educators and supporting their retention in the profession is paramount—but in order to do this, many changes will be required in the years to come.

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SECTION TWO

Case Studies on Improving Practice

Championing Change: A Case Study of Implementing a LGBTQIA+ Learner Support Initiative within Further Education and Training

SARAH LAVAN, LINDSAY MALONE, AND ROSALIND THREADGOLD

Abstract

This practice-based paper provides a case study of the Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board's (WWETB) Rainbow Connection Initiative. The initiative employs badges as a visible symbol of inclusivity and staff commitment, actively seeking to address issues and challenges faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, asexual, and other (LGBTQIA+) Further Education and Training (FET) learners and staff. The research outlined in the paper underscores some of these specific challenges and affirms the significance of targeted initiatives. Emphasising the importance of such efforts in enriching the overall educational experience for all learners, the initiative actively contributes to building an inclusive learning community within FET's diverse landscape. The conclusion outlines WWETB's next steps in the ongoing journey towards sustained inclusivity and support for LGBTQIA+ learners and staff.

Keywords: Adult Learning, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Learner Supports, LGBTQIA+

Introduction

This practice-based paper presents a case study approach to demonstrating how Further Education and Training (FET) has the capacity to drive change in attitudes and understanding of the barriers and exclusion faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, asexual and other (LGBTQIA+) learners and staff. We will begin with an overview of the Rainbow Connection Initiative which was developed by the Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board (WWETB). This inclusive initiative aimed to create a safe and

welcoming environment for learners and staff across FET within WWETB. It also sought to provide opportunities for staff to become allies for the LGBTIQIA+ community. Allyship involves more than just expressing support; it means actively standing up for marginalised groups by learning, taking action, and fighting against discrimination.

We will examine the overall approach and ethos of the initiative before reviewing the literature regarding inclusive practices for LGBTQIA+ communities. The paper will then explore the overall approach taken for the successful delivery and implementation of the initiative before examining the results from it. Lastly, we will consider the next steps and examine what the main learnings from this initiative have been to inform future inclusive practices in FET.

Background

The Rainbow Connection Initiative was developed by the Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board (WWETB) to support staff in developing their knowledge of inclusive practices in FET for people who are LGBTQIA+. It also aims to ensure that WWETB is a welcoming environment for people who are LGBTQIA+. The WWETB Rainbow Connection Initiative is a way for staff to demonstrate support for the LGBTQIA+ community. It intended to raise awareness of the issues that the LGBTQIA+ community can face in education or at work and to promote positive inclusion and support within our organisation. The badge is intended to be a simple visual symbol identifying its wearer as someone an LGBTQIA+ person can feel comfortable talking to, who will support them if they need assistance. Those who wear a rainbow badge demonstrate that they are prepared to listen and understand. Committing to wearing the WWETB rainbow badge signals that staff in FET are trained in how to promote an environment that is open, tolerant, and inclusive. This initiative aims to actively break down barriers LGBTQIA+ people may face.

The Project

Staff interested in this initiative signed up to complete two online courses. The first programme, facilitated online by the Health Service Executive (HSE), was LGBT+ Awareness and Inclusion: The Basics (see *Image 1*).

Image 1. HSE online course

Having successfully completed that programme, staff could choose to complete a second online course, BeLong To: Supporting the Mental Health of LGBTI+ Young People, facilitated online by Jigsaw (see *Image 2*). While this training was developed for working with young people, the content is applicable to all ages.

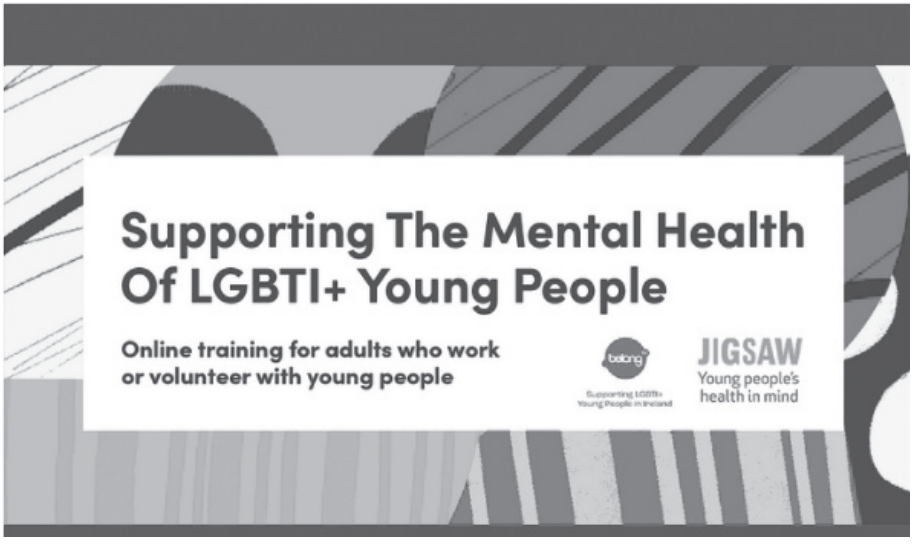

Image 2. Jigsaw online course

Once staff had completed both online courses, they could email their certificates of completion to the Access and Inclusion Officer within WWETB. In November 2023, in line with Stand Up Awareness Week, WWETB hosted a badge giving day when almost 100 staff received their WWETB Rainbow Connection badges, illustrated in *Image 3*.

Image 3. WWETB badge presentation day

The Approach/Ethos

The aim of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Initiatives is to create environments and conditions in which everyone is included and treated fairly, regardless of their differences. It is about recognising and appreciating diversity of race, gender, background, and more. It aims to prevent any form of discrimination and foster a culture that values the unique perspectives of each individual. The Rainbow Connection Initiative aligns with the principles of equality, diversity, and inclusion and is an expression of the following ethos and key concepts:

- **Equality:** promotes equality by signalling a commitment to creating a level playing field for individuals of all sexual orientations and gender identities within FET colleges and centres (DCYA, 2019).
- **Diversity:** embraces diversity by acknowledging and celebrating the unique experiences and identities within the LGBTQIA+ community. It recognises the importance of representation and appreciates the richness of diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and expressions (DCYA, 2019).

- **Inclusion:** serves as a visible symbol of inclusion, communicating that all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, are welcome and accepted. The initiative goes beyond mere tolerance, striving to create a culture where everyone feels a sense of belonging (DCYA, 2019).

Existing Research

Ireland has made significant progress in advancing LGBTQIA+ rights in recent years. Important advancements include the legalisation of same-sex partnerships in 2010 and legalising same-sex marriage in 2015, the first country in the world to do so. (DCEDIY, 2019, p.7). This legalisation was won by a majority vote in a national referendum and demonstrated a positive shift towards acceptance and equality. Additionally, Ireland has seen increased visibility of LGBTQIA+ individuals in many aspects of public life (DCEDIY, 2019, p.11). Since the referendum, ongoing efforts have included further advancement for LGBTQIA+ rights and inclusivity. This has included improvements in legal protections not only against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, *The Equal Status Acts 2000–2018*, but also gender recognition under the law, *The Gender Recognition Act 2015*. However, challenges still exist, and ongoing research and advocacy efforts are still needed to address issues such as transgender rights, mental health concerns, and discrimination within the LGBTQIA+ community (DCEDIY, 2019, p.8).

Research, such as the Irish National School Climate Survey (Pizmony-Levy, 2022) and the LGBTIreland report (Higgins et al., 2016), reveals the significant challenges and discriminatory behaviours that are still faced by the LGBTQIA+ community in Ireland. This discrimination adversely affects individuals' quality of life and wellbeing, particularly in the school environment. Alarming rates of self-harm, suicide attempts, and mental health difficulties are reported, emphasising the urgent need for targeted interventions. Griffith (CEO of BeLonG To) stated:

> This research [The Irish National School Climate Survey], highlights the urgent need for educators, parents, schools, policymakers, and politicians to listen to LGBTQ+ students and to learn from them. We must prioritise the safety and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ students who are seriously at risk. (Griffith, 2023, no pagination)

The 2022 Irish National School Climate Survey Report (Pizmony-Levy, 2022) sheds light on these safety concerns within Irish schools for lesbian, gay,

bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students. It explores the association between discrimination, victimisation, and educational goals, revealing a correlation between verbal harassment, decreased aspirations for post-secondary education, and increased absenteeism. When asked about absenteeism 'three in ten LGBT students reported not attending school at least one day in the last month (32.2%) because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable' (Pizmony-Levy, 2022, p.4).

The LGBTIreland report (Higgins et al., 2016) focused on the general wellbeing of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) population in Ireland, emphasising the vulnerability of young individuals. The study highlights that, despite positive wellbeing experienced by a majority of the LGBTI population, a vulnerable cohort, particularly young individuals, faces profound mental health challenges. Disturbingly, rates of self-harm are reported as 'two times higher, and attempted suicide is three times higher among LGBTI youth aged 14 to 18 compared to their non-LGBTI peers' (Higgins et al., 2016, p.1).

Moving beyond the school setting, the research can inform policy development and practice within FET settings. There is a need for the FET sector to develop comprehensive anti-discrimination policies and FET tailored resources. Resources such as access to gender-inclusive facilities, that align with learners' gender identities are crucial for alleviating discomfort and potential exclusion that might hinder full participation in FET centres and colleges. In addition, the curriculum in FETis not inclusive, as it lacks representation of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. This can perpetuate stereotypes and contribute to a sense of invisibility among LGBTQIA+ learners. Addressing these challenges requires the FET sector to prioritise research, implement inclusive policies, provide sensitivity training for staff, and offer inclusive curriculum and resources tailored to the needs of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

The Delivery

The WWETB EDI Team spearheaded the development of the Rainbow Connection Initiative: Championing an Inclusive Learning Community, drawing inspiration from the HSE Rainbow Badge Initiative and the South East Technological University (SETU) staff initiative. The design of the rainbow badge itself was based on the Progress Pride Flag, which was developed in 2018 by non-binary American artist and designer Daniel Quasar, to reflect the diversity of the LGBTQIA+ community and emphasise inclusion and progression. The updated flag now has stripes representing people of colour

as well as those who identify as transgender, gender nonconforming (GNC), and/or undefined. Once the badge was designed, the name for the initiative was chosen. It was important to the team that the name reflected the initiative's overall ethos and ambition to foster connection and belonging for LGBTQIA+ individuals. A comprehensive presentation (using MS Sway), with instructions on how to sign up, was developed and circulated to FET staff, while a survey was devised to collect data and feedback from staff upon completion of the online courses. This survey collected valuable feedback on participants' experiences, giving insight into their motivations for participation, knowledge gained, and interest in further LGBTQIA+ training. A poster highlighting the meaning of the Rainbow Connection Initiative and badge was created and circulated for display within centres and colleges. The official launch took place at the WWETB FET Forum at the beginning of the 2023/24 academic year, featuring a presentation by the EDI team on recent research findings on LGBTQIA+ educational experiences, recommendations from advocacy agencies, and insights into increasing the visibility of the LGBTIQA+ community and examples of best practices for staff.

A comprehensive communication strategy was implemented, which included emails to the FET Leadership Team and Coordinators Principals and Centre Managers. The initiative was further promoted through the WWETB internal Staff Hub (intranet), WWETB PLD (Professional Learning and Development (MS) SharePoint and periodic follow-up emails from the team. The EDI team made themselves available to meet with staff who had any follow-up questions. The badge presentation day at Gorey Youthreach during Stand Up Awareness Week was a resounding success, featuring guest speakers, among them a senator and County Wexford councillor, pictured in *Image 4*. Post-launch, the Rainbow Connection Initiative garnered significant participation, with almost 100 staff engaged by the 2023 yearend.

Image 4. WWETB badge presentation day

Outcomes

All participants returned feedback, which was gathered to measure the impact of the initiative. This has given some insights into the motivation behind participation, previous knowledge, knowledge gained, and the evolving perspectives of staff.

1.1 Motivation to Participate (Question One)

Motivation Themes

The primary aim was to explore the motivation behind staff involvement in the Rainbow Connection Initiative. Three main themes emerged:

1. **To Build Capacity, Knowledge, and Awareness:** 59% of participants expressed a desire to deepen their understanding of the LGBTQIA+ community, its language, and effective inclusivity practices:

   I wanted to understand more about the LGBTQIA+ community, the language and how best to be inclusive (Rainbow Connection participant).

   I feel it is important to have knowledge to provide leadership in this area and to set an example as a leader of my team (Rainbow Connection participant).

2. **Support for Inclusion:** 31% of participants highlighted the importance of creating a safe, inclusive learning environment. Implementing suggestions from the initiative was seen as visually reinforcing this inclusion:

   The centre aims to be a safe, inclusive learning environment (Rainbow Connection participant).

3. **Allyship:** 32% of participants underscored their commitment to supporting LGBTQIA+ learners, fostering inclusive education, and actively assuming an ally role:

   I care about supporting LGBTQIA+ learners, providing an inclusive education and being an ally (Rainbow Connection participant).

1.2 Significance for Adult Education Programmes

Recognising the impact of our adult education programmes on marginalised individuals, the feedback emphasises the pivotal role of LGBTQIA+ training in dismantling barriers and ensuring equal access:

> Our adult education programmes are aimed at those who are unemployed. The reasons for unemployment are wide ranging and can include marginalisation and discrimination on the grounds of gender.

> Heterosexuality and cisgender status is very often assumed as the default unless otherwise stated and this training plays an important role in making us all recognise and hopefully begin to break down barriers for LGBTQIA+ people to access our courses, participate fully in them, and progress in confidence (Rainbow Connection participant).

2. Previous Training and Knowledge (Question Two)

The second question aimed to discern the staff's prior training or knowledge and its implications for the necessity of the Rainbow Connection Initiative. The breakdown is shown in *Figure 1*.

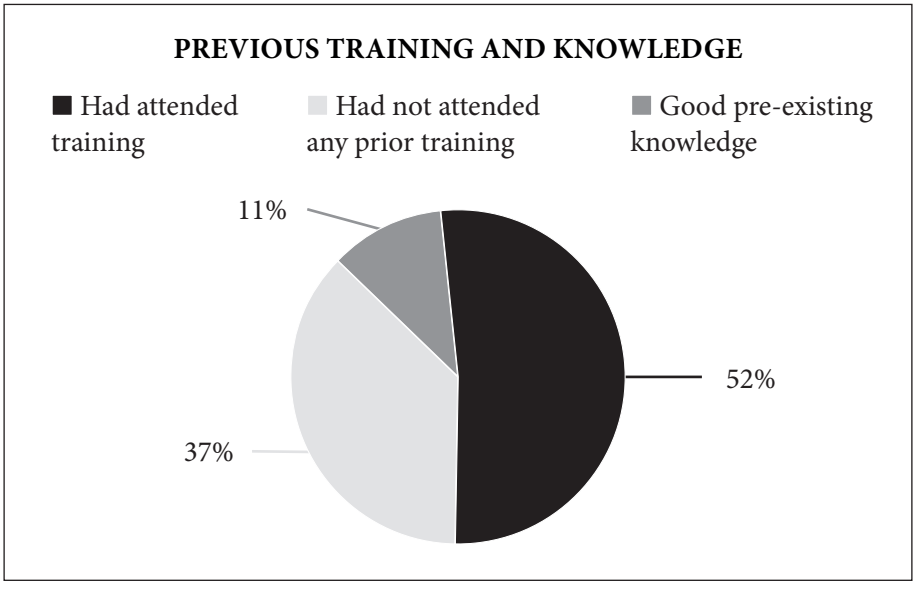

Figure 1. Level of Prior Knowledge

3. Knowledge Assessment (Questions Three and Six)

Staff were asked to rate their knowledge of the challenges facing individuals in the LGBTQI+ community on a scale from one (low) to five (high). The results are shown in *Figure 2.*

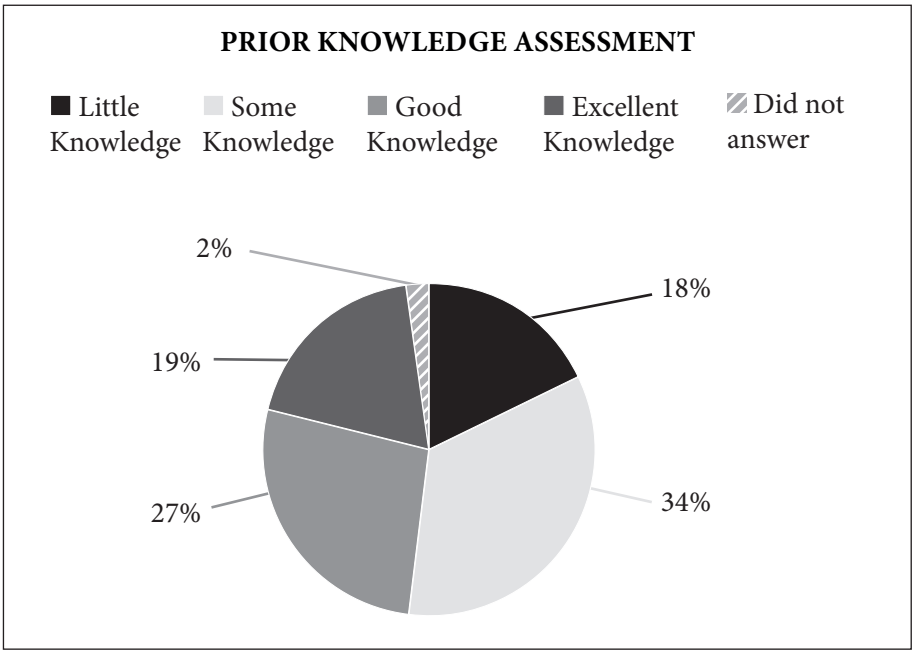

Figure 2. Level of prior training knowledge

The results (shown in *Figure 3*) highlight the evolution in knowledge ratings, with a notable shift towards higher assessments post-training.

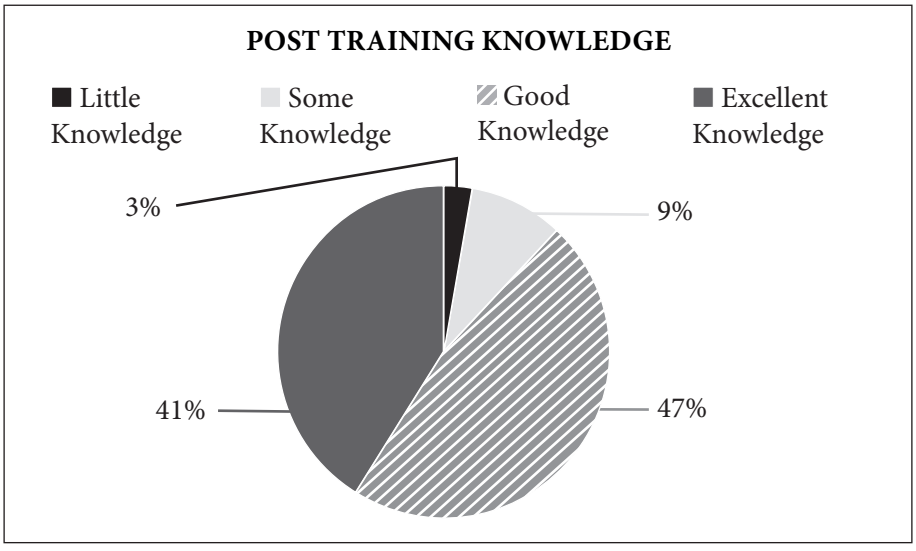

Figure 3. Post-training level of knowledge

4. Training Course Evaluation (Questions Four and Five)

When asked to rate the two online training courses out of five stars, HSE received a 4.12 average rating and BelongTo a 4.56 rating.

5. Interest in Further Training (Question Eight)

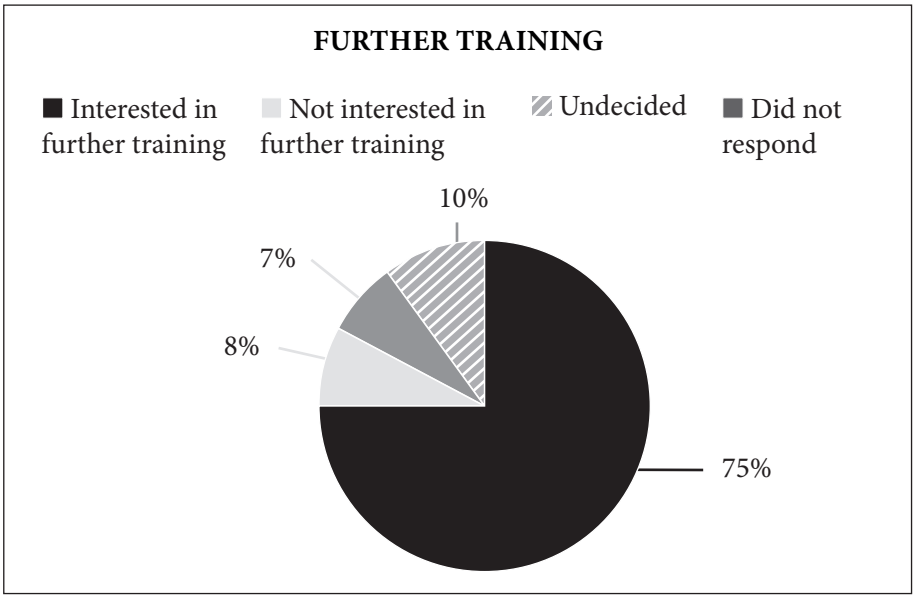

Figure 4. Interest in further training

6. Recommendations for Alternative Training for LGBTQIA+ (Question Seven)

The majority of participants were not aware of alternative training. BelongTo, Spun Out, and Jigsaw were among the organisations mentioned for those who did answer.

Next Steps

The Rainbow Connection began as an initiative for FET staff as one way to promote inclusion and belonging and raise awareness about the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ colleagues and learners. The initiative aligns with the core values of WWETB and supports the implementation of the LGBT Ireland Strategic Plan 2023–27, The National LGBTI+ Youth Strategy, and the Public Sector Human Rights and Equality Duty. Furthermore, learning from initiatives like the Rainbow Connection Initiative can inform future research, policies, and strategies specific to the FET sector.

The Rainbow Connection is a long-term commitment and will continue to be promoted among staff to ensure widespread participation. The Rainbow Connection Initiative posters displayed in FET centres and colleges serve as a constant reminder of this commitment to inclusion and support for LGBTQIA+ identities within learning communities. By wearing the badge, the staff display genuine allyship. As highlighted in *Figure 4*, there is a noted interest among staff for further training in LGBTQIA+ awareness and additional inclusive practices specific to FET and higher education. There is a shortage of LGBTQIA+ training specifically designed for adult learners in further and higher education, and this shows a need for further development in this area. Due to increased interest across the whole organisation, the initiative has gained recognition, has evolved into a cross-departmental initiative, and has now been extended to include other WWETB staff outside of FET.

In its next phase, the Rainbow Connection Initiative will be introduced to FET learners, encouraging them to take part in training and receive their WWETB rainbow badge. This phase acknowledges peer initiatives among learners as essential for promoting support and allyship for LGBTQIA+ individuals and creating a network of support. By encouraging open dialogue and contributing to a cultural shift within FET centres and colleges, initiatives like the Rainbow Connection can have a positive impact on both the learning environment and broader societal attitudes.

Key Learnings

Implementation of the Rainbow Connection Initiative has revealed the profound impact of visible symbols, like the rainbow badge, on shaping an inclusive and supportive learning environment. The initiative strives for a deeper understanding of LGBTQIA+ experiences, fostering meaningful conversations and validating the power of positive measures to drive real change. Visual representation is a named objective within National Strategies, both the LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019–2021, and the LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018–2020. At its core, the initiative is dedicated to championing inclusive FET centres and colleges and has heightened awareness and deepened the understanding of the challenges faced by the LGBTQIA+ community. The promotion, launch, and associated training have equipped staff with valuable insights, further enhancing their support skills. Its impact extends beyond symbolism, cultivating empathy, support, and a united front against discrimination.

Incorporating the principle of 'leading by example' supported the initiative's commitment. Staff in leadership and management roles actively participating and setting an example for their teams promotes authenticity and shared responsibility. Crucially, this fosters important conversations on equality, diversity, and inclusion, highlighting the importance of creating spaces for individuals to share their stories and perspectives.

While the initial surge of enthusiasm during the September launch was encouraging and the coinciding event during 'Stand Up Awareness Week' served to further boost staff engagement, the challenges launching at the start of the academic year highlighted the need for improved planning and a longer lead-in time for future initiatives. Sustaining impact over time requires persistent commitment and engagement. The constraints faced by part-time tutoring staff time also need to be factored in.

For future initiatives, training specific to the FET environment and in-person training for enhanced peer learning are essential. These adjustments will reflect our commitment to continuous improvement and responsiveness to the unique needs of the FET settings.

Conclusion

This practice-based paper presented a case study approach to demonstrating how FET has the capacity to drive change. The paper gave an overview of the Rainbow Connection Initiative developed by the WWETB. This inclusive initiative aimed to create a safe and welcoming environment for learners and staff across FET within WWETB. The overall approach and ethos of the initiative were examined before discussing the existing literature regarding inclusive practices for LGBTQIA+ communities. The paper explored the approach taken for the delivery and implementation of the initiative before examining the results from it. Lastly, the paper considered the next steps and examined what the main learnings from this initiative have been to inform future inclusive practices in FET.

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My Voice, My Choice: A Case Study Exploring an Innovative Approach to Engaging Learners with Disabilities in Tertiary Education in the South East of Ireland

SARAH LAVAN, LINDSAY MALONE, AND ROSALIND THREADGOLD

Abstract

This practice-based paper provides a case study of a new initiative developed by Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board with support from South East Technological University. The My Voice, My Choice Initiative is an inclusive approach to engaging learners with intellectual disabilities in Higher Education (HE). The learners were registered to Further Education and Training (FET) programmes at Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Levels 2 and 3 and their classes were delivered in the South East Technological University Waterford Campus. Learners had the opportunity to engage in relevant QQI programmes whilst having a university experience. This is a case study which reflects the impact of adult learning on the learner. In their feedback learners expressed pride in taking part and their sense of belonging in the college environment. The next steps will focus on expanding the delivery to Waterford for a second intake and to the Wexford area.

Keywords: Adult Learning, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Advocacy, Disability

Introduction

This article will explore the My Voice, My Choice initiative as a case study to explore the impact of experiencing adult education modules in a Higher Education (HE) learning environment. The My Voice, My Choice initiative was developed by Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board (WWETB) to engage learners with intellectual disabilities in two Quality and

Qualifications Ireland (QQI) programmes in a university setting. This article will present the background to this topic before outlining exactly what the My Voice, My Choice initiative was. The ethos and approach used throughout this initiative will be explored before examining the existing literature relating to supporting learners with disabilities to engage in inclusive educational experiences. The article will conclude with the main outcomes of the initiative and a reflection on the key learnings that emerged.

Background

On a global scale, inclusive education is important not only for students and academics with disabilities but the societies they live in, as it helps to combat discrimination and promote diversity and participation (United Nations, 2020). In 2023, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) published the first profile of students with a disability in HE in Ireland, compiling data from the previous three academic years: 2019/20, 2020/21, and 2021/22. In line with the *National Access Plan 2022–2028* (HEA, 2022), this profile report provides insight into the profile of students who report a disability in Irish HE institutions. It revealed that 18% of learners in HE had a disability, with 3% of new entrants who stated they have a disability entering HE through the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) (HEA, 2022).

Over the last 13 years, there has been a 273% rise in the number of students with disabilities entering HE, and, according to AHEAD (Healy and Ryder, 2023), it is crucial that the welcome increase in this cohort accessing HE elicits a change in the culture and practices in tertiary education, fostering an environment in which students with disabilities can enjoy equity of experience and progress through their studies in a manner that is fair and non-discriminatory. Traditionally, further education (FE) and HE have been separate and distinct sectors, however, in more recent times there is a move towards a more unified tertiary education system. This is affirmed by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2023, no pagination) which has confirmed that its unified tertiary system policy would facilitate Further Education and Training (FET), HE, and research and innovation working more closely together.Coupled with this, the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOU, 2023, no pagination) notes that:

> It will be important that as Ireland rolls out a unified tertiary system, that FET itself is valued and not just perceived as an additional stepping stone into higher education. FET is an important access point

to lifelong learning for people, some of whom may wish to enhance their life skills, others their employment prospects.

Recognising the importance of FET, and the need to create flexible and inclusive pathways for all learners, this project exemplifies a unique case study of supporting learners with disabilities to engage in tertiary education in the South East.

The Project

The My Voice, My Choice initiative was developed by WWETB in collaboration with South East Technological University (SETU), illustrated in *Figure1*.

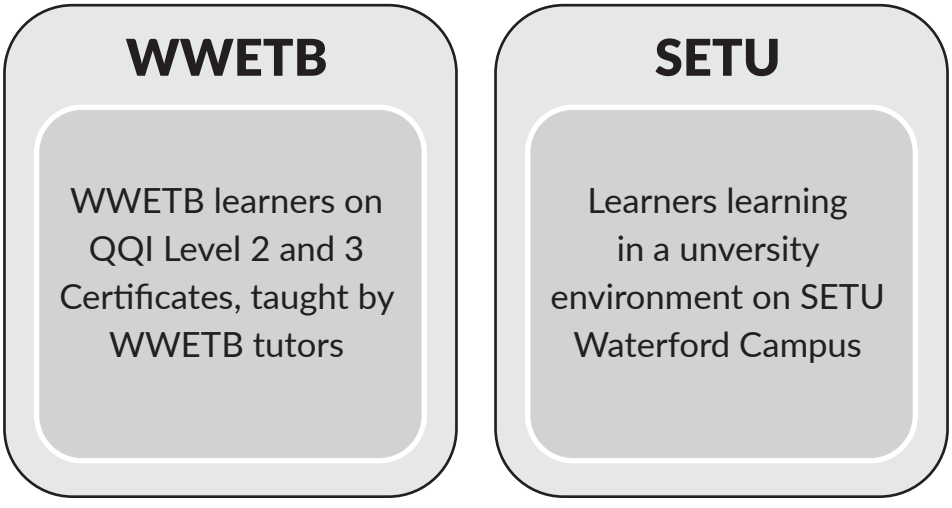

Figure 1. Collaborative approach by WWETB and SETU

The focus of the initiative was to engage WWETB learners with intellectual disabilities in a HE environment so that their experience would be similar to their peers. The process began with 10 learners accepted onto the programme (see *Table 1*).

My Voice, My Choice Participants		Module 1	Module 2	Module 3 (to be completed in 2025)
Gender	**Age**	**Using Technology Level 2**	**Personal Decision-Making Level 2**	**Self- Advocacy Level 3**
Female	**25**	✓	✓	
Female	**24**	✓	✓	
Female	**28**	✓	✓	
Female	**36**	✓	✓	
Female	**39**	✓	✓	
Female	**45**	✓	✓	
Male	**21**	✓	✓	
Male	**24**	✓	✓	
Male	**45**	✓	✓	
Male	**61**	✓	✓	

Table 1. Gender, age and enrolment of participants

The learners were registered to QQI Level 2 Certificate modules, in Using Technology and Personal Decision Making, with a plan to progress to the Level 3 Self Advocacy module, shown in *Figure 2*.

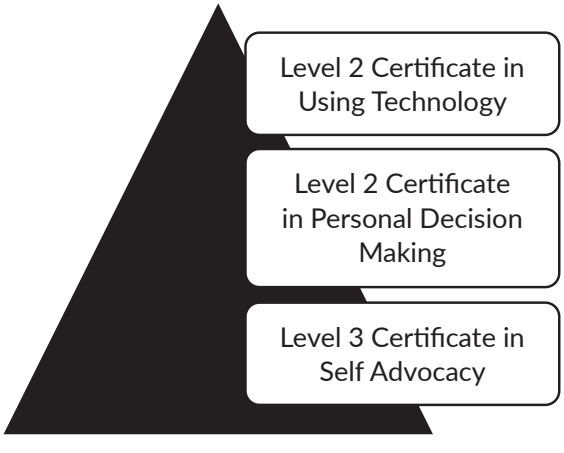

Figure 2. The three QQI programmes

The certificate programmes were delivered by WWETB tutors to learners in the SETU Waterford Campus (see *Image 1)*.

Image 1. My Voice, My Choice in SETU Waterford Campus

Learners attended two mornings per week from 9:30 am to 1:30 pm. This collaborative approach to programme delivery meant that learners could engage in an education programme which was suited to their needs and educational level whilst having the experience of being a student in HE. The learners received a SETU student card so that they could access the facilities onsite, such as the library and canteen, which created an inclusive environment for them. The initiative was innovative as it not only created an inclusive learning experience for this cohort of learners, it also served as a potential pathway for learners to enter HE and engage in the Skill Up: BU programme with SETU, which is a modular approach programme, delivered over two academic years, leading to a 10 or 20 credit SETU certificate.

Ethos

Inclusive education is rooted in a rights-based approach, promoting equality and an anti-discriminatory ethos (Inclusion Ireland, 2024). As emphasised by Heijnen-Maathuis (2016), the true inclusivity of education is intertwined with its quality. Education cannot truly be inclusive without being of quality, and conversely, it cannot be of quality without embodying inclusivity. The

relationship between access and quality must be acknowledged and actively nurtured. Heijnen-Maathuis (2016) further points to the multifaceted nature of quality in education, asserting that there is no single universally accepted definition. However, most conceptual frameworks converge on two central components: learning and development; and the role of education in fostering values, responsible citizenship, and socio-emotional development. Quality education, therefore, is not solely measured by academic achievements but encompasses a holistic approach that empowers individuals to be informed, empathetic, and responsible members of society (Heijnen-Maathuis, 2016).

In the development of the My Voice, My Choice Initiative, the team was cognisant of the interplay between quality and the learner experience, recognising that these two elements are not only interconnected but also mutually reinforcing. Time and resources were invested into the programme's content and structure; thorough research ensured that the information and resources provided were accurate, up-to-date, and aligned with the programme's objectives. Content was co-created with the learners, and experienced FET Tutors were selected to deliver the programme. Simultaneously, we were aware of the importance of the overall experience for the learners. We focused on creating an environment that fosters active participation as well as personal insight and growth. The programme's curriculum was designed not only to award QQI qualifications but also to inspire and empower learners, encouraging them to voice their opinions and make informed choices.

Our work was further informed by the Health Service Executive's (HSE) national New Directions framework (Gadd and Cronin, 2018). This framework represents the HSE's approach to enhancing support for adults with disabilities utilising day services in Ireland. In essence, it advocates a person centred and collaborative approach, encouraging self-advocacy, informed decision-making, and the integration of diverse services to meet the unique needs and aspirations of adults with disabilities. The primary goal is to empower adults accessing these services to lead lives aligned with their personal preferences, needs, and aspirations (Gadd and Cronin, 2018).

Literature

According to Kubiak et al. (2013), learning in the tertiary environment is a complex undertaking for learners with intellectual disabilities. The findings from their research, which investigated how students with intellectual disabilities experienced learning while undertaking the Certificate in Contemporary Living (CCL) at Trinity College Dublin, revealed that educators must not assume that they know how people with intellectual disabilities learn

and that developing knowledge and understanding of such learning should be researched inclusively (Kubiak et al., 2013, p.4). They also argued that educators can be proactive in creating a classroom atmosphere that is safe, supportive, and helpful if they are armed with the tools of facilitative teaching practices and emotional competencies (Kubiak et al., 2013, p.4).

In order to provide context in terms of the amount of people who have a disability, and intellectual disability, in Ireland and our region, we looked to statistics gathered by the Disability Federation of Ireland (2018, no pagination). These statistics show that 3.5% of the population of Ireland, or 643,131 people, have at least one disability of which 66,611 have an intellectual disability. As WWETB operates across Waterford and Wexford, it is pertinent to consider these figures on a more regional basis and it is evident that 14% of the population of Waterford, or 16,675 people, have at least one disability, with 1,559 having an intellectual disability. In Wexford, 15% of the population, or 22,650 people, have at least one disability, with 2,311 having an intellectual disability. This provides the relevance of offering a programme like this to support local people with intellectual disabilities to ensure they have a meaningful opportunity to engage in FET.

Research has confirmed that access to post-secondary mainstream education in FET and HE, as well as access to meaningful employment, is still a significant issue facing persons with an intellectual disability. Research carried out by Trinity College Dublin School of Education, Post-school Transitions for Students with Intellectual Disabilities in the Republic of Ireland (2021), found that 'People with intellectual disabilities are significantly underrepresented within the workforce and within further and higher education in Ireland' (Aston et al., 2021, p.9) and recommended that 'further and higher education providers need to implement policies, many of which already exist, that aim to address participation, completion, and progression for these students' (Aston et al., 2021, p.11). The report further highlighted how 'students with intellectual disabilities rarely make the transition to further or higher education when they leave school' (Aston et al., 2021, p.11). Walkinstown Association for People with an Intellectual Disability (WALK) (2015, cited in Aston et al., 2021, p.15) argues:

> 'that students with intellectual disabilities 'miss out' on acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge required to gain meaningful employment and progressive career opportunities', and states that persons with ID 'are often deprived of the social and cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1977 cited in Bourdieu and Nice, 2013) that is associated with accessing a further and higher education certificate or degree.

In 2022, SOLAS (Dulee-Kinsolving et al., 2023) reported that a total of 12,704 learners enrolled in FET programmes disclosed having at least one type of disability, representing 6.8% of the overall learner population for that year; 1,219 of these were registered with WWETB. Within the 12,704 learners with reported disabilities nationally, just 3,070 indicated having an intellectual disability. This highlights a lower participation rate for this particular cohort within the total enrolled learners.

The Delivery

In order to recruit learners to the programme, WWETB worked in collaboration with the Adult Day Services in Waterford, The Brothers of Charity Services, RehabCare-Vita Hub, and Waterford Intellectual Disability Association, shown in *Figure 3*.

Figure 3. Interagency approach to learner recruitment

An Easy-to-Read poster was created with representation within the image, an expression of interest form and these were sent to Day Services, with an accompanying email outlining the project.

The aim was to reach learners that were members of their advocacy committees, those interested in advocacy, and learners who have been considered 'harder to reach,' who may be older or living within the community (either individually or in group homes) and had not recently engaged in education.

The My Voice, My Choice initiative was developed around two existing QQI modules: Using Technology and Personal Decision-Making. The Using Technology module aimed to support digital literacy, the use of their own digital devices and the use of laptops to promote the use of assistive technology and interactive digital learning. This module provided an opportunity for tutors to incorporate individualised planning for assessment and customisation of content according to learner profiles and learning styles. The Personal Decision-Making module was designed and customised with content specific to learners who have an intellectual disability and are attending day services. The focus of this module was to support the learner's decision-making and enhance their capacity and empowerment for making decisions. It also focused on developing their understanding of the decision-making process, as is their right in matters that affect them under the *Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015*.

The content for the Level 3 Self Advocacy module was created using current relevant legislation for people who have an intellectual disability; the Irish Human Rights Equality Commission (IHREC) public sector duty; Human Rights Charter and Equality legislation; the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) rights; information guidance from advocacy organisations (Inclusion Ireland); and material from the advocacy agencies Safeguarding Ireland and Inclusion Ireland.

For delivery of the modules, the tutors adopted a universal design for learning approach. This involved the use of Google Classroom, WhatsApp, Mentimeter, Inclusion Ireland Self Advocate YouTube resources, and Flipgrid. The principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) were incorporated by providing multiple means of action and expression (CAST, 2018) and learners' answers were recorded in diverse ways, written, spoken (voice dictate), video, and scribe, providing multiple means of communication. Another important element of the delivery was that some of the material was co-created with the learners. This meant the materials were personalised and contextualised to

learners' lives and the challenges they face in autonomy and independence which meant it also provided multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2018).

A person-centred document was completed with each learner which informed the person-centred planning for content in order to ensure the learners could demonstrate that they met the learning outcomes to achieve certification. The pilot programme was hosted in SETU Waterford. This was a particular draw for learners, to experience the university environment and being part of their local university community. Given the central location of the SETU Waterford Campus, it also created the opportunity for learners who attend local day services to make their own way to and from the college independently. Lunch was timetabled to facilitate the learners in negotiating the canteen and becoming part of the college community.

Outcomes

Learners enjoyed going to university and participating in the courses, as was evident from the excellent attendance. Learner levels of participation were also very evident through their engagement with the course and group work and through their co-created content and materials. The learners gave feedback throughout the course both formally and informally in relation to the learning outcomes and their overall experience. They also provided individualised content for their portfolios to achieve their minor awards. The ability to use the learners' own experiences was central to the success of the programme, as the learners had different levels of autonomy, ranging from living independently and travelling independently to having transport needs and in community living, to living at home and being supported to travel by the day services or their parents.

An opportunity arose to submit presentations to the Inclusion Ireland conference (Inclusion Ireland, 2023) for people who have an intellectual disability, which the learners embraced, and which was very relevant to the learning outcomes in the Self Advocacy module. The theme of the conference was 'Access to the community for people that have an intellectual disability and barriers to accessing the community' (Inclusion Ireland, 2023, no pagination). The poster and advertisement for the conference were in Easy-to-Read format, shown in *Figure 4*. The conference was hosted by the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities and run by Inclusion Ireland, by self-advocates, for self-advocates and those who support them.

INCLUSION IRELAND INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
EVENT – CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

The Inclusion Ireland Self-Advocacy Committee are holding an event for International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

The event is about access and inclusion for people with Intellectual Disabilities in the community.

It will be called **Access to Your Community**.

The event will be on Monday 4th December from 11am until 3pm at The Dargan Theatre in Trinity Business School in Dublin.

We would like to hear from you about what helps you to be part of a community and what are the barriers to being part of a community.

If you want to share your story you can write a story or poem, record a video or do a painting telling us your story.

A video should not be longer than 4 minutes.

We might show your piece at the event.

You can email your story or video to emer@inclusionireland.ie or send it by post to **Inclusion Ireland Unit C2, The Steelworks, Foley Street, Dublin 1**.

The closing date for sending your story to us is 14th November 2023.

in association with Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
Trinity College Dublin
Ollscoil Átha Cliath | The University of Dublin
Ionad na Tríonóide do Dhaoine le Míchumais Intleachta, Scoil Oideachais
Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, School of Education

Figure 4. The learners' poster

A co-teaching opportunity arose for the learners to collaborate with a social care group that were participating in a creative studies module, as we had discovered shared goals and learning outcomes that supported collaboration for both modules. The learners used this opportunity to create their poster presentations and to undertake group work on what community means and how to create a barrier free society where people that have an intellectual disability, mobility issues, or communication needs are included in society through community engagement. The learners collaboratively created mixed collages on what is important to them for inclusion within their community, including transport, social activities, sports, employment and volunteering, shopping, restaurants, hairdressers and nail salons. The learners were supported and empowered to co-create their projects with the social care students who were briefed on the human rights perspective and social models of disability. The human rights perspective supports personal autonomy and decision-making, engagement with the community, and a right to mainstream experiences for people that have an intellectual disability. The barriers to the learners' accessing their community were also explored as per the theme of the conference.

Voice of the Learner

Feedback was captured throughout the project and the impact of the programme on the lives of learners is evident as one learner said:

> It is an amazing course and means so much to all the students that take part in it. You should be so proud of the course you have created and developed for students. Thank you so much again for everything.

Another learner stated that:

> Because we are the first of a kind (in this) building SETU, having new friends and always be friendly to one another and to embrace that feeling that we can be one of a kind in the greatest college in Waterford has been so great.

When asked what their experience was like engaging on the programme, one learner said:

> Because everyone put a lot of work into the type of work we do every week and its great the way everyone puts the effort in, everyone gets the right amount of time to do their work, at the same time.

Next Steps

The SETU My Voice, My Choice WWETB initiative was initially designed as a pilot programme along with three other two-year programmes that are currently in the second year of the pilot phase. They were developed in the greater context of expanding on service provision in tertiary education for people who have an intellectual disability. There are two Literacy and Technology Hands On (LATCH-ON) programmes for adult learners that have Down Syndrome (Waterford and Wexford) and a Pathfinders programme for learners that are autistic and/or neurodiverse and have an intellectual disability or learning differences. The My Voice, My Choice programme was designed as both a direct entry or follow-on programme for these and other learners who have an intellectual disability including those who attend day services for access and progression purposes. The staff delivering these programmes for WWETB have built their capacity over the years from working with learners that have an intellectual disability within the adult literacy services. The staff have learned approaches to pedagogy and curriculum in this area and have designed meaningful content and experiences with a strong commitment to UDL. On successful completion of the pilot programme, the next steps involve rolling out the programme in SETU Wexford and SETU Waterford in collaboration with the day services and colleagues in SETU in 2024. The learners currently attending the course should have further opportunities to avail of the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) 4 Phase 2 courses that will be designed by the HE institutions or to avail of other courses on offer in further and higher education in 2025.

Key Learnings

The key learnings gained in the development and delivery of the My Voice, My Choice programme emerged in two primary themes: collaboration and inclusive teaching strategies. Collaborative efforts within SETU opened doors to unique learning opportunities, particularly by facilitating involvement of Social Care students and providing the classroom space to deliver a FET programme on the university campus. But beyond access to space, the significance of fostering campus inclusion and enhancing the overall college experience was a crucial element of this collaborative approach. The emphasis on inclusive teaching strategies underlined the importance of designing instructional materials that cater to diverse learning styles. Actively engaging learners in defining learning objectives, involving them in the creation of teaching materials, and promoting collaboration between educators and learners in course development, all proved to be effective strategies. Encouraging learners to contribute ideas,

identify accessibility barriers, and actively participate on a national front at the Inclusion Ireland Access to Your Community conference further enriched the learning experience and highlighted the importance of visibility. True inclusion requires the intentional and proactive design of inclusive and responsive activities that acknowledge and meet the diverse needs of learners. Adequate time and effort must be allocated for developing a programme that uses appropriate strategies to address the real needs identified through a participatory process (Heijnen-Maathuis, 2016).

Conclusion

This practice-based paper has presented a case study to explore the impact of adult learning on learners through the My Voice, My Choice Initiative. An overview of the initiative was presented before illuminating the partnership approach which was taken with SETU Waterford in order to create a meaningful and inclusive approach to engaging learners with intellectual disabilities in HE. The delivery was explained before addressing the existing research on the topic. The voice of the learners was captured through their direct feedback through which they expressed their pride in taking part, their ability to meet new friends, their sense of belonging in the college environment, and their ability to manage their workloads. Next steps will focus on expanding the delivery to a second intake in Waterford and to Wexford.

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Numeracy-Meets: Supporting the Teaching of Numeracy to Vulnerable Adult Groups

MARK PRENDERGAST, ANNETTE FORSTER, NIAMH O'MEARA, KATHY O'SULLIVAN, AND FIONA FAULKNER

Abstract

A key commitment of the Adult Literacy for Life Strategy (2021) is to reduce the number of adults in Ireland with unmet numeracy needs from 25% to 12%. One of the main challenges in achieving this is the varied provision of adult numeracy education. Many numeracy practitioners are either employed part-time or are volunteers with few opportunities for professional development and networking with their peers. This paper details the design, implementation, and evaluation of a professional development model that aimed to support adult practitioners' in developing their learners' numeracy skills. This was done through the development of a new series of Numeracy-Meets — organised, informal meetings for practitioners to share good practice and personal insights into teaching adult numeracy. This new series of Numeracy-Meets was implemented between September and December 2023 and focused specifically in supporting practitioners who teach numeracy to vulnerable adult groups.

Keywords: Adult Numeracy, Practitioners, Professional Development, Vulnerable Adult Groups, Numeracy-Meets

Introduction

In today's technical and data driven society, numeracy is essential in helping people to participate as knowledgeable and insightful citizens (Diez-Palomar, 2020). Having a numerate population improves human capital at a societal level, while enhancing opportunities and the prosperity of the individual (National Adult Literacy Agency [NALA], 2017). However, despite the clear and obvious need for adults to be proficient in numeracy, findings from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), suggest that large

numbers of adults have low or very low numeracy skills (OECD, 2019). This places them at a disadvantage in terms of employment, financial security, and wellbeing. Research has shown that adults who struggle with numeracy are more likely than others to have lower incomes, have trouble finding employment, and suffer from poorer physical and mental health (Parsons and Bynner, 2005; Carpentieri et al., 2009). When Ireland took part in PIAAC in 2012, it revealed that over one-quarter (25.3%) of adults scored at or below Level 1 on the numeracy scale (there are six proficiency levels; Levels 1 to 5 and below Level 1) (OECD, 2013). In essence, this score suggested that 754,000 Irish people struggle with everyday numeracy and may be unable to do a basic calculation such as subtraction (NALA, 2017).

Despite these growing concerns about a numeracy skills deficit and a significant body of research on the effects of poor numeracy skills, there is less research on how to address the issue (Carpentieri et al., 2009). In Ireland, there has been increased attention on adult education, and particularly on the availability and quality of adult literacy and numeracy education. This is reflected in a continued national policy focus over the past decade which has culminated in the publication of the first *Adult Literacy for Life* (ALL) Strategy for Ireland in 2021. This cross-government strategy is underpinned by one simple vision: 'an Ireland where every adult has the necessary literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to fully engage in society and realise their potential' (Government of Ireland, 2021, p.33). A key commitment of the ALL Strategy is to 'reduce the number of adults in Ireland with unmet numeracy needs from 25% to 12%' (Government of Ireland, 2021, p.13). One of the main challenges in achieving this is the unavailability of effective adult numeracy education. Ireland, like many European countries, lacks teaching staff with formal qualifications in adult literacy and numeracy pedagogy (Windisch, 2016; Gal et al., 2020). Many numeracy practitioners are either volunteers or employed part-time. For instance, a SOLAS (2021) report found that only three Education and Training Boards (ETBs) had full-time staff members involved in adult numeracy. Furthermore, while professional development is offered, there is no qualification requirement specific to adult numeracy practitioners and they are not mandated to have credentials in numeracy or mathematics related fields (Goos et al., 2023). The SOLAS (2021) report recommended that ETBs should consider ways of ensuring adult numeracy tutors are appropriately qualified and should provide further numeracy-specific professional development.

With such recommendations in mind, we decided to design a professional development model that would enable adult numeracy practitioners to develop the necessary skills to support their students. This model took the form of a series of online Numeracy-Meets. First implemented in 2022, Numeracy-

Meets was designed with the aim of providing remote practitioners with opportunities to network and further develop their practice (Prendergast et al., 2023). In 2023, we developed a second series of Numeracy-Meets focused specifically on supporting practitioners who teach numeracy to vulnerable adult groups. This paper details the design, implementation, and evaluation of this series.

Phase One: The Design

The Numeracy-Meets model of professional development was designed to provide numeracy practitioners with an opportunity to learn in an informal way, primarily through social interaction (Prendergast et al., 2023). It was adapted from the Scottish Teach-Meet model (Bennett, 2012). According to Blanchett (2014), Teach-Meets 'provide a nice informal atmosphere to share ideas and good practice with a chance for everyone to have their say' (p.5).

The second series of Numeracy-Meets, which is the focus of this paper, adapted many of the same design features as Series One: they would take place virtually; the shared focus would be adult numeracy; there would be discussions of practice and sharing of planning and instructional approaches; and there would be a shared repertoire of resources gathered after each Numeracy-Meet. However, while the content focus of Series One centred on specific life domains (e.g. financial, health, digital, etc) and related uses and practices of numeracy in the context of work, family, and everyday life, Series Two would focus specifically on supporting practitioners who teach numeracy to vulnerable adult groups. This stems from the idea of promoting active citizenship of all adults. Not limited to, and as classified by the ALL Strategy, vulnerable groups in Ireland include older adults, members of the Traveller community, people with disabilities, people in prison, migrant learners, and people with language needs (Government of Ireland, 2021, p.59).

In recent years adult education policy and practice have aimed to develop active citizenship (European Association for the Education of Adults [EAEA], 2019; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2019). The ALL Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2021) relates citizenship to 'well-being and active participation in modern society' (p.53), with the strategy document also citing access to everyday human rights related to employment, housing, health, education, welfare, and social inclusion. The document also highlights that an unmet numeracy need 'impacts areas of active citizenship, such as the likelihood to volunteer or to vote, and influences the overall trust in institutions' (p.7). This is particularly pertinent for vulnerable groups.

Similar to Series One, the design of the Series Two of Numeracy-Meets was based on a community of practice model in which practice and experiences were openly shared and discussed. As outlined in *Figure 1*, the structure of each Meet was focused on analysis of evidence, discussion about teaching practice, and instructional planning between the numeracy practitioners. This was an adaptation of Farley-Ripple and Buttram's (2014) work on developing learning communities in the U.S.

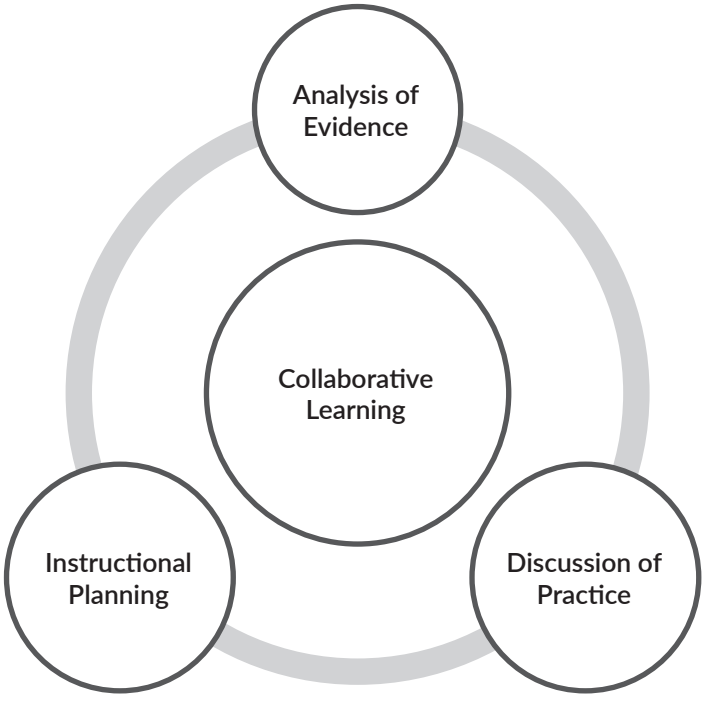

Figure 1. Underlying design of each Numeracy-Meet

Phase Two: Implementation

The implementation of Series Two of Numeracy-Meets took place between 27th September 2023 and 6th December 2023. Flyers advertising the six Meets were circulated in advance to participants who had attended Series One, as well as ETBs and Community Training Centres nationwide. Practitioners were asked to register their interest to attend the Numeracy-Meets via a Microsoft Forms link which was also circulated through NALA's adult numeracy networks. As outlined in *Table 1*, each session focused on a particular vulnerable group. The Meets were facilitated online using the Microsoft Teams platform and were scheduled on Wednesdays between 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.

Date	Focus	Attendees
27/09/23	1. Teaching numeracy to language learners	30
11/10/23	2. Teaching numeracy to people with dyscalculia	38
25/10/23	3. Teaching numeracy to members of the Traveller Community	23
08/11/23	4. Teaching numeracy to migrant learners	26
22/11/23	5. Teaching numeracy in prison	23
06/12/23	6. Teaching numeracy to mature learners	28

Table 1. Overview of focus and attendance of Numeracy-Meet

A total of 112 participants registered for the series (90% female and 10% male). The largest percentage of participants worked at ETBs (56%), followed by participants from the Irish Prison Service (11%). There was no attendance cap for each Meet, and registered participants had the freedom to attend as many as they wished, based on their interests. Of the 112 adult numeracy practitioners who initially registered their interest, 66 attended at least one of the Numeracy-Meets. There was a range of 23 to 38 attendees across the six Meets and the average number of attendees at each Meet was 28. As evidenced from *Table 1*, the number of attendees varied slightly from Meet to Meet, with the 'Teaching Numeracy to the Traveller Community' and 'Teaching Numeracy in Prison' sessions having the lowest attendance, both with 23 participants. 'Teaching Numeracy to People with Dyscalculia' had the highest number of attendees at 38.

During each Meet, a brief introduction was followed by an invited speaker (or speakers) who made a presentation approximately 30 minutes long on the given topic. Following the presentation, either participants were randomly assigned to breakout rooms and asked to discuss a question related to the topic under discussion, or a whole-group discussion took place. After each Meet, participants received a recording of the presentation, a newsletter, and a video with suggested activities related to the topic. At the end of the six Meets, all of the resources were collated into a Practitioner Pack which is now freely available online (see Prendergast et al., 2024).

Phase Three: Evaluation

On finishing the six Numeracy-Meets, participating practitioners were asked to complete a brief online evaluation in which they had to quantitatively rate certain aspects of the programme (there were 22 respondents). Additionally, five practitioners also took part in individual semi-structured interviews to ask if they found Numeracy-Meets effective. Each interview was recorded via Microsoft Teams, and the participants' responses were transcribed into an MS Word document. An inductive 'bottom up' content analysis was performed by one of us to ensure a systematic examination and interpretation of the qualitative data.

Overall, the evaluation of the Numeracy-Meets was very positive. For example, respondents to the online evaluation gave the Meets an average rating of 4.86/5 in terms of effectiveness in focusing on the numeracy needs of adults from specific vulnerable groups. Twenty-one respondents to the survey, positively rated (either 'Good' or Very Good') the Numeracy-Meets in terms of:

- Sharing new knowledge/ideas for teaching numeracy
- Providing opportunities to meet other adult numeracy practitioners
- Giving access to helpful resources for teaching numeracy
- Offering strategies for supporting learners from vulnerable groups

In the interviews, all five participants indicated that they had enjoyed this series of Numeracy-Meets. They liked the fact that each session was short and concise and that sessions were held at lunchtime. As one interviewee noted, it was great to be able to participate 'from the comfort of your own office'.

Participants enjoyed the interaction, and the range of topics discussed during the Meets:

> The interaction was brilliant and informative with up-to-date information – the presentations were first class – excellent and professional. Great opportunity to link in with tutors from a diverse range of students (Interviewee 4).

> A wide range of topics and groups not normally covered in numeracy education. They brought people together and helped us to network (Interviewee 2).

They were happy to learn about wide-ranging resources and ideas for a different way of doing things:

> Excellent for resources, ideas, and professional discussion. Often it is difficult to find material relating to adult learners for numeracy (Interviewee 3).

Participants also noted that they sometimes felt isolated in their classrooms and had little contact with other numeracy practitioners. Therefore, they were relieved that the Numeracy-Meets sessions validated what they were doing. Practitioners liked seeing how other educators approach their teaching, as they sometimes questioned if they were doing the right thing in their classrooms:

> Could I be doing it better? And you're listening to people and they're doing different things and they're doing things the same as you. And you say, God, you know I'm doing it. I'm doing alright and it's great, it's great in that respect (Interviewee 1).

Interviewees were keen to stress that numeracy practitioners 'wear all different kinds of hats'. They must deliver the module they are assigned and provide students with the support they need to obtain Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) certification. With some students, practitioners have to 'tread softly and carefully' as students have experienced significant trauma in their lives and need to feel comfortable with the practitioners before they can engage in learning. Sometimes, vulnerable learners also need information about the services that are available to them and the facilities that are available in the local area. Numeracy practitioners merge their role as 'teacher, counsellor, and adviser' by designing numeracy activities that are relevant to students' needs. With this in mind, participants were appreciative of being supported and having a spotlight shone on numeracy and a diverse range of learner groups:

> The feeling of being supported was fantastic, joining the meeting every two weeks was a lovely way to stay in touch with others in the field (Interviewee 3).

> Excellent opportunity to meet others and share practice, sometimes numeracy can be the forgotten element of FET provision, so it's great to see the spotlight being shone through the Numeracy-Meets initiative (Interviewee 5).

> Great range of learner groups targeted over the six sessions, again with groups who might not always be as visible in FET provision, so great to see the inclusivity of the session topics (Interviewee 4).

Two participants found the session 'Teaching Numeracy to People with Dyscalculia' the most helpful. They noted that although they were aware that people struggle with mathematics, it was difficult to determine whether this was due to a learning disability and if so how to support such students. They felt the session provided them with ideas on how to approach topics in a different way and at a different pace:

> So, I found that feedback on dyscalculia, about giving them information about the grouping of numbers, about how they visually represent data or chunk it or the struggle with that. That was new to me even though we know people struggle, it actually put stuff that you can pinpoint (Interviewee 2).

One participant explained how she enjoyed the session 'Teaching Numeracy to Members of the Traveller Community'. She related to the guest speaker of that session because she works with a similar cohort of students. On the other hand, two interviewees felt that some vulnerable groups had not been adequately addressed during this series of Numeracy-Meets. Interviewee 1 works with younger adults and felt that this cohort is not intrinsically motivated and must be motivated by the practitioner through relevant, fun activities. She would have liked to see more focus on younger vulnerable learners and how to support them. Additionally, while one of the Numeracy-Meets focused on 'Teaching Numeracy to People with Dyscalculia', Interviewee 4 would have liked to learn more about supports for those with other disabilities and learning disorders.

Discussion and Conclusion

The evaluation of Numeracy-Meets Series Two has shown that this model of professional development provided an effective and cost-effective approach for supporting adult numeracy practitioners in Ireland. The costs associated were relatively small and covered the expense of some of the invited speakers and the development of resources to accompany each Meet. The online approach and short one-hour input was popular since, in the main, it didn't conflict with family or work commitments, and there was no financial cost involved for participants. The participants developed a sense of being part of a larger community with a common goal to improve adult numeracy provision. There was also some evidence of the cascading effect of the Meets. The core group were passing on what they were engaging with and learning to their fellow practitioners who were attending occasionally, or who were unable to take part. Although participants liked the lunchtime Numeracy-Meets sessions, not all practitioners could participate at this time. Some practitioners registered

for the sessions with the intention of accessing the videos and resources at a later time. With this in mind, we always circulated the resources from each Numeracy-Meet to all 112 practitioners who had registered their initial interest, and this was appreciated by many.

The notion of a 'spotlight being shone' on numeracy was a theme mentioned by several of the participants. The SOLAS (2021) report highlighted the need to 'promote the distinctness and importance of numeracy' (p.55). This is because adult education in Ireland has historically subsumed numeracy within a broad definition of literacy (Goos et al., 2023). For example, the ALL Strategy notes that 'literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate, access services, and make informed choices' (Goos et al., 2023, p.7). Numeracy should not be viewed as a subset of literacy. Furthermore, it should not be defined solely by reference to basic arithmetic skills or to the wider content of school mathematics (Hoogland and Díez-Palomar, 2022). Geiger et al. (2015, p.531) define numeracy as a concept:

> used to identify the knowledge and capabilities required to accommodate the mathematical demands of private and public life, and to participate in society as informed, reflective, and contributing citizens.

More specifically in relation to this paper, adult numeracy can be defined as 'a construct related to the ways people cope with the many mathematical, quantitative, and statistical demands of adult life' (Gal et al., 2020, p.378). In recognising the importance of numeracy, the ALL Strategy does argue that more attention needs to be given to building adults' numeracy skills, particularly those of vulnerable adult learners. Through effective design, implementation, and evaluation, we believe that the Numeracy-Meets initiative has directly addressed this point. Through both Series One and Series Two, Numeracy-Meets has established a national adult numeracy learning community to support practitioners in sharing resources and local good practice. In terms of numbers, for Series One, 60 adult numeracy practitioners registered their interest. There was a range of 14 to 23 attendees across the six Meets in 2022 and the average number of attendees at each Meet was 20. There was huge enthusiasm among the core participants for the Numeracy-Meets to continue, and the growing numbers (23 to 28) who attended Series Two are testament to this. Throughout both series, there was positive partnership and collaborative between all those who attended, regardless of whether they came from higher education, an ETB, or other settings including community education,

probation projects, prison, and disability services. As noted by Dalby and Noyes (2022), such diversity among adult numeracy practitioners presents valuable opportunities for a cross-sector learning community. However, it is important that such a learning community is sustained.

If the commitments of the ALL strategy are to be realised, and if the number of adults with unmet numeracy needs are to be reduced from 25% to 12%, we believe that Numeracy-Meets should be an annual professional development opportunity for adult numeracy practitioners. As previously documented, one of the main challenges regarding effective adult numeracy education is the lack of support and of networking opportunities for practitioners (SOLAS, 2021) From the evaluation of both Series, we believe that the initiative has offered a useful starting point, and it is important at that these growing collaborations between practitioners can continue to prosper. In line with similar sharing of practice initiatives, the heart of the work is the importance of building relationships and creating a safe space to share (Civil, 2022).

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Using Digital Tools for Positive Change in Adult Education

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'Change is the end result of all good learning' – ***Leo Buscalgia***

Abstract

This practice-based case study explores how digital education practices within an inclusive, supportive environment can help to transform the practice and meet the specific needs of adult literacy education practitioners in their specific contexts. In an effort to contribute to discourse in relation to what works in various programmes and contexts, this paper presents a case study which demonstrates how the Literacy Development Centre (LDC) in South East Technological University (SETU), Waterford, utilised digital tools to contribute to transformative learning experiences, with the voice of the adult learner to the fore. This case study is of interest to adult learners, adult educators or indeed educators in (higher) education settings as it explores the application of collaborative digital tools within the classroom.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Digital Teaching, Inclusion, Collaboration, Communication, Creativity, Critical Thinking

Introduction

The Literacy Development Centre (LDC) is located within the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the South East Technological University. The LDC provides third level professional development programmes (National Framework for Qualifications [NFQ] Level 6 to Level 9) for individuals working in the field of Adult Literacy and Adult Education within the Further Education and Training (FET) sector. Understanding the optimal balance and integration of face-to-face and digital learning spaces is increasingly important for the post–COVID-19 classroom, and the LDC continues to provide a blended learning environment, which supports its distinct adult learner profile.

Students of the LDC are recognised as skilled professionals who bring with them a unique set of skills and experiences. Through modelling effective teaching methodologies within adult education, students are supported to become reflective practitioners who can apply theory to their practice. The LDC staff endeavour to create a dialogic classroom environment, whether that be online or face to face, whereby the voice of the student is valued just as much as the voice of the lecturer. Dialogic teaching harnesses the power of talk to engage interest, stimulate thinking, advance understanding, expand ideas, and build and evaluate arguments, empowering students for lifelong learning and democratic engagement (Alexander, 2019). This aligns with the LDC's understanding of literacy as a social practice, 'informed by an emancipatory interest which expects both to start with and to transform the learner's experience' (Mace et al., 2006, p.14). Transformative learning makes it possible for students to develop new perspectives within their own practice and to take action based on this new view of themselves, their families, and wider society (National Adult Literacy Agency [NALA], 2012).

Context

This case study provides an overview of an NFQ Level 7 Blended Learning elective module, part of the BA in Adult and Further Education and tailored for adult learners/students of the LDC, which was delivered in a blended learning format. The module includes a collaborative approach to assessment and brought about change in the practice of many of the students. The case study describes the module, the assessment, and how the students felt it had a positive impact on them as learners and practitioners. The findings are reported through the voices of the students. In addition, the module lecturer, who is one of the authors of this article, also shares their reflections on the approach.

As will become apparent, the approach to assessment fostered student collaboration while also contributing to the dialogic classroom experience through a digital based activity and shared resources. The objective was to explore, through peer learning and collaboration, the range and application of a variety of digital tools currently available and evaluate their potential suitability and impact on learning within the classroom.

NFQ Level 7 Module in Blended Learning – Case Study

The assessment was part of an NFQ Level 7 module, Blended Learning. This is an elective module for adult educators who are interested in applying digital

technology in a meaningful way with their own learners within the FET sector. The module was delivered in a blended mode over four days with the first day being face to face and the other sessions online and asynchronous. Ten students participated, and the whole process was completed over eight weeks. It was designed as an authentic assessment, one that involves students conducting 'real world' tasks in meaningful contexts (Swaffield, 2011). As part of the module assignment, each student was invited to contribute to a shared BookCreator and to showcase a digital tool that would be relevant to their professional practice. Many other platforms, such as Google Classroom, MS Sway, or Canva, may have resulted in the same collaboration, critical thinking, and final product. In this case the lecturer's familiarity with BookCreator, and its functionality, prompted its selection. At the end of the module, each student had access to a shared repository of engaging digital teaching activities.

BookCreator, as illustrated in *Figure 1*, is an application that facilitates the creation of digital books, which can include text, video, audio, images, and hyperlinks and can enhance learning through greater expression and creativity.

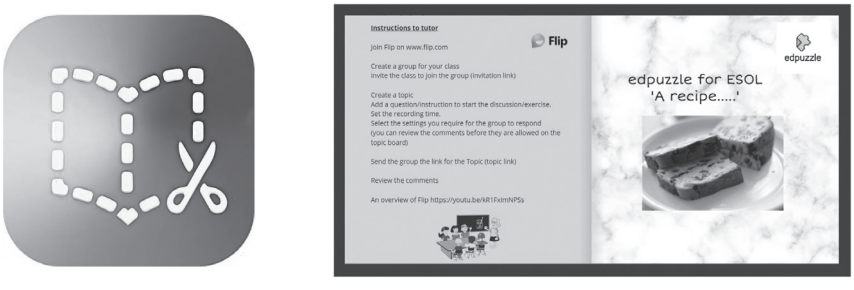

Figure 1. Blended learning BookCreator

There are four stages in this process. Scaffolding and facilitating rich dialogue formed an important part of each stage.

First Stage – Brainstorming

During the brainstorming stage, the group shared their knowledge and experience of digital tools that they were familiar with from their learning or teaching. Once a range of educational digital tools had been identified (e.g. Padlet, Flipgrid, Kahoot), a discussion followed in relation to the advantages and disadvantages of the tools from the perspective of the learner. The discussion also focused on how engagement and collaboration could be promoted through the use of these resources.

Second Stage – Digital Tool Review and Practical Tips

The group were then paired up, and each pair was asked to review one tool that they felt had the potential to support learner engagement within an adult learning context. This review was shared with the whole group and included a 'how to use' guide. This fostered opportunities for peer learning.

Third Stage – Authentic Application and Peer Review

The learners continued to work in pairs to select one of the digital tools identified and develop an authentic use of the technology in their own context. Each pair provided feedback to the whole group continuing the collaboration and peer learning.

Fourth Stage – The Showcase

For the final stage, and asynchronously, each student designed an individual digital activity and added it to the shared BookCreator. They were asked to include a rationale and describe how it could improve engagement among their learners. The final 'published' BookCreator included 12 activities grounded in pedagogical principles and instructions on how to implement them. Each student now had a range of resources for their own practice. These were drawn from the experience of peer learning and collaboration and were scaffolded through each of the key stages of the activity.

Methodology

The research design consisted of a case study approach which incorporated a number of qualitative data collection techniques to gather insights from both students and the lecturer involved in the NFQ Level 7 Blended Learning module. The methodology is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the use of a digital tool can contribute to positive change in adult education. A case study approach allows for the examination and reflection of a lived experience (Thomas, 2023) and in the current case study, focus groups, critical friend dialogues, and reflections were conducted to provide a rich understanding and to support the generation of hypothesis for future research. The following data collection methods were utilised.

Focus group

A focus group was conducted with six of the module participants to review their experience of collaboration, using the digital tool and the experience, impact, or influence on their own practice.

Critical Friend Dialogues and Reflection

Critical friend dialogues were conducted between the lecturer of the module and the other authors of this paper. These dialogues provided additional insights into the collaborative learning process and the impact of digital tools on peer interactions and learning outcomes.

The data was further explored through the application of an analytical framework – the 4Cs (Dede, 2010; Gagliano, 2021). The application of an analytical framework allows for a deeper understanding of the key concepts and variables of the research which are outlined in the following section.

Conceptual Framework – 4Cs

Dede (2010) provides a framework, commonly referred to as the 4Cs, which classifies the essential learning skills of the 21st century that students need for their application of learning. They are (1) Collaboration; (2) Critical Thinking; (3) Creativity; and (4) Communication (Dede, 2010; Gagliano, 2021). The emergent data was analysed in line with this framework to determine the potential of digital tools to bring about change through the development of each of these competencies.

Collaboration

The responses of the participants highlight that this approach promoted collaboration among the students. The benefits of collaboration are multi-faceted but can be particularly advantageous for adult educators. Collaboration between adult educators is a powerful professional development activity that can help teachers improve their subject knowledge, think about teaching strategies in different ways, and learn new ideas to try in the classroom (Patzer, 2023). Furthermore, it also promotes and encourages the development of informal communities of practice.

The impactful nature of collaboration was recognised by both lecturer and students in this study. One student reflected that 'everybody helped each other out.'

Another reflected that 'even when students were struggling, we were able to point them in the right direction, and they took off.' This student elaborated:

> We were able to share our work then together and learn from each other and had so much fun doing it and it was great. And the level of engagement in the classes was great.

One student reflected that they have gone on to use this approach with their own learners and felt that this learning was transformational for themselves and indeed for their learners:

> I actually find it a very useful tool in my classroom and use it regularly. Because it is a collaborative tool for the group, they can actually work by themselves and then they can look at and comment on each other's work.

The module lecturer noted that collaboration was evident and group dynamics were enhanced.

In this example, collaboration also promoted autonomy and agency (Kennedy, 2014). Students were self-directed and organised themselves to meet online to work collaboratively on this project. They were empowered as they shared their own practices and supported each other in designing new practices or enhancing current practices. Working on a collaborative resource meant students could see what everyone was doing in real time. Public sharing of work is a cornerstone of professional learning in transformative collaborative communities (Brennan and Gorman, 2023).

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking has been identified as another fundamental skill for the 21st century. It can be defined as applying knowledge to new situations, considering different viewpoints, evaluating options and evidence, and having a critical thinking disposition (Thonney and Joseph, 2019). Fostering critical thinking has been identified as somewhat of a challenge for instructors in adult education due to the hegemonic assumptions that can sometimes blind adult learners (Moore, 2010, p.8). Consequently, adult education tutors/adult educators must also help learners see the vital connection between adult learning and critical thinking, create a learning environment which promotes critical thinking, and refer to real life experiences wherever possible (Moore, 2010, p.8).

In this case study, both the lecturer and students recognised that critical thinking among adult learners was a favourable outcome of this assessment. This gave the student autonomy which ultimately empowered their own learners.

One student noted that 'it gave me the idea to use it when I work with people with intellectual disabilities and to use more universal design. It's very inclusive'.

Moreover, the students demonstrated a practical application of digital skills to everyday situations, to support their learners:

> When you're using any new piece of technology or an app, you always try to see it from the perspective of your learners. They are familiar with the concept of using a book. So, it's familiar territory. Even those at lower levels of ability, with help from the tutors were very much engaged with the process. They then were able to show their books to their families.

This account not only highlights critical thinking – it provides evidence of how learners were empowered to engage with intergenerational learning and family literacy. This is indicative of effective practice which brought about transformative learning and meaningful change.

The lecturer noted that critical thinking was promoted by encouraging each student to design an activity for their own context.

Through sharing experiences with each other at the early stages of the module, a safe space emerged where students were comfortable evaluating each other's work and critiquing their own practice. They were able to identify how their own signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005) were influencing their decisions around their practice. Listening to other perspectives and constructive feedback facilitated change and growth in both their learning and practice.

Creativity

Creativity is the ability to develop something new and relates specifically to the art of seeing things in a new and different way (Dumitrascu, 2017). Another advantage of the BookCreator activity was that it fostered creativity in the students as well as the adult learners in their professional practice. The opportunity to be creative is often neglected in an adult learner context (Tsai, 2012).

The potential for this approach to foster creativity was recognised by both the lecturer and students.

One student argued that Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) modules can be prescriptive and constraining due to prescribed learning outcomes. They described how this particular activity allowed them to think and behave with more creativity as the learning achieved in the module was enhanced by the creative addition of Flipgrid, a video discussion platform:

> Adult learners were asked to record elevator pitches on Flipgrid. This gave more opportunity for practice and performance and from feedback from both tutor and peers.

Another student reflected that it was empowering their own learners by 'hearing their voices and giving themselves a voice.' Another was able to link it to QQI assessment, as 'there's a lot of video and photographic evidence for portfolios. We can easily upload that to BookCreator.'

The lecturer noted that the students learned about a range of resources from each other rather than from the lecturer.

This is indicative of a dialogic learning experience. Students demonstrated creativity in how they used it in other contexts. For example, some of the cohort used BookCreator for other module activities, such as in their final presentation and for reflection. They also brought it to their own practice as an easy-to-use resource for their adult learners, some with intellectual difficulties as mentioned above. Some have used the other digital tools explored through this activity in their professional practice, such as Flipgrid and Padlet.

Communication

Communication is particularly important for learners within the LDC, given that many of them support learners with unmet literacy needs. As well as recognising the value of dialogic learning experiences which promote discussion and communication, students should be supported to utilise a range of inclusive and accessible approaches to communication with their adult learners.

Within this case study, students identified that the BookCreator activity provided them with opportunities to develop their own communication skills while showcasing their contribution to the shared BookCreator.

Finding the appropriate language to use for assessments can be challenging for many students. One student commented that 'it was so easy to use, I could focus on what I wanted to say, not how I was going to put it together.'

Further evidence of meaningful change could be gleaned from a student who described how it also encouraged alternative forms of communication from adult learners in their setting: 'They've been an author of their book which in itself gives the learners such a sense of ownership.'

The lecturer noted that communication was authentic throughout.

Through facilitating brainstorming, feedback and peer discussion, a range of communication styles were modelled throughout this module. Students were clear on what was expected of them during each stage of this process. This created a safe and supportive space for all voices and for contributions to be made in subsequent stages of the activity. All participants could contribute without fear of judgement. In addition, in line with the principles of UDL, multiple means of action and expression were available and encouraged.

Reflection for Future Practice

It is evident that the participants perceived the overall module to be engaging and beneficial Nonetheless it is necessary for the lecturer to engage in reflective practice. According to Cunningham (2001), the goal in practitioner research is not necessarily to address a specific problem, but to observe and refine practice in general on an ongoing basis. Dialogic reflection involves 'discourse with the self' and a consideration of the decisions and judgements made and possible reasons for these (Brockbank and McGill, 2007, p.142). Afterward, the individual considers how well they achieved their intended goals and which aspects require further attention (Brockbank and McGill, 2007). The lecturer in question made a number of reflections in relation to how this approach could be enhanced even further in the future.

Reflection on Student Engagement

Due to the considerable student engagement with this approach, the final Book Creator product was deemed to be of exceptionally high quality. However, at the outset of the module, some students acknowledged that they had not engaged in this form of collaboration before. In addition to this, they found it difficult to envision what the 'finished product' might look like. To circumvent this barrier during future iterations of this module, past students will be invited to share their experience of this collaboration and to showcase their work.

Reflection on Technological Challenges

Even though students enjoyed experimenting with digital tools, certain features were inaccessible to them due to being behind a paywall. For subsequent delivery, the lecturer could seek minor funding to bypass this obstacle.

Reflection on Assessment Methods

Interestingly, as the students had ownership of the process, they were more focused on the final product than their actual result. Because of the extensive group work involved in this module's assessment, individual grading proved to be somewhat redundant. The lecturer may consider the possibility of adopting a pass/fail approach for future assessments. Pass/fail grading has been reported to increase students' motivation to focus on learning rather than grades (White and Fantone, 2010). This may be a challenge in Higher Education where quality metrics demand a numerical grade. Within this module, this element of assessment can be deemed pass/fail with measurement facilitated through individual reflections on participation in the process.

Reflection on Adaptability

This case study could be adapted across contexts. For example, a participating student has used this activity type within their own module to share elevator pitches as part of a Start Your Own Business Course. Within Higher Education, different topics can be researched by groups or individuals who can showcase their learning as a portfolio of work created throughout a programme.

Conclusion

This case study described how a digital tool was used in an authentic and applied assessment for adult learners. Indeed, the online space was particularly conducive to the completion of this activity, which promoted collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and communication. Scaffolding and facilitating rich dialogue formed an important part of the role of the lecturer. The students' engagement and investment throughout was indicative of a meaningful learning experience and authentic assessment: 'The end product was brilliant and even the fact that we got a few marks for it certainly helped us as well.' It is evident that this case study provides an insight into how digital tools in a blended learning environment can bring about meaningful change and transformative learning for adult learners. In doing so, it is hoped that aspects of this effective practice could be utilised or adapted for use in other programmes and contexts, thus enhancing learning experiences within the field of adult education.

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Learn with NALA: An Online Learning Platform for Adult Literacy

ELAINE COHALAN AND AOIFE CRAWFORD

Abstract

'Learn with NALA' is an online learning service provided by Ireland's National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). It supports the development of adult literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy skills at Levels 1 to 3 on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) through a virtual learning environment (VLE) and associated supports. This case study describes the service and discusses how adult education principles are put into practice through the service. The article presents key findings from a recent research project which used statistical data, a learner survey, and focus groups to better understand the profile and experience of learners using Learn with NALA. The findings highlight areas of good practice and their impact on learners.

Keywords: Adult Literacy, Online Learning, eLearning, Recognition of Prior Learning, Virtual Learning Environment

Background

Established in 1980, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is a registered charity and membership-based organisation. NALA supports adults with literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy needs to take part fully in society and to access learning opportunities that meet their needs.

From 2008, NALA ran an eLearning website called WriteOn, 'the first and only "end to end" online learning provision for adult literacy learners in Ireland' (NALA, 2022, p.4). WriteOn was developed for adults for whom in-person tuition was not preferable, suitable, or possible. In March 2020, Learn with NALA was launched as a successor to WriteOn.

About Learn with NALA

Forty-two courses at Levels 1 to 3 on Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) in literacy, numeracy, digital literacy, and personal development are available for free at the Learn with NALA website (see NALA, 2024a). Levels 1 to 3 on the NFQ are equivalent to Levels 1 to 2 on the European Framework of Qualifications (EQF). These qualification frameworks do not map directly onto the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), but NFQ Level 3 is equivalent to the Junior Certificate, Ireland's lower secondary qualification.

Learn with NALA is tailored to adult literacy learners by incorporating universal design, responding to feedback from users, and implementing recommendations from accessibility auditing. All text is in Plain English, with the option to hear audio recordings of written content. Much of the course content is delivered through video and the website is mobile responsive.

The design, content, supports, and user experience are informed by NALA's *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* (NALA, 2012). That document sets out the theoretical framework for our work, distilled into five key principles:

1. learning for personal development and social action;
2. self-direction of learning;
3. treating learners ethically;
4. involving learners in all aspects of provision;
5. creating a positive learning environment.

It is challenging to deliver on these principles online. For example, there is no Freirean dialogue between teacher and student in a predesigned course, and the learning is not entirely self-directed. Furthermore, an online learner may not experience peer learning or a collective learning environment.

NALA has tried to meet these challenges to deliver on our principles. We encourage learner involvement through course evaluations, in-person events, and learner membership of our Student Subcommittee and Board. Self-direction of learning is built into the platform. Learners can choose where and when to learn, or whether to attempt accreditation, and they can choose from a range of course options. These include courses such as Personal Effectiveness and Self-Advocacy which can empower learners to take social action.

The service has elements associated with effective use of technology in adult literacy education as identified by Moore et al. (2023); it is flexible, can be integrated into in-person teaching or used independently, and enables differentiation. Adults can learn independently, choosing the courses or course components that best suit their needs, or in a blended learning context through registered Learn with NALA centres, which use Learn with NALA in various ways. Some select certain elements for classroom activities. Others lead students through the full course content to earn certificates through the system.

The Learn with NALA VLE is an interactive platform with regular assessment of and for learning. Digital badges are awarded for the completion of learning outcomes. NALA awards certificates to learners for completing courses at Level 1 and Preparing for Level 3, which is a new level introduced by NALA in response to learner feedback about the increase in difficulty between Level 2 and Level 3. When a learner completes a course at Level 2 or Level 3, they can apply for certification from Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), a state agency which is a national certification body for NFQ awards. As an approved QQI provider, NALA designs Level 2 and 3 courses in accordance with QQI award requirements. Assessment instruments include interactive tasks, multiple choice questions, and portfolio tasks.

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) feature on courses that lead to QQI certificates allows learners to skip ahead if they wish to the final assessment of learning outcomes, where they have demonstrated prior learning. Learners can take a quiz called 'What do I already know?' at the start of a course. Each quiz question is mapped to a learning outcome. For example, in a Level 2 writing course, a learner may be asked to distinguish from a list of sentences which one is correctly structured, to demonstrate skills in sentence writing. If the learner demonstrates that they have already achieved the learning outcome, they can skip to an assessment of that learning outcome. RPL is a key element of lifelong learning as it values the formal and informal learning that adults have acquired (O'Leary et al., 2015, p.7164) and provides 'meaningful and accessible' learning pathways (Staunton, 2021, no pagination).

The wealth model of adult literacy education (NALA, 2018) is embedded in the RPL feature, as RPL acknowledges the knowledge and skills that learners are bringing to their learning experience. The wealth model recommends working with the life circumstances of the learner (NALA, 2018, pp.37-39), which an online, flexible platform naturally does. The awarding of digital badges also puts the wealth model into action, as this gives the learner positive outcomes early on (NALA, 2018, p.15).

NALA held its first award ceremony to recognise the achievement of learners in September 2022. Any learner who has achieved a NALA or QQI certificate is invited to the next ceremony to be awarded a certificate in person (or they may opt to receive a certificate by post). The following quotation from a ceremony participant illustrates the impact on learners and those who have supported their learning journey:

> It was a celebration and a return for all the hard work I had to do to achieve the award. It was a great day out; I brought my parents with me. It was a day out for them too!

Research Methods

NALA commissioned Straightforward Research to examine the impact of Learn with NALA over its first 18 months, March 2020 to November 2022. The research had three strands:

1. Analysis of learner data held in NALA's databases
2. Survey of learners currently using the VLE
3. Focus groups with survey respondents

Analysis of learner data provided insights into the profile of learners and their interactions with the VLE including registration, completion of learning outcomes and courses, and QQI certification.

The survey investigated learners' experience of Learn with NALA, covering topics such as learners' motivation to return to learning and why they chose Learn with NALA. It also gathered demographic information which is not routinely collected by NALA. Supports were provided to enable learners at all levels to complete the survey. Learners could:

- call Straightforward Research directly;
- call the NALA helpline;
- complete the survey over the phone with their NALA tutor if they were enrolled in the service.

There were 249 respondents to the survey. Just over a third (35%) of respondents said their first course on Learn with NALA was at Level 1, so the experience of Level 1 learners was captured.

The focus groups allowed themes arising from the data and survey to be explored in depth. There were 15 participants in the focus groups, comprising 13 learners, a tutor, and a parent of a learner.

Response to the survey and participation in the focus groups was voluntary. Therefore, those samples are not statistically representative of all learners on Learn with NALA. However, they provide valuable insights into diverse learner profiles and experiences.

The full report is available online at NALA's website (see NALA, 2024b) A selection of key findings is discussed below.

Learner Profile

This section establishes who was using Learn with NALA during the research period, highlighting groups which were over- or under-represented.

There were 6,537 learners registered on the Learn with NALA VLE over its first 18 months of operation. Over half (56%) of these learners were using Learn with NALA independently; they were not registered through a centre. There was less than one percentage point of difference between the percentage of centre learners and independent learners at each level. This is evidence that the service can be used for independent learning at Levels 1 to 3.

Learners were broadly representative of the Irish population in terms of gender (54% female) and county (23% of learners were based in Dublin, compared with 28% in the population [CSO, 2023]). However, there was variance in the age groups using the VLE (see *Figure 1*).

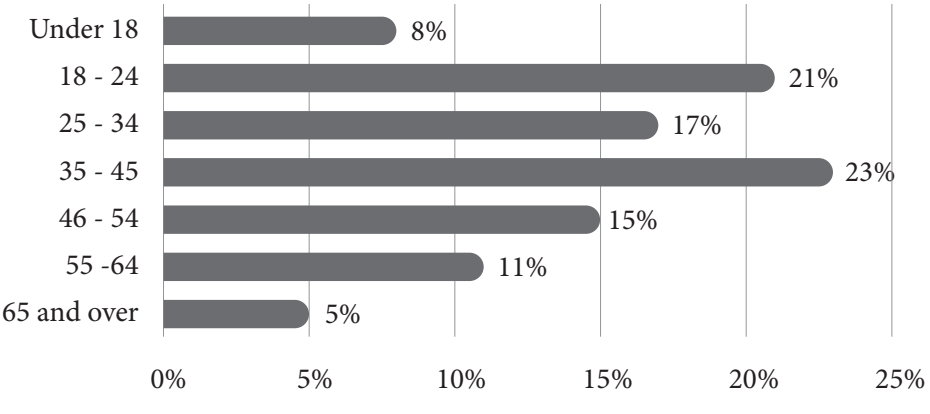

Figure 1. Age distribution of Learn with NALA VLE learners

Most (62%) learners were aged 18 to 45, whereas numbers dropped in older age groups. This shows that there is scope to attract more learners in older age groups.

Table 1 shows survey respondents' membership of 'vulnerable' groups. This is the terminology used in the *Adult Literacy for Life Strategy* (Government of Ireland, 2021) which lists these groups as priorities. Respondents may belong to more than one vulnerable group, or none.

Question	Number	Percent of responses	Percent of Irish population (CSO, 2023)
A person with a disability	82	35%	22%
Long-term unemployed	31	13%	N/A
A low-paid worker	29	12%	N/A
A carer for a child or older person	25	11%	6%
A person with language needs	21	9%	2%
An immigrant	15	6%	20%
A member of the Traveller Community	11	5%	0.7%
A person recovering from addiction	8	3%	N/A
A person who is subject to International Protection	7	3%	N/A
An ex-offender or ex-prisoner	4	2%	N/A
Total responses to this question	**233**	**100%**	

Table 1. Survey respondents' membership of vulnerable groups (n=180)

The Traveller Community is 'a traditionally nomadic ethnic minority indigenous to Ireland' (Haynes et al., 2020, p.270). People with disabilities, carers, people with language needs (i.e., low levels of English) and members of the Traveller Community were highly represented among survey respondents. This indicates that Learn with NALA is reaching these groups. Immigrants, however, were under-represented among survey respondents. Immigrants to Ireland are typically more highly educated than Irish-born residents (ESRI, 2020) so it is not surprising that they are under-represented among adult literacy learners.

Learner Motivation

This section explores what motivated learners to engage with Learn with NALA, based on the survey and focus groups.

In the survey, we asked learners why they had returned to learning. The most popular reasons were to get a qualification (20.2% of responses), career (19.7%), and personal development (19.7%). These figures are very close, indicating a range of diverse motivations.

We also asked why learners chose Learn with NALA (see *Table 2*); learners could select more than one response. We found that Learn with NALA being online and free is attractive. Other pull factors such as self-directed learning, learning at flexible hours, or not having to make travel or childcare arrangements were noted.

Question	Number	Percent of responses
I could do it online	135	24%
It was free	107	19%
I could work by myself	89	16%
I could do it at a time that suited me	77	14%
My centre was using Learn with NALA	66	12%
I didn't have to travel	56	10%
I didn't want to work in a group	20	4%
I didn't need childcare to do the course	19	3%
Total responses to this question	**569**	**100%**

Table 2. Survey respondents' reasons for choosing Learn with NALA (n=237)

Learn with NALA's availability throughout the COVID-19 pandemic made it a viable option when face-to-face tuition services were not running, as described by one focus group participant:

> I started with a group before COVID started and we were doing reading and writing […] I was so disappointed when it all came to an end due to COVID. When I was isolated, I saw NALA online and I went for it.

Some focus group participants spoke about Learn with NALA being the 'only option' for their needs, including disability, home-schooling, rural

communities, and parents. Online learning fills a gap in adult education for these learners:

> NALA are lifesavers for many people throughout Ireland – they are lifesavers for farmers in rural Ireland. They are lifesavers for mums who don't have anything.

Learner Experience and Outcomes

This section discusses learners' engagement with the VLE, and a selection of quantitative and qualitative outcomes for learners.

Completion rates on Learn with NALA were high. While not directly comparable statistics, it is notable that average Massive Online Open Course (MOOC) completion rates (3% to 6% in Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for example, according to Reich and Ruiperez-Valiente, 2019, p.5) are lower than the rates of achievement of NALA certificates for completing courses at Level 1 (59% of those who achieved at least one digital badge, i.e., completed at least one learning outcome) and Preparing for Level 3 (66% of those who achieved at least one badge). The percentage of learners who went on to attain a QQI certificate, having achieved at least one badge, was also quite high; 39% of badge recipients at Level 2 and 24% of badge recipients at Level 3 completed QQI certificates.

Figure 2 shows that Level 2 QQI certificates were typically completed in a short time; almost half of QQI certificates at this level were completed in less than a month. Level 3 certificates generally took a little longer – the most common completion time was one to three months. Online learning allows learners to work at their own pace, and many progress quickly, especially at Level 2.

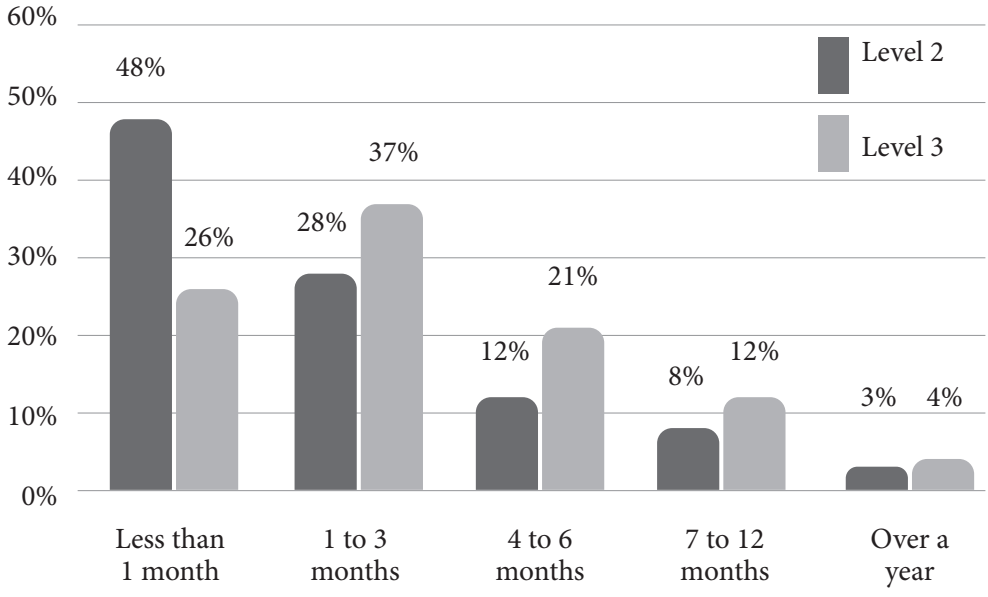

Figure 2. Time taken to complete QQI certificates, by course level

Data analysis also identified patterns across learner groups. For example, although the Learn with NALA VLE predominantly attracts younger age groups, older learners do very well on the VLE – learners aged 65 and over have the highest success rate (68%) at QQI certificates.

Focus group participants expressed the impact of Learn with NALA on employment, personal development, health, and family among other themes. One participant described how upskilling through Learn with NALA has enabled them to take on more responsibility at work:

> I have a learning difficulty, and reading and writing was a big problem for me. I am in a job part-time and getting some support here as well. I found it very helpful for me and lets me do the books in my job now.

In terms of personal development, confidence emerged as a theme in the focus groups. One participant described how the certification was confidence-inspiring for her daughter, a Learn with NALA user with multiple disabilities:

> She likes the independence of it and the fact she can get a certificate in the post – she has been absolutely tickled with that and was delighted. It has given her a boost of confidence.

Learners of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) also use the Learn with NALA VLE, despite the lack of English language courses on the platform. For this focus group participant, there were wide-ranging benefits:

> English is not my first language – I speak Portuguese. When I started the Learn with NALA Programme I couldn't even call to ask for the lessons, I asked a friend […] NALA helped me because for the small things in my life, even to explain to the doctor how I am sick, I can now do this. I can also go out and buy something, or to look for a school for my kids. Everything in life has changed, because of the help I got from NALA.

From this testimonial, it appears that Learn with NALA is having impact beyond its intended audience of English-speaking adult literacy learners.

Discussion

Learn with NALA is a useful case study for online adult literacy education. Our research provides evidence of the profile of learners, how and why they are engaging with the service, and its impact. We are not aware of comparable research internationally – in fact, Moore et al. (2023) have identified a 'sizeable evidence gap' in the use of technology in adult literacy practice.

Our research illustrates the reach of online learning – the majority of learners chose Learn with NALA because it was online. People living far from adult education centres, who have difficulty travelling or family commitments, depend on this service. This research has also shown that others simply prefer to work alone or at times that suit them.

We found that Learn with NALA attracts learners from diverse backgrounds, including some 'vulnerable' groups who face barriers in traditional education but have high representation among our learners. Further outreach and marketing work is needed to attract older learners to the VLE, where they are likely to succeed.

Learn with NALA enables adults to take ownership of their learning and make decisions about their own learning journey. This takes account of the 'spiky profile' of adult literacy learners who may 'show strengths in specific areas of literacy and numeracy while finding other areas challenging' (Grummell, 2023, p.608). It also allows for a 'wavy line of progression' as adults may move in and out of learning due to life events (Grummell, 2023, p.609). Some learners spent

a significant amount of time completing a QQI certificate; others took less than a month. The online system facilitates different speeds of learning and different levels of availability.

Acknowledgement of achievement through certification was found to be motivating for some participants in the focus group, and 23% of survey respondents had registered to gain a qualification. These findings underscore the importance of certification options at NFQ Levels 1 to 3. However, the variety of motivations for returning to learning indicates that 'success' has a different meaning for different learners. Including focus groups in our research enabled the exploration of qualitative impacts such as increased confidence and empowerment in daily life.

Conclusion

Building on the success of WriteOn, Learn with NALA provided online learning services to over 6,500 people in its first year and a half. This research demonstrates the demand for online learning among adults with literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy needs. It also demonstrates the potential for these adults to achieve skills improvements, personal development, and qualifications through online learning.

Learn with NALA is a model for the adaptive use of online learning in adult literacy. The insights gained from this research will contribute to the ongoing improvement of Learn with NALA, offering inspiration and valuable lessons for the development of similar services.

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‘There Are Many More Young Lads Like Me Out There’: Creating Person-Centred Learning Pathways in Literacy Services for a Growing Cohort of Young Male Early School Leavers Seeking Apprenticeships

JOAN MCSWEENEY

Abstract

This article sets out to share the experience of a Cork Education and Training Board (CETB) Further Education and Training (FET) Guidance Counsellor on collaborating with FET Literacy and Apprenticeship Services colleagues to support young male early school leavers who had achieved less than the required five passes in their Junior Certificate to be eligible to register as apprentices. The individual learning pathways created with two of these young males to achieve their Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 3 Awards are outlined, the first within CETB and the second within Tipperary ETB (TETB) Literacy Services. Reflections from colleagues and learners are included to give further insights. The article concludes with an exploration of possibilities for creating wider awareness of these pathways, for example, with school guidance counsellors who could refer other young people in similar situations to their local FET Guidance and Literacy services.

Keywords: Early School Leavers; Guidance Counselling; Literacy; Access: Person-centred Learning Pathways; Blended Learning; Innovation; Collaboration; Learner Reflections

Introduction

In my Further Education and Training (FET) Guidance Counselling role, I identify with this definition of Adult Guidance Counselling as outlined in the *Learning for Life: White Paper on Adult Education* (Department of Education and Science [DES], 2000):

> Guidance refers to a range of activities designed to assist people to make choices and to make transitions consequent upon these choices. In the context of adult education these activities include: information; assessment; advice; counselling; teaching/careers education; placement; advocacy; feedback; follow-up; networking; managing and innovating systems change. (pp.156-157)

This definition encompasses the breadth of the role, including the innovation of systems change which this article seeks to speak to. My role involves the provision of one-to-one and group guidance counselling supports for FET learners on part-time Education and Training Board (ETB) courses ranging from uncertified to Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Levels 1 to 5, including literacy learners. The initial operational guidelines for adult guidance services (National Centre for Guidance [NCGE], 2014) outlines additional target groups eligible for guidance including 'Adults and young people aged over 16 who left school with low or no formal qualifications or low literacy levels' (NCGE, 2014, p.5).

Learner A Pathway, Cork ETB (CETB)

Often in my work, the challenge for a learner interested in doing an apprenticeship has been to source an employer to take him/her on. Recently, I experienced a different challenge when I was contacted by a staff member in the Apprenticeship Services. They were liaising with a local employer who wished to offer a young man a Mechanical Automation and Maintenance Fitting (MAMF) Apprenticeship. When the company began the process of registering him as an apprentice, it was discovered that he did not meet the education requirements of a minimum of five passes in his Junior Certificate, as he presented with passes in Maths and Irish solely. The employer was really impressed with this young man and were willing to wait while he completed the necessary courses to become eligible to register as an apprentice. As this young man was working full-time, the traditional referral route to a pre-apprenticeship course, which is full-time, was not an option for him.

I looked at the document *Equivalence of Qualifications for Apprenticeship Requirements for Entry to the Standards Based Apprenticeship in Ireland* (SOLAS, [no date]) which apprenticeship services had shared previously. This outlined a list of equivalent qualifications and the level required. I linked in with the resource worker in the FET centre, and we concluded the fastest route for Learner A would be to work toward a QQI Level 3 Major Award. The *Equivalence of Qualifications* document listed specific Level 3 components that were required (see *Figure 1*).

FETAC/QQI Level 3 Major Awards	Minimum 6 modules including 3 core – Comunication, Mathematics OR Applicationof Number and Functional Mathematics, Personal Effectiveness OR Personal & I nterpersonal Skills

Figure 1. QQI Level 3 Components required for entry to Apprenticeship

We were both aware that QQI had the facility to apply for exemptions for some Junior Certificate subjects when submitting components for a learner toward a full QQI Award but we were not familiar with the process, nor whether Learner A could apply for exemptions for both subjects. The QQI (2021) document, which maps non-QQI Awards subjects to QQI components for exemptions, lists the QQI Level 3 Mathematics components for which an exemption can be awarded for those with Junior Certificate Mathematics (see *Figure 2*).

Non-QQI Award	JCMATH Junior Certificate Mathematics QQI Comontent(s) 3N0928 Application Number 3N0929 Mathematics 3N0930 Functional Mathematics

Figure 2. QQI L3 Mathematics components eligible for exemption with Junior Certificate Mathematics

Challenges and Solutions

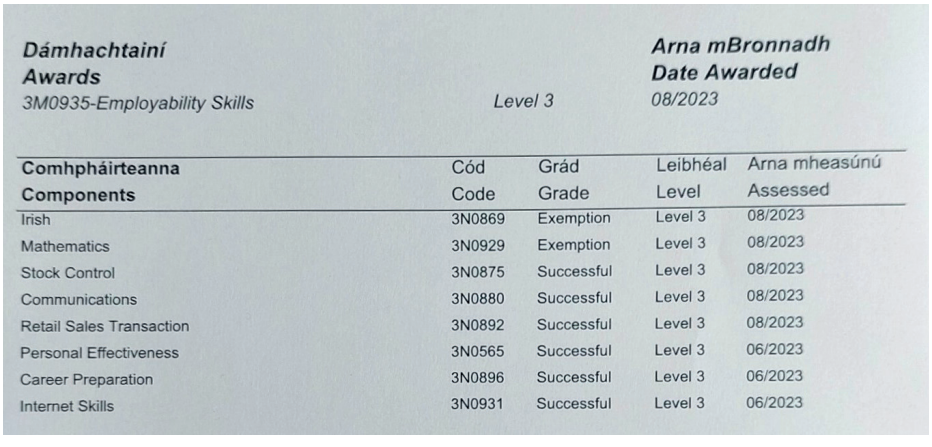
While Junior Certificate Irish was not included in the exemptions, QQI advised that Irish seemed to have been omitted and that an exemption could be awarded for those with Junior Certificate Irish for QQI Level 3 Irish 3N0869. QQI also advised of the five-year limit to using qualifications for exemptions which meant that Learner A had just a six-month timeframe to complete his Level 3 Award to avail himself of these two exemptions. Learner A and his employer were updated on this, and the employer was very supportive of rostering Learner A so that he could attend Level 3 component classes in the centre.

Another challenge that we sought to overcome related to the Level 3 Personal Effectiveness or Personal and Interpersonal Skills component required by SOLAS, which was not available in the specific FET centre. I proposed we look at the option of supporting Learner A to complete this through National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA)'s online learning option (NALA, [no date]). I liaised with a colleague who was the link person with NALA and organised a virtual training session with her to go through the process of registering Learner A

through Cork ETB so that the resource worker could also see how he was progressing and offer assistance where needed. After reviewing components available in the centre and online, it was decided to work toward the Level 3 Employability Skills 3M0935 Award.

Outcome

Learner A was very motivated and committed to completing the full Level 3 Award in the six-month timeframe while still working full time. Although unable to attend all classes during busier work periods, he was very active in his learning and the resource worker was an invaluable support in enabling him to achieve his full Level 3 Employability Skills Award.



Dámhachtainí
Awards
3M0935-Employability Skills

Level 3

Arna mBronnadh
Date Awarded
08/2023

Comhpháirteanna **Components**	Cód Code	Grád Grade	Leibhéal Level	Arna mheasúnú Assessed
Irish	3N0869	Exemption	Level 3	08/2023
Mathematics	3N0929	Exemption	Level 3	08/2023
Stock Control	3N0875	Successful	Level 3	08/2023
Communications	3N0880	Successful	Level 3	08/2023
Retail Sales Transaction	3N0892	Successful	Level 3	08/2023
Personal Effectiveness	3N0565	Successful	Level 3	06/2023
Career Preparation	3N0896	Successful	Level 3	06/2023
Internet Skills	3N0931	Successful	Level 3	06/2023

Figure 3. Learner A QQI L3 Employability Skills Transcript of Awards

The Transcript of Awards (*Figure 3*) outlines all of the components achieved (70 credits in total, 60 credits required) through the following combination:

- Level 3 Irish (10 credits) and Mathematics (10 credits) awarded exemptions for his Junior Certificate Irish and Maths.
- Level 3 Stock Control (5 credits), Communications (10 credits), and Retail Sales Transaction (5 credits) were completed in the FET centre with great support from the resource worker and tutors.
- Level 3 Personal Effectiveness (10 credits), Career Preparation (10 credits), and Internet Skills (10 credits) completed online through NALA online learning, with the resource worker providing regular check-in and support.

The Apprenticeship Services colleague was advised that Learner A had achieved his full QQI Level 3 Award, and he subsequently registered as an MAMF apprentice. This successful outcome demonstrates the benefit of collaborative practice in creating a new learning pathway, making it possible for this young learner to achieve his goal of accessing an apprenticeship.

Learner B Pathway, Collaboration with Tipperary ETB (TETB)

I was subsequently contacted by Apprenticeship Services about another young man a local engineering company wished to register as a metal fabrication apprentice. He had been due to sit his Junior Certificate in 2021 but due to COVID-19 there were no examinations, with students being awarded predictive grades. He had achieved four subjects: English, Mathematics, Materials Technology (Wood), and Metalwork. I phoned him and on being asked about his experience of school he spoke about feeling disengaged due to being out of school during lockdowns. I explained about the QQI Level 3 pathway Learner A had taken and he indicated that he was interested in taking up this opportunity. As he was living in Tipperary and working full-time, his preference was to attend classes with TETB.

I linked with an Adult Literacy Organiser (ALO) in TETB and shared with her our experience of supporting Learner A to achieve his QQI Level 3 Award with CETB. She followed up with Learner B and put a plan in place, including a tutor to work on a one-to-one basis with him. As he had experience of using Microsoft Teams with his school from the COVID-19 lockdown, Learner B was supported by his tutor to achieve his components through a combination of online and face-to-face meetings. It was decided that the QQI Level 3 General Learning Award would be the best fit for him based on Junior Certificate subjects achieved and related exemptions.

Challenges and Solutions

The ALO advised that although he had achieved four passes in his Junior Certificate, Learner B was considered eligible for only three exemptions (English, Mathematics, and Materials Technology [Wood]) because the subject Metalwork didn't match the required criteria for exemptions. It was also challenging to keep Learner B engaged while working full-time. Motivation dipped due to the demands of balancing work and evening study commitments. To address these challenges, an experienced tutor who specialises in working with young people was assigned to Learner B, ensuring a good fit to motivate him throughout the process. Additionally, a blended learning approach helped to save time on travelling, making it more convenient for him to engage with the course.

Outcome

This young man successfully completed the required Level 3 components with TETB and, together with Junior Cert exemptions, he achieved his full Level 3 General Learning Award 3M0874 (see *Figure 4*).

Tideal 3m0874-General Learning

Title

Toradh {P}Awarded

Outcome

Grád an Teastais *Successful*

Certificate Grade

Comhpháirteanna Components	Cód Code	Leibhéal Level	Grád Grade
Communications	3N0880	Level 3	Exemption
Computer Literacy	3N0881	Level 3	Successful
Mathematics	3N0929	Level 3	Exemption
Personal Effectiveness	3N0565	Level 3	Successful
Woodwork	3N0589	Level 3	Exemption
Word Processing	3N0588	Level 3	Successful

Figure 4. Learner B QQI L3 General Learning Award Provisional Statement of Results

Figure 4 outlines all of the components achieved (60 credits required) through the following combination:

- Level 3 Communications (10 credits), Mathematics (10 credits), and Woodwork (10 credits) awarded exemptions for his Junior Certificate English, Mathematics, and Materials Technology (Wood).

- Level 3 Computer Literacy (10 credits), Personal Effectiveness (10 credits), and Word Processing (10 credits) completed one-to-one with a tutor using a blended approach of face-to-face and online meetings

The TETB ALO informed CETB Apprenticeship Services and Guidance Counsellor of this successful outcome. A CETB Apprenticeship Services staff member met this young man recently and he has now been registered as a Metal Fabricator Apprentice.

Learner Reflections

Both learners were invited to give an evaluation of their experience of the QQI Level 3 pathway. The preferred method of giving feedback was via text messages. I texted the eight questions shown in *Figure 5*, which also outlines the verbatim text responses received from the learners.

Question	**Learner A Response**	**Learner B Response**
1.What if anything did you know about QQI Level 3 before you came into contact with ETB Staff?	I didn't know much about the QQI Level 3, was very confused at the start and I was able to understand it when you explained it to me	I had never heard of QQI Level 3 before I came in contact with staff
2. What was your experience like of returning to learning and attending classes in the centre?	I felt great returning to education and the classes were good they weren't too long and they weren't too short so it was perfect	It was something I had to get used to again

3. What was your experience like of doing some Level 3 components online?	Doing some of the Level 3 courses online were challenging at some points but other than that it was okay	Ya it is good that you can meet face to face and also a call or text away […] finding time to do the work and start a time schedule to manage my work, my tutor came up with the idea of a time schedule to help me through my work. The time schedule really helped.
4. What was your experience of getting support from ETB staff?	Getting support from Cork ETB staff was great, I got put into a class straight away very helpful and very understanding of my situation	The staff are great people and the options they gave were mostly online and small bits of written work
5. Is there anything we could do differently?	I was happy with the way Cork ETB were doing everything, I definitely wouldn't change anything	Not at all
6. What advice would you give to another person who wouldn't have enough Junior Cert subjects to get an apprenticeship?	The best advice I could give is talk to your closest college ask for advice. It might take awhile but it sure is great when it's done	To seriously try QQI Level 3 it will be worth it […] Really get on to the ETBs they can help your over the line to start your apprenticeship
7. What does it mean to you now to be registered as an apprentice?	What it means to me is that I can move onto a different chapter now and looking forwards to the future	It's a good feeling knowing I have a good lifetime job

8. Any other comments you would like to share?	You shouldn't be afraid of returning to education, talk to people if you are stuck in a situation and best of luck	It's good to have a 1:1 tutor is better to find out information than over the phone, flexible learning times was great for me because I work full-time

Figure 5. Learner A and B tabulated responses to evaluation questions

Colleagues' Reflections

TETB ALO

I have co-authored a case study with the TETB ALO (Cleary and McSweeney, 2024) to disseminate our learning of this new learning pathway more widely among colleagues in both ETBs. I include some of her reflections from that case study here:

- The tailored pathway provided by TETB enabled this young man to efficiently achieve his goal of becoming a Metal Fabricator apprentice.
- Understanding the importance of personalised support and leveraging online resources can significantly enhance the effectiveness of such interventions.
- This success story opens up the possibility of offering similar pathways to others facing similar challenges in accessing apprenticeships.
- Additionally, continually assessing and refining support strategies based on learner feedback and evolving educational needs is essential for the success of future initiatives.

In conclusion, the collaborative effort between TETB and CETB successfully navigated the challenges faced by the young learner in accessing a craft apprenticeship. Through a tailored pathway, utilising exemptions and a blended learning model, the learner achieved his goal of becoming a Metal Fabricator apprentice. This highlights the significance of personalised learning support and innovative solutions in overcoming educational barriers.

CETB Apprenticeship Services Colleague

The colleague working in Apprenticeship Services was invited by me to give her feedback, which she emailed to me:

- Thanks to both yourself and (Literacy colleagues) for all the assistance given to several young people who I have come across in the course of my work as a Training Advisor.
- It's great to see collaboration between both our departments to find ways to get these young people the required level of education (Level 3) to allow them to participate in an apprenticeship and gain an invaluable career opportunity.
- Between us, over the last 12 months, we have successfully managed to get two apprentices registered and we have two other prospective apprentices who are currently going through the process.
- It is great to be in a position when I come across people with an interest in doing an apprenticeship who do not have the correct qualifications to be able to give them hope and assurance that by us all working together, we can help them reach their goal of entering the workplace in their chosen apprenticeship.

Concluding with Some Possible Wider Applications

I have subsequently received referrals of two more young men in similar circumstances to Learners A and B from my colleague in Apprenticeship Services who are now attending Level 3 classes in their local ETB centre, including some classes together, providing support for each other. They too are very resourceful young men who have proactively sought out and been offered apprenticeships by their employers. Like Learner B, they were due to sit their Junior Certificate in the COVID-19 years and so were given predictive grades. They too spoke of the challenging experiences of staying engaged during lockdowns and via learning online. One of these young men commented that 'there are many more young lads like me out there', a sentiment that has resonated with me and has informed the title of this paper. Learner B also spoke of knowing other young lads in his situation and has encouraged them to contact their ETBs. There is potential to explore creating further opportunities for these learners to connect with each other and to be role models for their peers.

The CETB Apprenticeship Services colleague has shared our experiences with another colleague who has come across a further two people in the same situation in other parts of Cork. On foot of writing a case study based on Learner A for the Adult Guidance Association, I have been contacted by a colleague in a Dublin ETB with regard to a client of hers in a similar situation.

Other possibilities include exploring the potential for communicating this pathway to school Guidance Counsellors to create referral pathways for young people who would benefit from it, for example, through the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC). The Apprenticeship Services colleague is now planning to share her experiences with school Guidance Counsellors she meets at apprenticeship promotional events in schools. There is also the potential to signpost other young people who could benefit from this pathway to their local FET Guidance and Literacy Services through the apprenticeship website in the FAQ section, under the question, 'What can I do if I can't meet the education qualification requirements?' (SOLAS, 2020).

In conclusion, this article has sought to share and reflect on collaborative FET practices that can lead to more person-centred pathways in literacy for early school leavers, thus enabling them to have access to apprenticeships. The following recommendation in the *Adult Literacy for Life Strategy* (Government of Ireland, 2021) remains, therefore, a priority for action:

> The adult guidance and information service and the adult literacy service within ETBs will play an important role in supporting and linking people to the supports needed. Ongoing guidance and information will be key to ensuring responsive and flexible learning pathways that meet people's current and future needs and ambitions. (Government of Ireland, 2021, p.58)

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Exploring Leadership Development in Further Education and Training (FET): A Pilot Case Study

ANGELA CAHILL

Abstract

Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland is an evolving educational sector, available in every community, that offers education, skills, and qualifications to a broad spectrum of the population (SOLAS, 2020). FET coordinators are an important occupational group within the FET sector, occupying a middle management/leadership position with responsibility for the learner experience in their FET centre. This article uses a biographical lens to view the leadership journey of an Irish FET coordinator, 'Sarah' (Ribbins, 2003). It demonstrates that her leadership practice to date has been influenced by her intrinsic motivation, the values that inform her practice and the collaborative approach that is enacted in her leadership practice. The study presented here is part of the pilot design of a more extensive, doctoral study on FET coordinators' daily practice that aims to add to the small empirical research base available on FET leadership in Ireland.

Keywords: Further Education and Training (FET), FET Coordinator/Manager, Leadership Biography, FET Policy

Introduction and Context

Over the last 10 years, Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland has gained greatly in visibility and in the perceived societal recognition of its worth (Rami and O'Kelly, 2021). However, there is little empirical evidence associated with the sector (Glanton, 2023). This paper aims to add to the evidence base on FET leadership practice in Ireland by taking a humanistic and biographical approach to view the journey to leadership of a FET coordinator/manager, in an Education and Training Board (ETB). FET coordinators are an important occupational group in the FET sector, occupying a middle management/ leadership position within relatively recently established arrangements for

FET leadership and management in ETBs. FET coordinators are responsible for delivering a quality learning experience for the learners in their centre, as well as leading a team of teaching staff, maintaining centre infrastructure, and responding to the administrative demands, including data reporting, of the role.

I am currently employed in a FET senior management role in an ETB setting and have previously been a FET coordinator for over eight years. Given my own lived experience and implicit knowledge of FET and the FET coordinator role, I am currently undertaking a more extensive, qualitative study with FET coordinators to explore their daily practice. FET coordinators from the following FET provisions are being asked to participate: Adult Literacy, Back to Education Initiative (BTEI), Community Education, Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), and Youthreach. It is important to note here that ETBs are currently at different stages in their evolution of FET management structures. While FET coordinators would have traditionally been identified by their programme name, some ETBs have moved away from using such titles, with coordinators being renamed, for example, FET Centre Managers or FET Coordinators for full or part-time provision. The aim of my doctoral study is to elicit perspectives from FET coordinators as to how they conceptualise and experience their role, their attitude toward the strategic priorities guiding FET, and their perceptions of middle leadership. This article presents the outcomes of a pilot interview carried out to inform the research design of the wider doctoral study.

In this paper, a brief overview of the research literature on leadership in Further Education (FE) will be provided. A portraiture-based leadership framework developed by Ribbins (2003) will be presented and used as the lens to examine the initial path to leadership undertaken by the FET coordinator in this study. Themes that developed from the research interview will be considered, with a view to adding to FET leadership knowledge in Ireland.

Leadership Studies in Further Education

In an Irish context, there are few peer-reviewed studies on leadership in FET (Anderson, 2012; Brennan, 2017; Russell, 2017). Given the dearth of scholarly literature on FET in Ireland, it is proposed to refer to middle leadership studies in a United Kingdom (UK) FE context in this study while being cognisant that although further education in both countries may be conceptually connected, there are differences in the policy context and drivers for FE in the UK, with its emphasis on a highly centralised structure and an embedded culture of performativity (O'Leary and Rami, 2017).

Within leadership studies, middle leaders play an important role in implementing organisational change policies and programmes (Collinson, 2007). In a study of middle managers in FE colleges in the UK, Briggs (2005) determined that they experience multiple leadership pressures and demands that can arise from above and below and from other (horizontal) functions. Thus, the middle managers' role encompasses answering to those in senior positions while also responding to their own staff and students, often leading to role ambiguity and ambivalence (Greatbatch and Tate, 2018; Poole, 2022). Page (2010) maintains that there is an 'interactional distance' (p.132) between senior management and FE teachers, proposing that this distance is filled by the FE middle manager who is 'satisfying a trialectic of students, their team and the organisation, each exerting their differentiated influence and demands on the time and energies' of the middle manager (Page, 2013, p.1259). In a recent UK study, Wolstencroft and Lloyd (2019) note that the whole learner experience from 'initial recruitment through to achievement and everything in between' (p.120), including the implementation of policy initiatives, rests with the middle manager.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was used in this study, employing a biographical model which provides a framework of four career/developmental stages (Ribbins, 2003). Unlike other research on educational leadership that focuses on the nature of leadership, the framework developed by Ribbins (2003) provides a tool to explore a person's journey to leadership over time and experience. Dimmock and O'Donoghue (1997) emphasise the importance of significant events in leaders' pasts that should 'be acknowledged as key filters through which meanings of best practice are distilled' (p.168). Similarly, Inman (2011) recommends that it is crucial to know how 'leaders learn to become leaders' (p.229) so that they can 'reflect, unpick, articulate and potentially reassess how they learnt to lead' (p.239), as otherwise this knowledge remains implicit or tacit.

This article presents the findings of a pilot interview conducted with 'Sarah', an ETB FET coordinator, to explore aspects of leadership and personal experience in her role. In Sarah's ETB context, responsibility for the delivery of educational provision is distributed across a range of FET programmes, each of which is managed by a middle manager – the FET coordinator – who reports to the ETB FET Senior Management Team. The interview in this study was semi-structured with an interview schedule devised around the formation, accession, and incumbency stages of the four-stage framework (Ribbins, 2003). The data

was analysed according to Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Findings

The findings are presented according to the formation, accession, and initial incumbency stages of the leadership framework developed by Ribbins (2003).

The formation stage of the framework describes a preparatory period for the possible leadership role where the candidates 'shape themselves' or are shaped (Ribbins et al., 2003, p.5). The key influences at this stage include family and school, in what Ribbins (1997) describes as 'concentric circles of influence' (p.169). Inman (2011) suggests that the foundations of both high expectations and moral values are formed at this stage. In the interview with Sarah, she mentioned that she was the first in her family to attend Higher Education (HE). It is interesting that in Ribbins' 1997 study of nine educational leaders, most were the first in their family to go to university, yet all had gone on to be leaders in their respective educational sectors. Of note is that after graduation, Sarah worked in industry in her degree-related area for several years but then decided to retrain in a vocational area which involved attendance at FET evening classes for eight years.

The accession stage comprises the first steps into a teaching career where the candidate can 'rehearse and test their capacity and readiness' for leadership, construct themselves as a 'credible candidate', and acquire 'marketable performance routines' to 'convince' others of their potential (Ribbins et al., 2003, p.6). Inman (2011) comments on the 'constant desire to learn' in this stage, the 'strong motivation […] impatience to achieve' as well as the opportunity for potential leaders to bank a 'repertoire of skills' (pp.235-239). Sarah's interview reveals that during her accession phase she began teaching in her chosen vocational area on a part-time basis and was motivated to leave her secure, permanent job in industry to pursue her teaching ambitions. After a period of self-employment and part-time teaching, she found a full-time role as a teacher/instructor with a Training Centre in an ETB. She up-skilled, by completing a degree in education and training to get, as she mentions, a 'foot on the ladder'. Sarah continued to up-skill by undertaking a Level 9 Higher Diploma in Educational Leadership and Management.

The third stage of the framework is incumbency which concentrates on the actual leadership period. Here, just the initial period of incumbency is considered. Sarah was appointed to her current role in late 2020. She is

responsible for the part-time FET provision in an ETB and leads a team of 18 teachers, with one administrative support person, as well as managing the upkeep of several FET buildings. All of Sarah's initial incumbency phase was dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion

Arising from the interview, three main themes around values formation, motivation, and collaborative leadership were identified.

Theme 1 – Values Formation

Coleman and Glover (2010) suggest that 'even if they do not intend it to be so, teachers and leaders of teachers display their values in everything they do […] constantly modelling their beliefs to others' (p.39). FET provision in Ireland encompasses both inclusion and economic responsibility with these two discourses existing in parallel. There is the learning agenda focused on learner access, progression, and the provision of a supportive, holistic environment. There is also the employability agenda characterised by a neoliberal discourse of accountability to service the needs of the economy (Grummell and Murray, 2015). The FET coordinator sits at the interface between FET senior management's policy-mandated, strategic decisions in response to SOLAS and the FET teachers who interact daily with learners. In Sarah's interview, she mentions, 'I'm always trying to think of the learner […] having been there myself', referring to her own experience of up-skilling through FET classes. Boocock (2015), in his discussion of manager motivation in FE in the UK, uses Le Grand's tropes of public sector workers being either 'knights' or 'knaves' with knights possessing altruistic and intrinsic motivation whereas 'self-interested motives' drive knaves (p.173). Sarah's experience, as a learner, of the transformative possibility of adult learning may underpin her intrinsic motivation and thus inform her values and leadership approach.

Greatbatch and Tate (2018) propose that 'effective leadership behaviours for middle managers differ from those for senior leaders because they are primarily concerned with day-to-day people care and management' (p.14). Sarah displays cognisance of the teacher-care aspect of her role when she comments that 'it's about keeping your mind open […] don't go in guns blazing and think you're going to change the world […] slowly make the changes that you want to make'. Sarah's comments demonstrate empathy and understanding toward her teaching staff, something that is further highlighted in her collaborative approach to leadership.

Theme 2 – Motivation

Motivation as a driving force in Sarah's pathway to leadership is observed in both her formation and accession periods. Ribbins (1997) mentions that each of the leaders in his study identified a readiness to lead, and this may be seen in Sarah's acknowledgement of always wanting to do well, of knowing that teaching was where she wanted to be and of then being ready to move to the next level by completing her postgraduate qualification as 'I needed to, I had to do that to move'. Savours and Keohane (2019) note the lengthy progression through a series of teaching and other leadership roles for leaders in FE in the UK, allowing them to gain a 'clear understanding of the core work' of FE (p.23), and while there are no published studies for FET coordinators, a similar prolonged progression route via FET teaching is likely.

It is interesting that Sarah, when asked about the most demanding aspect of her role, commented that she is 'not great at reports', indicating that senior management might not 'get it the day [it is] asked'. Grummell's recent 2023 study on adult literacy provision comments on 'FET system imperatives for measuring and reporting learner data' being misaligned with the maintenance of a supportive learning environment (p.8). It will be interesting to explore as more data is generated in the doctoral study whether reporting requirements and 'system imperatives' are impacting on FET coordinators' stated values and commitment to learner support and collaborative leadership.

Theme 3 – Collaborative Approach

Although Sarah is still in the early incumbency phase of her leadership journey, she appears to both promote and enact a collaborative leadership style. Jameson (2008) mentions that FE leadership depends on 'gaining legitimacy' and the trust of staff by engaging in 'everyday, authentic, ordinary actions' through 'hands-on leadership work' (p.14). Sarah demonstrates her recognition of what Jameson suggests in her comment, 'you need the teachers to work with you […] initially […] they didn't know if they could trust me […] they didn't know where I stood in their world'. Jameson (2008) describes collaborative leadership to literally mean 'co-labor-ating' (p.21), perhaps what Sarah has envisioned in her comment on encouraging the teachers to work with her. Sarah specifically mentions not seeing herself as part of the 'hierarchy' (referring to senior management). Sarah even questions whether she is a leader: 'I don't see myself as being a leader […] I'm working with them'. Briggs (2005) and Lumby (2003) observe that the term 'leader' was little used in FE colleges in the early 2000s with Briggs suggesting that leadership may be seen in what is done rather than

what someone is called. In a more recent study, Wolstencroft and Lloyd (2019, p.118) comment that:

> Although many managers in the sector are reluctant to identify as leaders […] our research shows that their role has evolved so that they are undertaking a range of activities that could be classified as leadership.

Sarah also mentions that if there are 'issues […] I include the teacher […] I ask them what's their opinion, what do they think'. Sarah may be undertaking to work in a similar manner to that observed by Briggs's study in 2005 when she noted FE middle managers leading from 'within' the team (p.37).

The word 'support' was mentioned three times by Sarah when speaking about her relationship with her teachers: 'So I'm their support […] that's how I say it to them, I'm their support […] I just think I'm their support […] I think that's the biggest thing for me to break down with the staff'. Page (2013) refers to the 'priest' typology in FE middle management as 'advocates for their teams', providing 'the skillful and moral management, support and motivation of their teams', and suggests that the middle managers' role is to 'make the professional lives of their team easier, thus providing increased quality of teaching and learning' (p.1261). Page (2013) emphasises the 'intensive emotional labour' of the FE middle manager's role allied with the belief that what they are doing is making a 'real difference in the lives of their learners' (p.1260). Given Sarah's demonstrated learner-centred ethos mentioned earlier, it may be suggested that her approach to middle leadership in FET in Ireland is aligned with Page's characterisation of the 'priest' metaphor in his study of FE middle managers in the UK.

Doctoral Study

This is a time of policy flux in FET, with the current FET strategy coming to its end and a new strategy due in 2025. During the lifetime of the current strategy, the work started in 2013 with the formation of the FET sector has continued apace with transformational change noted in the FET landscape (Brennan and O'Grady, 2023). However, several FET researchers have recently sounded a cautionary note regarding the direction that FET is taking. Glanton (2023) and others (Brennan and O'Grady, 2023; Grummell, 2023) speculate that the discourse around what was Adult Education — with its associated educational philosophies and ethos — and is now FET, has changed with an emphasis on data and metrics prioritised, resulting in an emerging culture of

performativity and a prevailing neoliberal policy climate. The challenge for the FET coordinator going forward may well be in negotiating the leadership-policy nexus, which may be placing performative demands on FET centres, while remaining true to their own ethical underpinnings.

It is therefore timely to consider the role of the FET coordinator/manager at this point in FET's evolution. It is pertinent to ask what the role of the FET coordinator looks like during a time of evolution, change, and contextual flux. The Irish FET coordinator is not represented in the scholarly literature, therefore there is little knowledge existing on how they negotiate their daily practice and orientate themselves within the FET sector. While this paper has taken a biographical lens to view the leadership journey of an Irish FET coordinator, 'Sarah', the wider ongoing doctoral study will explore FET coordinators' experiences and perception of their role and both the internal and external influences on their daily practice. The study will provide an opportunity to hear FET coordinators' voices in identifying the drivers and constraints of their role. The impact of FET policy on the ground as predicated through the current FET Strategy 2020–2024 (SOLAS, 2020), will be examined as well as providing an investigation of how FET coordinators experience the 'middleness' of their role. The generated data from the study will highlight participants' actions/processes and perceptions of their role.

Conclusion

This article presents a pilot study on the leadership journey of a FET coordinator, 'Sarah', using the framework developed by Ribbins (2003), through formation, accession, and initial incumbency phases. It has been demonstrated that Sarah's leadership practice to date has moved through the formation, accession, and initial incumbency phases of the framework and has been influenced by the values that inform her practice, her intrinsic motivation and the collaborative approach that is enacted in her leadership practice.

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Here Today, Gone Tomorrow: Identifying Ways to Address/Mitigate Premature Exit of Learners in Adult Learning Service Courses

TARA KELLY AND MARY FENTON

Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of premature learner exit from Adult Literacy (Learning) Service (ALS) courses from the perspective of seven ALS tutors working in three Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in Ireland. The findings highlight ALS tutors' insights into the situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers facing ALS students in returning to and persisting with ALS courses. They also highlight a lack of focus on retention, which they regard as a significant weakness in current policy and practice in ALS centres. This paper recommends strategies for addressing student attrition and supporting students to persist with and indeed flourish in their studies.

Keywords: Premature Exit, Student Retention, Adult Literacy, Adult Basic Education, Adult Literacy Service

Introduction

Adult Literacy (Learning) Services (ALS) are the primary state Adult Basic Education (ABE) services in Ireland (Eurydice, 2022). Premature learner exit is a persistent issue affecting ALS/ABE services worldwide. High rates of premature learner exit have negative impacts at individual and societal levels, reinforcing feelings of dissatisfaction for learners and hindering their educational progress, and representing a lost opportunity not only for the individual learner but for the education system and society more generally. This article describes a small-scale research project which sought to gain some initial understandings about the barriers that exist for learners in Irish ALS that lead to them exiting courses prematurely.

Research Context and Methodology

Through her work as an Adult Literacy Organiser, Tara identified the phenomenon of premature learner exit from ALS/ABE courses, which is an internationally-identified challenge. Her professional practice prompted an interest in conducting a small-scale research project as part of her studies for a Masters in Management in Education at South East Technological University (SETU) (Waterford) to explore the phenomenon of premature learner exit from ALS courses through the perspectives of ALS tutors. It was decided to focus on garnering the insights of tutors, due to the shorter-term, small-scale nature of this study and with due consideration to limitations set by the School of Education and Lifelong Learning's Research Ethics Committee with regard to the possible informed consent and data protection challenges pertaining to vulnerable research subjects and former students. Tutors possess very valuable insights and perceptions on the learner experience due to their unique relationship with and perceptions of their learners and their relationship with the educational structures and organisations they mediate with and for the learner. It was hoped that by engaging the perspective of tutors that areas of interest would be identified for future larger research studies with learners.

Searches for literature relating to the causes of learner premature exit from Adult Literacy (AL)/ABE courses in Ireland and internationally resulted in either dated and/or culturally distinct results (Prins, 1972; Abdulkarim and Ali, 2012; Banda, 2019). Our intention was that this research would: (i) provide valuable insights into causes that lead learners to cease attending their AL/ABE programme of study in Ireland; and (ii) identify enablers for learners to persist with their studies. Following ethical approval from the School of Education and Lifelong Learning's Research Ethics Committee in February 2023, we invited seven ALS tutors working in three separate ETB areas to participate in our research. The main inclusion criterion was that all research participants must have had recent tutoring experience in publicly funded AL/ABE.

We believed that a qualitative approach was the most suitable for this research, as it allowed for greater insight into subjective and sometimes contradictory experiences of individuals attempting to navigate the educational system and articulates individual lived experiences far more than a rigid, quantitative method does (Blaxter et al., 2004; Hammarberg et al., 2016; Tanwir et al., 2021). We chose a semi-structured interview format as it allowed for flexibility in the interview process and for follow-up on the information provided (Kvale, 1996; Horton et al., 2004; Doody and Noonan, 2013). Moreover, it enabled a more relaxed interview format, which allowed me to ask deeper questions and

to explore the information provided in greater depth so that valuable insights were not left untapped (Kvale, 1996; Horton et al., 2004; Doody and Noonan, 2013). The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed using Otter technology and the research participants were given the opportunity to amend and approve their transcripts before final data analysis.

Introduction of Findings

Interviews with tutors identified key challenges for ALS participants covering institutional, dispositional, and situational factors. This reflects the categories of barriers described in the literature on barriers in education.

One of the key findings of this research was the identification of the adverse effects of cumulative disadvantage, as described by Kurlychek and Johnson (2019), among AL/ABE learners. All of the ALS tutors interviewed highlighted the cumulative nature of socio-economic disadvantage and that poverty and social disadvantage marginalise AL/ABE learners and exacerbate and compound the challenges facing learners engaging in ABE courses.

The ALS tutors described AL/ABE learners as having highly complex, often difficult lives characterised by multiple competing demands, managing the legacy of causes and effects of their unmet literacy and basic education needs including health problems, financial issues, low self-esteem, and (low-paid, unstable) employment.

Key Challenges for Adults Participating in AL/ABE

Table 1 shows the key challenges faced by adults participating in AL/ABE courses, as identified by ALS tutors. The tutors identified more situational and dispositional barriers to participation.

Institutional	Situational	Dispositional
• Poor course matching to learner interests • Course difficulty • Certification requirements • Teaching/ learning style mismatches • Absenteeism • Inadequate induction/ preparation of learners • Inadequate progress	• Caring work (Hegarty and Feeley, 2020; WFRN, 2024) • 'Difficult' home situations • Availability of 'free' time – work responsibilities • Transport availability • Housing instability • Health, including mental health • Early life – parental attitudes to education • Educational: current skill levels, educational level, duration out of education, prior educational experience • Community integration • Readiness to engage in an educational course • Effects of absences • Inadequate progress	• Education not a priority/ negative experience (Hegarty and Feeley, 2020) • Motivation • Low self-esteem • Low perception of the necessity of education • Old ways of thinking • Anxiety/fear • Stigma • Referral by external agencies/compulsion

Table 1. Key Challenges for Adults Participating in AL/ABE

Key Situational Barriers to ALS Learners' Participation in AL/ABE Courses

The most frequently mentioned barriers to ALS learner participation in AL/ABE courses were situational, namely: (i) childcare; (ii) transport; (iii) changes in work; (iv) housing instability; and (v) certification. Causes of premature exit from AL/ABE courses share much in common with challenges that AL/ABE learners encounter generally (Nicholson and Otto, 1966). Caring work (World and Family Researchers Network, 2024) features highly in the findings as a cause of premature exit. Changing work circumstances (Comings et al., 1999), such as availability for short-term and 'nixer' work, affects a learner's ability to complete their studies. The combined responsibilities of home and work often leaves little time for other activities, including study (Fingeret, 1985; Purcell-Gates et al., 2000). Interestingly, the ALS tutors highlighted the gendered nature of caring work and how prevalent this issue is to ALS as there are higher numbers of females in AL/ABE programmes (D'Amico, 2004).

The *Adult Literacy for Life (ALL) Strategy* (Government of Ireland, 2021) highlights the need for childcare and transport supports to remove barriers to AL/ABE, however, it fails to elucidate how this will be implemented, beyond a suggestion under the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Fund. The ALS tutors argued that childcare and transportation are critical supports for enabling some learners to complete their course. These barriers need to be removed at a systemic level, therefore, funding of these supports should be prioritised as there are few other factors that could be addressed as comprehensively. The cost of these supports would be mitigated by the reduction in learner churn.

The ALS tutors identified the first weeks of a course as critical periods when premature exit is indicated (Kambouri and Francis, 1994; Young et al., 1994; Quigley, 1998). They pointed to breaks/holidays as periods when learners are at risk of premature exit, as consistency is broken. They identified that learners are particularly prone to premature exit when assessment work for certification commences in courses – owing to low self-efficacy/self-esteem and poor assessment load management.

Specific to AL/ABE, the ALS tutors noted that some learners exit their studies prematurely when there are changes to their provision: 'Before we merged one group into two and suddenly somebody stopped coming, and it's because of that' (ALS Tutor 6).

Key Dispositional Barriers to ALS Learners' Participation in AL/ABE Courses

Dispositional factors such as self-esteem/image/efficacy and fear/anxiety were identified in both the literature (NALA, 2010) and fieldwork as leading to premature exit. The ALS tutors described how, having overcome barriers to participate in ALS/ABE (Jun, 2005; Aarkrog et al., 2018), learners who leave early struggle with feelings of inadequacy regarding work they encounter in the course, predominantly early in their studies.

Conversely, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators (Woolfolk et al., 2008) were seen as key enablers for sustaining participation in AL/ABE. These enablers include work, family, and voluntary participation in AL/ABE. Some act in multiple ways to sustain engagement; family support can encourage and offer practical assistance with reading tasks (Fingeret, 1985; Purcell-Gates et al., 2000). These social supports validate the decision to invest in the activity and recognise the value of education.

ALS tutors indicated that, as noted by Archambault et al. (2009), they often observe signs from learners that they are disengaging from their course beforehand. Some learners tell tutors that they are considering leaving their studies, which is welcome as it enables tutors to address the learner's concerns before they develop further. But, other tutors described learners 'grumbling' (ALS Tutor 1) in class, expressing dissatisfaction with tasks, or even showing physical discomfort. 'Teetering', as described by Lessard et al. (2007), manifests itself through intermittent attendance. The ALS tutors identified limitations impeding their ability to respond to learners who were 'teetering' in their course, including lack of time available for supporting these learners, similar to Kambouri and Francis (1994), and lack of a private setting for one-to-one meetings to discuss emergent issues. Intermittent attendance (Greenberg, 2008) means the learner misses out on key learning and thus attendance is both an indicator and cause of premature exit. 'They'll start missing every other class and it gets a bit spotty' (ALS Tutor 4).

It is clear from the research that there is an apparent disconnect between the AL/ABE tutor and the wider organisational supports available to AL/ABE learners, but the scope of this research did not extend to the broader Further Education and Training (FET) area. While the ALS tutors were aware of supports that could be offered in class and had some awareness of supports at centre level, they were uncertain of the supports at organisational/national

level, which suggests that the link between AL/ABE tutors and the broader educational environment should be strengthened. The ALS tutors argued that their efforts in class must be supported and supplemented at centre level to address learner needs that are too complex to respond to in the classroom, and such measures should be underpinned by national policy and guidance. Learner retention must be reconceived of as a system-wide issue, as opposed to a local problem, thus ensuring that tutor responses are informed by available supports and resources, and that tutors are adequately supported in this work.

Significance of Findings

The ALS tutors made some practical recommendations to address the issue of ALS learners' premature exit from ALS/ABE courses, which are described here.

Understanding the Critical Role of the AL/ABE Tutor

The ALS tutors highlighted the central role of the tutor, which concurs with the literature (Fingeret, 1985; Quigley, 1998; Hegarty and Feeley, 2020; Lovejoy, 2023). Their role requires flexibility, responsiveness, and prioritisation of rapport-building (Evans and Tragant, 2020; Hegarty and Feeley, 2020) to cultivate a supportive learning environment. During the interviews, the ALS tutors displayed a strong commitment to their learners and ABE. Qualities of empathy and care emerged repeatedly, placing learners at the centre of the learning experience (SOLAS, 2020), and trying to find ways to address their needs and issues (Greenberg, 2008). The lack of a career structure for ALS tutors was seen as a major drawback in the system, meaning that staff turnover is high, affecting continuity of support for learners.

The Essential Relationship between AL/ABE Tutor and Learner

The ALS tutors described the critical role they play in retaining AL/ABE learners and identifying those at risk of premature exit. They display not only strong professional skills but also a commitment to and strong empathy for learners, placing the individual at the heart of their concern. They have a tacit knowledge and deep understanding of their learners, the context in which they work, and the AL/ABE sector, representing a precious resource to both learner and system. The ALS tutors identified a wide range of supports that could be implemented at classroom-level to support learner retention in courses, including flexibility in provision, content, and methodology, and ensuring

curricular relevance and applicability. The ALS tutors described an abundance of skills/functions which assist in retaining learners in their studies, including tutor immediacy, encouragement/motivation, open communication, developing persistence in academic skills, and understanding education as a process. Tutors are aware, as part of their work, of the importance that learners see progress in their studies, that 'they feel they're getting somewhere […] they can see that their English is improving or that they they're able to fill in the confirmation forms' (ALS Tutor 2).

The ALS tutors identified that their role was to build a supportive learning environment, rapport with students, and group cohesion. They believed that building a supportive learning environment was key to creating safety, comfort and enjoyment for their ABE learners and engaging with them in a meaningful way: 'If it's not fun, nobody's going to go to a class if they're not engaged and you will be engaged with a bit of fun' (ALS Tutor 3). Part of building a supportive learning environment involves activating peer support and the zone of proximal development (Woolfolk et al., 2008) within the classroom.

Supports Implemented at the Organisational Level

While the ALS tutors provide supports at classroom-level – including flexibility with structure and content, scaffolding, motivation, and rapport building – it is noteworthy that they identified many more classroom-level rather than organisation-level supports for AL/ABE learners. In fact, some participants were unaware or had limited awareness of what, if any, support measures their organisation had in place. Where tutors were aware of supports, these differed from ETB to ETB, and there were varying levels of awareness of supports among individual ETBs. This highlights the lack of a national framework in relation to retention practices which would elucidate appropriate practices, procedures, and resourcing as opposed to individualised responses relying upon local signposting and the level of connectedness between the tutor and the ETB in which they work.

The tutors recommended that appropriate resources should be directed to support AL/ABE learners in their studies, including staffing, funding, and time. Centre-level supports appear ad hoc and include follow-up of absences and clear and effective communication. These supports are less comprehensive in nature and are uneven across the region. At a macro level, there appear to be no designated supports to assist learners with the causes of premature exit. This means the resolutions that can be offered are always applied locally and cannot address deep-rooted systemic causes. The tutors identified underlying

flexibility as a critical factor in effective organisational responses for learners. The Adult Literacy Organiser was identified as a key link between the tutor and the organisation (ETB)—supporting both the tutor and the learner, providing advice, and enabling further organisational supports. Childcare and transport were identified as important supports to sustain learners in their studies, echoing the assertions of the ALL Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2021). It was unclear whether provision of these supports should be through education or other State providers.

Pre-course Information

In common with the literature, the ALS tutors identified that provision of pre-course information and supports assist in making good registration decisions (Silva et al., 2020), identifying supports, managing expectations, setting goals, establishing relationships (Kerka, 1995; Greenberg, 2008; Ferguson and Merga, 2021), and exploring readiness. There is a need for standardised intake procedures, including initial assessment and level-appropriate groupings.

Clear Communication with AL/ABE Learners

Clear and effective communication is another core organisational function identified for retaining AL/ABE learners. The ALS tutors identified communication at all stages of engagement including pre-course information, support information, regular check-ins, and follow-up with absent learners; this includes developing and including learners' voices through feedback and other methods. Targeted supports identified by participants to address premature exit include attendance tracking, follow-up, and exit interviews. A designated role with sufficient time and resources for comprehensive and targeted follow-up would support existing efforts.

The Centrality of the Social Aspect of Learning

The ALS tutors highlighted the social aspect of learning as central to retaining AL/ABE learners in their studies. Building strong relationships between programme staff and AL/ABE learners costs next to nothing, but a little time and effort, and repays generously. For AL/ABE learners, the social aspect of learning connects them to their course of study. For this reason, it is imperative that AL/ABE tutors and services attend to the development of rapport and group-bonding activities as a priority. Small groups were identified as critical to retaining learners moving from one-to-one to group provision. Informal extra-curricular events were identified as important to encourage motivation, creativity, and to stimulate and sustain in-group support: 'Days out for learners

[…] just to keep them engaged because they need to make friends—that's the big thing with adult learners' (ALS Tutor 3).

Recognising and Celebrating ABE Learners' Achievements

Recognition and acknowledgment of achievement were identified as important in assisting the learner to demonstrate the value of their investment to both themselves and family/friends. The ALS tutors regarded certification as the lynchpin of this acknowledgment: 'Having that occasion where they go up and get their certificate. It's recognising what they've done' (ALS Tutor 3).

Conclusion

Premature exit of learners from AL/ABE courses is a complex problem with many causes, including situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers. Learners have multiple complex and competing demands for their time and education is often prioritised below other roles, including those of parent, carer, or employee. Premature exit is a serious issue in ALS, costing learners, AL/ABE programme staff, course providers, the economy, and society time and money. This research provides a glimpse into the phenomenon of premature exit from ALS in Ireland from the perspective of ALS tutors. The findings concur with previous literature reviewed on the causes of premature exit from AL/ABE courses and proposed measures to address this. However, this research provides insights into aspects unique to the Irish AL/ABE system and highlights the absence of retention in national policy, strategy, and indeed, practice. This suggests that retention is regarded as strictly operational, and thus, a local problem. The publication of the ALL Strategy (2021) is both timely and necessary as it provides clear targets and metrics for the broadening of access to AL/ABE in Ireland, which will undoubtedly assist in recruiting more AL/ABE learners into the classroom. While learner recruitment is addressed through the ALL Strategy (2021), this is the obverse side of the retention coin, which speaks to an underestimation of the importance of retention both for the individual learner and the system. The real task for ALS is to retain those same learners. However, in the face of the complex and multiple reasons why learners decide to leave their studies, this is a problem likely to persist.

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SECTION THREE

Book and Policy Reviews

Book Review: *Critical Perspectives on Further Education and Training*

CAMILLA FITZSIMONS AND JERRY O'NEILL (EDS) 2024
ANTHEM PRESS
ISBN: 9781839989162
REVIEWED BY ISY HAWTHORNE-STEELE

I confess, my knowledge of Ireland's Further Education and Training (FET) sector, related policies, and the socio-political landscape is microscopical. What expertise can I bring to the table then? I would not be so presumptuous to claim expertise, but rather experience, and a passion to reclaim a radical agenda promoting the core principles and values of community development. I am convinced this would create opportunities for an emancipatory pedagogy that aspires to challenge and transform structural oppression sites, working towards social cohesion within a framework of intersectionality.

I am therefore drawn to the key themes that have emerged within this compilation of critical narratives that critique the overpowering neoliberal ideology within the Republic of Ireland's political and economic landscape, and its detrimental effects on community development. Each captivating chapter of this text reveals an underpinning aim of challenging the dominant paradigm, of unfettered markets, and individualism that is diametrically opposed to the principles and values of community development. Each of the authors disclose their allegiance to explore the transformative power of emancipatory education.

The introductory chapter gives a concise overview of the current FET sector within a bureaucratized education framework based largely upon a Freirean banking education model that is uninspiring and market driven. The authors invite readers to unpack what they recognise as a dehumanising education system that they perceive as bureaucratic, restricts creativity, and limits learners' capacity for critical thinking. They suggest Mezirow's (1990) model of transformative education, paired with Ledwith's (2020) concept of promoting a radical agenda as a starting point for critical discourse leading to emancipatory praxis.

There is an excellent explanation of the government white and green papers and policies related directly to the FET sector. The authors contextualise the neoliberal academic landscape and signpost the reader towards a hopeful solution for emancipatory teaching, one that seeks to create inclusivity and shared learning environments, and leads to confronting current forms of oppression rooted in colonial capitalism that shape and perpetuate radicalised inequalities. They challenge what they have described as 'pedagogic inertia' (p.14) and each chapter suggests innovative educational technologies and modern pedagogies that are founded on a cutting-edge curricula, based on shared learning rather than a teacher-led system.

The overview of each chapter is a helpful guide and provides a concise synopsis and insight into each of the interests presented. I was particularly taken with the notion of infusing critical conversations that address key issues around gender identity and white supremacy that exist within a dominant culture of masculinity, again emphasising the real driver of racism is capitalism.

Noteworthy is the critical analysis of Ledwith's emancipatory praxis and hook's assertion that things must happen outside the classroom to action what is taught within. Above all, I found the discussion on neurodiversity in adults, an excellent informative exploration of embracing varied learning styles and instigating inclusivity with passion and empathy. This calls for implementing a universal design for learning (UDL).

Reoccurring themes throughout the book challenge the reader to critically reflect and then take radical remedial collective action to transform draconic systems steeped in a deficit model. The traditional system promotes bureaucratic managerialism, ethnocentric colonial mindsets, and fosters ever-increasing repressive capabilities of authoritarian regimes through digital alienation.

Some helpful suggestions to address these issues include instigating social movements and global solidarity; promoting innovative emancipatory pedagogy; and a sharper focus on a strength-based approach to harness the student's cognitive ability and learning styles in a supportive inclusive caring environment that reflects a Rogerian-centric humanistic approach. A very important suggestion to end with is the need to recognise the psychosocial experience of the teacher and address the demoralizing lack of respect for their professionalism through low pay, inadequate support, and heavy workloads.

The book offers bite-size chapters covering a range of important issues that the reader can dip in and out of and still see the thread of structural oppression driven by a neoliberal agenda. There are practical insights for educators and some useful innovative examples and suggestions for creating critical dialogue that is hoped will extend beyond a group hemmed in by bureaucratic systems and market driven goals.

I was particularly drawn to the passion of each of the authors to reimagine the classroom as a site for radical possibility through creative curricula, with a dedicated purpose to rebuild social cohesion and challenge the dominant economic paradigm. On a negative point, I am not yet convinced of the value of 'Afterwords', as it evoked feelings of voyeurism.

Would I recommend this to my community development students as a taster book to encourage critical dialogue? Yes.

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Book Review: *The Routledge International Handbook of Equity and Inclusion in Education*

PAUL DOWNES, GUOFANG LI, LORE VAN PRAAG AND STEPHEN LAMB (EDS) 2024
ROUTLEDGE
ISBN: 9781032253893
REVIEWED BY JANE O'KELLY

This substantial publication aims to explore equity and inclusion within education in terms of poverty, social class, and ethnicity including intersectionality and gender. The 31 essays in this volume acknowledge and recognise the voices of learners who may be at risk of exclusion or marginalisation, and offers insight into the link between health and education for vulnerable groups and the need for reform across systems. The essays are of interest to an academic audience and are organised under six themes, including international approaches to funding modules and structures for equity and inclusive systems, the links between health and education, and agency and empowerment. Although much of the focus is on compulsory education settings, the learning from new approaches, mindsets, challenging systems and structures are of interest to all.

The essay on improving literacy outcomes of socioeconomically excluded students by Kennedy and Shiel is also relevant to adult learners. The definition of literacy is discussed and explored in terms of the UNESCO (2023) understanding of literacy as 'a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation and communication' (p.449). The quality of oral expressive skills and its importance for success in life, and the skill of writing and creating text in different forms is a 'gateway to lifelong learning, employment and social inclusion' (Camacho et al., 2021). The link between socioeconomic status and gaps in literacy achievement are well described, with the OECD (2018) noting that 'disparities in performance related to SES [socioeconomic status] can widen throughout student's lives', and that it is important that 'children develop individual literacy skills to their individual potential by age 8-9 or earlier' (p.450). An interesting aspect of the authors' examination of gaps in reading literacy at primary and post-primary level across the EU

refers to reading loss in the summer months, where children from low SES or marginalised communities is equivalent to over a month's worth of instruction, while children from high SES communities gain a month.

The authors review the literature on interventions focused on reading and writing. Some effective practices that may have resonance for adult literacy tutors include integrated discussion around reading comprehension (literary, aesthetic and critical) with comprehension strategy instruction specifically focusing on metacognition and self-regulated learning, peer tutoring, high-quality feedback to learners, and collaboration among tutors (p.458). The authors emphasise the provision of sufficient daily time for this work in order for the higher dimensions of literacy to develop.

The essay, 'Exploring Immigrant women's learning experience in multicultural societies' by Zhu and Liu explores the current situations and challenges that immigrant women face in education and learning (p.494). This fascinating examination of immigrant women's views and experiences of learning across health, education, community and work provides an inspiring insight into immigrant mothers educational investment for their children and also a sobering reminder (p.499) of how immigrant women of colour have been 'put in their place' by way of 'gender stereotypes, double standards, glass ceilings and restricted opportunity structures' (Choo and Ferree, 2010). The authors reference Guo (2010) who proposes 'engaging the immigrant standpoint as a pathway to foster more socially equitable and just lifelong learning' by ensuring participation in education from 'socially and culturally differentiated groups' (p.498). They contend that the experience of female immigrants' learning in precarious work environments demonstrate that 'gender is raced, and race is gendered' (p.499). They suggest the use of an Integrative Educational Framework (IEF) that will allow adult educators to reflect on their own positionality and relation to others by examining the complexities of social categories and structural power, to combat xenophobia and discrimination through education and to build allyship between communities to affirm emancipatory learning and social actions. In my experience, the ethos of Irish Adult and Community Education affirms these aims and endeavours to implement them.

The handbook is bookended by the editor's introduction and conclusion that achieve the difficult job of synthesising and presenting the 'emerging movements that can underpin the multi-layered framework of equitable inclusive systems in education' (p.521). The issues, theory and policy explored and described in this handbook are complex, global, and challenging, and

they concern every one of us. The conclusions present conceptual directions that propose integrating a human rights-based approach to equitable inclusive systems, expanding equity as a differentiation of need and what is called 'a hermeneutic of suspicion'. This phrase, coined by Ricoeur (1970), requires us to 'critically question' how systems of inclusion and equity can be distorted by corporate power and vested interests (p.530). Adult and community educators may recognise a similar concept from Freire (1972) of 'false generosity' of do-gooders who wish to help the oppressed, targeting the symptoms of an unjust society rather than addressing the causes.

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Policy Review: *Global Citizens 2030 Strategy – Ireland's Talent and Innovation Strategy*

DEPARTMENT OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE (2024)

REVIEWED BY LAURA AUSTEN-GRAY AND JEMMA LEE

Ireland's Talent and Innovation Strategy *Global Citizens 2030* was launched in January 2024. The strategy outlines Ireland's ambitions to embed excellence in talent and innovation into its global footprint. Notably, it is Ireland's first international strategy to include the breadth of tertiary education, and research and innovation systems. While the strategy focuses heavily on the Higher Education sector, there are opportunities for Adult and Community Education as the move towards a unified tertiary system ensures the inclusion of Further Education and Training (FET).

The key mechanism for providing opportunities for internationalisation to Adult and Community organisations is the Erasmus+ programme. Erasmus+ is the EU's programme to support education, training, youth, and sport in Europe. It is co-funded in Ireland by the European Commission and the Irish Government, and coordinated nationally for Adult Education by Léargas. European development has supported a substantial increase in the funding available to Adult Education Erasmus+ mobility projects in recent years, rising from less than €800,000 in 2021 to over €2 million in 2024.

Erasmus+ provides funding for Adult Education organisations to share best practice, innovate, and co-create programmes, tools, and resources to address goals across the six pillars of the *Global Citizens 2030* strategy through partnership and collaborative projects. Mobility projects fund Adult and Community Education organisations to send their staff, volunteers, or learners to another country to learn and share with their peers. Opportunities for staff to attend training courses, job shadow, and other such professional development activities have been available for some time, but adult learner mobilities were a new addition to the programme in 2021.

The Adult Education field within Erasmus+ covers a broad range of non-vocational education, including formal, non-formal, and informal learning. This can include libraries, museums, prisons, NGOs, and community education organisations. An Erasmus+ mobility project can send either individual learners, or groups of learners, to other countries for peer learning, work-based learning or other innovative learning. Erasmus+ is a unique opportunity for adult learners to gain an international learning experience while in a supportive environment.

An important element of the strategy is ensuring that underrepresented groups are included in the move towards global citizenship and this emphasis is also present within Erasmus+. There are specific financial inclusion supports available for people with fewer opportunities to take part including funding towards passports, visa applications, climate appropriate clothes, and transporting medical/mobility equipment.

Global Citizens 2030 highlights the need to have a 'global perspective… to find the solutions to the grand challenges of our time' (Government of Ireland, 2024, p.2). To achieve this, it is essential that adult educators and learners have opportunities to connect with their European peers to learn from innovative practices as well as to share their experiences from the Irish perspective.

Erasmus+ learner mobilities allow adult learners to experience studying aboard, fostering greater cultural awareness, and promoting language learning (although activities can take place through English). Erasmus+ also helps to students to enhance essential life skills such as adaptability and problem-solving.

A recent study which focused on the Vocational Education and Training (VET) field of Erasmus+ looked at the acquisition of transversal skills through mobility projects. It found that work placements abroad had a transformative effect on VET learners, supporting them to rapidly develop key transversal skills such as confidence, self-awareness, and independent functioning, and 'that the transformative benefit of these skills impact the individual in their life and work' (Cleary, 2023, p.3).

The opportunities to host visitors from across Europe here in Ireland should not be underestimated. The Erasmus+ programme enhances the quality of education, learning, and skills-development by promoting the exchange of best practices, innovative teaching and research methods, and professional development opportunities for participants, staff, educators, and practitioners.

Erasmus+ facilitates the creation of international networks, strengthens collaboration between institutions, and supports innovative projects that have a transformative impact on individuals, organisations, and communities.

Global Citizens 2030 significantly focuses on the Higher Education sector. However, there are ample opportunities available for adult and community educators as well. It is crucial that staff and learners avail of these opportunities and secure their place in a globally connected society.

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Policy Review: *Learner Support in Further Education and Training: Towards a Consistent Learner Experience – A Framework Guide*

SOLAS (2024)
REVIEWED BY AISLINN BRENNAN AND MAEVE O'GRADY

This Framework Guide represents a collaborative effort by SOLAS, the state agency for funding Further Education and Training (FET) in the Republic of Ireland, and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), the national representative body for 16 local statutory FET providers. It was produced in 2024 by the ETBI/SOLAS Learner Support Programme Board, which comprised five Education and Training Board (ETB) FET Directors, the ETBI Inclusion Unit Manager and Director of FET, and the SOLAS Director of Learning Support. An accompanying position paper was also produced.

The current SOLAS FET strategy focuses on three main areas: building skills, fostering inclusion, and facilitating pathways. Fostering inclusion depends upon providing supports for learners. Section 6.1 of the Strategy notes 'substantial variations in the nature and level of support' and pledges 'consistent and integrated support offered to all learners in all FET settings' (SOLAS, 2020, p. 45). This Framework Guide and Position Paper are a response.

The Framework Guide comprises twenty-one pages and contains a series of conceptual diagrams. There are three images on page seven: the first two present the links between the three strategic pillars of skills, pathways, and inclusion and the four inclusion priorities of Literacy and Numeracy, Embedding FET in the Community, Target Priority Cohorts, and Consistent Learner Supports, as mentioned in the current FET Strategy (SOLAS 2020). An arrow leads the reader to the third diagram containing six key areas for coordinating supports in each ETB to enhance the learner experience. The next diagram on page nine, The Learner Supports Pyramid, depicts how learner supports can be distributed. It describes a continuum of support and separates academic and study-related supports from those related to personal, social and wellbeing

supports. It distinguishes between supports for all, for few, and for some. The fifth diagram (p.13) categorises learner supports into four groups: Direct, External, Indirect, and Integrated Supports. The sixth diagram (p.15) contains three interwoven areas: Personal and Social Supports, Health and Wellbeing Supports, and Activities Supporting Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion. The final diagram on page 17 sets out the function of a Central Coordinating Resource at ETB level, with Action Areas in three parts: Linking learners to the supports; Supporting practitioners to support learners; and Facilitating staff to adopt supports such as Universal Design Learning (UDL).

The Framework Guide has many merits. It makes clear the connections between the inclusion priorities articulated in the FET Strategy and the ETB's role to co-ordinate the provision of consistent learner supports. The Categorisation of Learner Supports diagram could be used in conjunction with diagram six on Personal and Social, Health and Wellbeing Supports and Activities Supporting Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion as a starting point for ETBs to map their current offerings and identify areas that need to be addressed. If there is the will, appetite, and resources at the ETB level, this Framework has the potential to scaffold dialogue, meaningful collaboration, reflection, and planning. This approach will move FET closer to delivering on its support responsibilities to learners, SOLAS, Qualifications and Quality Ireland (the accrediting body for FET), and those outlined in 'implementing the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty' (IHREC, 2019).

There are some omissions: no parameters, baselines, benchmarking, key performance indicators or monitoring of goal achievement. Readers might also expect to see a roadmap on how to get to the point of 'consistent' FET learner support within individual ETBs and across the sixteen ETBs but will be disappointed. The language is carefully noncommittal: the word 'Towards' in the Guide's title perhaps reflects the acknowledgement in the Position Paper (p.4) that this is a 'stepping stone' in this direction. Resource allocation is always a critical consideration, and constraints may preclude consistent learner support across programmes within an individual ETB. There may be unintended consequences if resources are redeployed in the reach for consistency.

We see the Framework Guide as a starting point without a clear vision. However, it enables all ETBs to use the same Framework Guide to map their learner supports and find a way towards consistency in provision.

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Notes

Notes

The Adult Learner is the Irish journal for adult and community education founded in the mid 1980s and is published by AONTAS.

Its aim is to serve the needs of the adult education and lifelong learning community both in Ireland and internationally by providing a forum for critical discussion and reflection. The journal seeks to make new knowledge easily accessible to the widest possible audience through emphasising the importance of describing and critiquing practice and through publishing the results of research. The journal gives priority to subject matter that addresses issues of community, citizenship and learning and which focus on disadvantage, literacy and equality. It also includes contributions on how adults learn in formal, non-formal and informal settings including life and work contexts.

The journal provides a forum for publication and dissemination of reflections on research, policy and practice in the broad field of adult and community education.

The journal can also be viewed on the AONTAS website, where further details on how individuals can make contributions are made available each year. Visit www.aontas.com for more information.

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