

## Adult Literacy - A Core Issue in Tackling Educational Disadvantage

Since 1980, NALA ( National Adult Literacy Agency) has consistently worked towards improving the standards of adult literacy provision by lobbying for increased recognition of the work of paid and voluntary staff, an increase in the resources available to the service and a national literacy policy. The year 1997 was a watershed in achieving recognition, resources and representation.

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NALA and AONTAS co-ordinated *Campaign 2000 - Learning Through Life*, a pre-election campaign which saw all those involved in political life bombarded with demands for full recognition of adult literacy and adult education in Ireland. The press launch to highlight the content of our campaign was well attended by the media whose imaginations were in particular caught by the extent of the adult literacy problem in Ireland and the heavy reliance on volunteers in service delivery.

### **POLITICAL PROMISES**

The response of political parties in their Election manifestos varied: Fianna Fail promised to double the Adult Literacy and Community Education (ALCE) budget and to put in place a National Literacy Policy; Democratic Left promised to double the ALCE budget also; Labour emphasised the need for targeting the long-term unemployed who had literacy difficulties; Fine Gael advocated increasing access to literacy schemes. It was however significant that all the major political parties made specific reference to adult literacy and to NALA.

The appointment of Willie O'Dea as the first Minister of State with specific responsibility for Adult Education was the next major development. Initial meetings with Minister O'Dea confirmed the Government's commitment to tackle the adult literacy problem in light of the pending publication of the Irish results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). This commitment was

demonstrated by the announcement that the Department of Education was working on the first Green Paper on Adult Education. It was promised that a national literacy policy would be at the core of this document. NALA was invited by the Minister for Education to make a submission outlining the requirements for a high quality adult literacy service throughout Ireland.

### **IRISH ADULT LITERACY RESULTS POOR**

Coinciding with these developments was the leak of the Irish results of the IALS to the media during the summer. From the first group of seven countries surveyed, only Poland had a higher number of people with literacy difficulties than Ireland. Minister O'Dea responded to the news by reiterating the Government's commitment to seriously addressing the adult literacy issue. This was to be done in consultation with NALA.

The policy implications of adult literacy levels were addressed in NALA'S submission to the Inter-Departmental Policy Committee of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS). The submission stressed that efforts to raise literacy levels amongst our population, must involve appropriate interventions for children and adults. A working group comprising representatives from a variety of government departments and agencies was established to co-ordinate activities addressing the the adult literacy problem. It was now widely accepted that the adult literacy issue was the concern of a variety of sectors, in particular those dealing with educational disadvantage. A policy framework drawn up for the NALA-Integra Consortium was adopted as a model of how government departments and agencies might begin the process of inter-departmental co-operation and development in this area.

The International Literacy Day conference held on 27th September continued the progressive momentum of the year with guest speakers from a range of different settings, all of whom influence social, educational and employment policy. The event received widespread media coverage including RTE News. The advertisement campaign on RTE 1 and Network 2 television, which ran during and beyond National Literacy Awareness Week, resulted in a threefold increase in the number of referral calls received by the Agency.

### **SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF LITERACY PROBLEMS**

The official publication of the Irish results of the IALS in October 1997, confirmed the extent of the adult literacy problem in Ireland: 1 in 4 adults with

very low levels of basic skills and a further 30% of the adult population with below average literacy skills. The report also confirmed the fact that those with the lowest literacy skills, i.e. Level 1, were far more likely to be unemployed or in low paid employment, watched more television and read fewer books. Participation in community activity was also far less among those with poor reading skills.

The results of the IALS have had a major impact on the response to adult literacy from a number of government departments. In the context of tackling social exclusion, long-term unemployment and educational disadvantage, it has become a matter of urgency to put in place measures targeted at increasing literacy levels among the marginalised.

### **GOVERNMENT POLICY NEEDED**

The recently published *Further Results from the IALS* (1997) showed that of twelve countries surveyed, Ireland revealed the highest unemployment rate for those who scored at the lowest levels of literacy proficiency. The Celtic Tiger has not created or sustained employment for those with low literacy skills. The report concluded that improving adult literacy skills must be part of the policy response to tackle persistent unemployment.

It is important to note that the survey sought to identify literacy levels to cover demands at work, in the home and in the community. It did not divide the population crudely into those who are literate and those who are not. Therefore, the 500,000 people who scored at Level 1 are able to perform at best, only the simplest of tasks, i.e., locate a single piece of information in a simple text. Given the fact that 58% (930,000) of the adult population in Ireland left school at or before the junior cycle of second level, it is not surprising that 1 in 4 adults have literacy difficulties.

### **BARRIERS TO ADULT BASIC EDUCATION**

The NALA-Integra project carried out research into access and participation among 160 adult learners situated in 16 literacy schemes throughout the country. Its aim was to identify the main barriers to participation in adult basic education and to make recommendations on how to increase access to, and participation in, adult literacy schemes. The participation rate in schemes nation-wide is as low as 1% of those estimated to have literacy difficulties.

One of the most striking features of the research findings was the extent to which

the adult learners who were interviewed were convinced that their experience of poverty as children had contributed to their literacy difficulty. As children they felt that the treatment meted out in schools was often based on the socio-economic status of their families. This was the perception of participants in both urban and rural areas and across the age ranges. Many of the adult learners commented on the attitudes of their parents to education and on the role played by parents and home atmosphere in their subsequent difficulties.

In terms of employment, research participants spoke about their work situations, often expressing regret and frustration. A number pointed out that they had turned down promotional and training opportunities due to inadequate literacy skills. They also felt that their earning potential was limited by their educational attainment. Although few research participants joined the literacy service for employment related reasons, almost 80% perceived an improvement in their job prospects from improving their basic skills.

### **MOTIVATION FOR RETURN TO EDUCATION**

Most of the research participants were parents and as a result of their own experiences were determined that their own children would not be educationally disadvantaged. There is a strong correlation between the education level of parents and children's academic achievements. A positive educational environment in the home is crucial to children's achievement in school.

The desire to have a positive impact on their children's education motivated the vast majority of those interviewed to return to learning. Some younger men wished to improve their employment prospects or enter a specific training programme. Unfortunately overcoming the stigma attached to literacy difficulties significantly delayed many in their return to the literacy service by many years.

### **POSITIVE OUTCOMES**

Among the many benefits of returning to adult basic education, increased confidence was cited by all research participants. Participation in a range of other educational and community based activities was for many an unplanned outcome of returning to learning. In general, for most people their lives had changed very much for the better.

The NALA pre-budget campaign at the end of 1997 resulted in the ALCE Budget increase from £2 to over £4 million with the proviso that the additional resources

are to be spent on the development of adult literacy services, in particular providing more than two hours tuition per week. It is acknowledged within the Department of Education that more resources will be needed to deal with the ever increasing number of learners returning to adult basic education.

Significant breakthroughs have been achieved in the last twelve months, essentially through the combined efforts of all those involved in the adult literacy movement in Ireland, greatly aided by the powerful IALS research results. There are many lessons to be learnt from 1997 that will inform how NALA can move further towards the goal of realising a nation-wide high quality literacy service.

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