

Paper presented at the Fifth Annual Conference on Special Education, IATSE,
St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, June 10-12, 1993.

Adult Literacy Education Ireland: Issues for Forward Development

In the fifteen years since the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) was founded many important advancements have taken place in the Irish context - not the least of them being the constructive partnership that has evolved with the Department of Education and other state agencies. The need to maintain and cherish the ethos of student centred learning through voluntary non-professional commitment and initiative is, however, a concern for the future.

GERALDINE MERNAGH is Director of the National Adult Literacy Agency in Dublin.

INTRODUCTION

The National Adult Literacy Agency is a co-ordinating, campaigning and training agency for those working in literacy and Adult Basic Education. It provides direct support for literacy/ABE practitioners by running training programmes, carrying out research projects, producing learning materials, raising issues of concern to Literacy Workers and disseminating models of good practice. NALA also works in consultation with policy makers by recommending standards of good practice and promoting awareness of the literacy problem.

ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION IN IRELAND: BEGINNINGS

In 1973 interest in the literacy needs of adults was generated through a report by the committee on Adult Education in Ireland (commonly known as the Murphy Report), and through developments in the provision of literacy in the United Kingdom. This led to the establishment of a pilot project, the Dublin Literacy Scheme, in the Dublin Institute for Adult Education. There has been no formal research on levels of adult illiteracy at a national level. For many years, the National Adult Education Agency estimated the number of adults with severe reading and writing difficulties to be about 100,000 or about 5% of the adult

population. This figure reflected the estimates of the adult literacy problem that were being used in the United Kingdom at that time and in a discussion document on adult literacy circulated by the Department of Education in Ireland in 1986.

In 1980, NALA drew up a constitution establishing an Executive Committee elected by the membership to further the aims of literacy. At present there is a membership of approximately 1,100 which includes bodies such as The National Association of Adult Education, Combat Poverty Agency, Rehabilitation Institute, The Conference of Religious of Ireland, Trade Unions, FÁS - The National Training Agency, Community Training Workshops, Traveller Workshops, Youthreach Initiatives, Public Libraries and Literacy Schemes as well as individual students, tutors, trainers, organisers and others.

A DECADE OF DEVELOPMENTS

In 1982, NALA conducted a survey of literacy provision and found that the main characteristics of literacy schemes at that time were:

- heavy reliance on volunteers and inadequate training for tutors
- little or no funding for organisation or support services resulting in limited materials and resources
- predominately 1:1 tuition, largely based in the home of either tutor or learner.

In 1984, the report of the government-appointed commission on adult education recommended that courses in basic education should be free of charge and that paid literacy organisers should be appointed in each local education authority area. In response the government allocated one million Irish pounds to literacy and community education over the three year period 1984 to 1987.

In 1985, the Department of Education allocated a grant in aid for NALA to establish a National office, a small staff team and a materials resource room. The Agency produced its first policy document *Guidelines for Good Adult Literacy Work* in 1985, revised and updated in 1991 and a *Guidelines for Tutor Training* in 1987, revised in 1993. In 1990 - The social partners and the government drew up a programme for social and economic progress. A specific commitment was made to tackling the literacy problem at a preventative level as well as allocating specific resources to adult literacy programmes.

From 1991 to 1993, the role of NALA in training literacy personnel was reinforced by the allocation of a special grant from the Department of Education to organise and implement national and regional training events. Following a number of national and regional student writing and training weekends in 1993, the first national student conference took place in Galway in June of that year.

ACKNOWLEDGING ROLE OF THE NON-PROFESSIONAL TUTOR

One of the central concerns for literacy organisers and their students is that of student participation. Many of NALA's members are concerned about the transition from what was originally an entirely voluntary movement to a more organised, paid and professional literacy service. They fear that this will lead to a loss of democratic accountability and the tradition of student centred learning.

The strength of the movement has always been that the momentum to provide help for adults with reading and writing difficulties came from concerned individuals and community groups. There was a process of discovery emerging from groups of largely "non professional" volunteers who devised methods and approaches for the delivery of literacy tuition which depended on the ultimate test "is it helping students to learn what they consider relevant in their lives?"

Therefore what is important is that any record of developments in literacy should (i) acknowledge the role of the "non professional" in identifying and tackling the literacy problem and (ii) recognise the random as well as the more structured responses to the problem which emerged from the wide range of statutory, non statutory and voluntary groups who sought to tackle the problem at different stages and (iii) consider the heightened awareness for the literacy problem at a national level against a backdrop of social and economic developments at an international level.

ISSUES IN PARTNERSHIP WITH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The voluntary nature of the literacy movement in its early stage gave it the autonomy to establish a literacy practice sensitive to the particular culture and needs of the adult learners. However the limitations of a literacy service heavily dependent on volunteers are apparent. If access to help with reading and writing is a right, then the existing patchy and restricted literacy service is unacceptable. Discussion concerning increased partnership between the Department of Education and NALA raised some of the following issues.

It was argued that a voluntary organisation like NALA would be able to use their direct involvement with literacy workers on the ground to reflect a real picture of the problem and suggest some effective ways of tackling it. NALA hoped that such an exchange of views could strengthen its ability to influence policy changes and the ways in which statutory bodies function. However it was recognised that the success of such a partnership requires that the government body guarantees that funding on an ongoing and flexible basis, as well as recognising NALA's independence and the right to voice the frustrations and needs of people experiencing reading and writing difficulties.

ADULT LITERACY AND THE GOVERNMENT GREEN PAPER

In 1992 the Department of Education produced a "Green Paper" entitled *Education for a Changing World*. This is a historic document in so far as adult literacy is given a specific section with proposals and recommendations for its future development. A White Paper is due to appear in the near future. The significance of these developments is that literacy is beginning to appear on the political agenda and is being discussed in the broader context of lifelong learning and adult education and training. NALA in consultation with its membership used their response to the document as an opportunity to assess developments in literacy provision to date and reflect on the way forward.

In the light of these developments, it is clear that we are presently in a situation where the idea of a partnership between the formal policy-making and funding bodies, e.g. the Department of Education and FÁS (The National Training Agency) and the local literacy schemes is at a critical stage in its evolution. There is success implicit in securing the commitment of such bodies to tackle the literacy problem. However this is accompanied by the challenge of working out the terms for the partnership which are essential if the partnership is to be mutually rewarding.

DEVELOPMENTS AS A RESULT OF OFFICIAL LINKAGES

To date there has been a constructive dialogue between NALA and the Department of Education. Recognition and support has been given to the distinctive ethos of student centred literacy practice. At present we are waiting for the publication of the White Paper on Education and the results of a survey carried out by the Educational Research Centre on the Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme. These documents will play a key role in deciding upon future literacy provision. We are concerned about the degree to which our

views and our understanding of the issues facing our members will be considered for the development of policy. The following are some of the concerns which our members have expressed in recent discussions.

MAINTAINING THE ETHOS OF A STUDENT-CENTRED PRACTICE

In this context literacy is understood as a process which equips people with the skills and knowledge to assume more control over their lives. This is particularly important as a more narrow concept of functional literacy is gaining increased recognition. The extension of literacy provision into a wide range of settings other than community-based schemes raises the question about who defines the content and aims of the literacy programmes and what definition of literacy they are promoting.

NATIONAL FUNDING AND LOCAL PROVISION

Local literacy schemes play a central role in providing literacy tuition for the general public. Their success is due to the fact that they respond to each individual's learning needs, they are culturally relevant, open, informal, confidential and free of charge. Although the Green Paper acknowledged "the substantial contribution" of volunteer tutors it does not recognise either the extent to which the literacy movement depends on volunteers or the high turnover of volunteer tutors. There is a need for a core of paid personnel if the quality and continuity of the literacy service is to be guaranteed.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND EVALUATION

All the partners in the literacy learning process i.e. students, tutors, organisers and funding bodies are increasingly concerned to find ways by which progress can be measured and the overall effectiveness of schemes can be evaluated. The way in which this is done must be in keeping with the principles of good adult literacy work. Literacy practitioners have held as central that all evaluation should actively involve students. If evaluation is to record the real progress made by students then it must take into account the motivation and achievements as expressed by the students. Our work with students indicates that while students may initially describe their goals in terms of acquiring practical skills, as they progress in literacy tuition they place at least equal importance on benefits they are gaining in personal development and confidence.

GAINS EXPRESSED BY ADULT LITERACY STUDENTS

“I found a new life opening up for me”.

“Eventually I would like to become more involved in farming organisations and be confident enough to attend meetings”

“In another few years I am hoping to be able to teach someone with trouble in reading and writing”.

Any attempt to measure progress should enable students to see how they are moving towards achieving their goals.

IMPROVING STATUS AND TRAINING OF LITERACY WORKERS

The overdependence on the volunteer combined with inadequate training and career routes for literacy workers means that there is a very large turnover of literacy personnel with subsequent loss of skill and expertise from the literacy service. Many literacy workers would like the security of some form of accreditation which would formally recognise their expertise. A further exploration is needed to examine a form which is appropriate to the philosophy and methodology of adult literacy. It is also important that any system of accreditation would protect and not exclude those expert practitioners with little formal education, perhaps coming from the same cultural background as the student.

For many years literacy tutors have been among the few adult educators to receive specific training for their work through local and national training programmes. Tutor trainers have brought together their own ideas, experiences and methods of working to create comprehensive guidelines for high quality tutor training. There already exists a wealth of expertise in terms of materials and methodology which has emerged from the work of tutor trainers in local literacy schemes. There is a need for a clearer commitment to developing initial and in-service training with a coherent long term plan.

STUDENT ACCREDITATION

There is a growing demand for an Irish form of student accreditation in Literacy/Adult Basic Education. Such accreditation must reflect the principles and philosophy that underline a learner-centred approach, in both its form and its assessment procedures.

It also needs to have currency and credibility with those to whom the resulting certificate is presented whether they be employers or gatekeepers to further education and training. We believe that it is now time for an Irish-based qualification where progression and certification are linked to mainstream education and where credit accumulation and prior learning are recognised towards a certificate. The reasons which students give for seeking accreditation range from personal satisfaction: "I wanted to have something to show for all my hard work" to a desire to improve their employment opportunities - "I know that today you need exams to get any kind of a job."

There is also evidence to suggest that employers are looking for increasingly higher levels of qualification for job recruitment. However some students do not wish to be accredited and argue strongly that learning for the pleasure of learning is a valuable end in itself.

PROMOTING STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

It is important to ensure that developments in literacy provision should actively encourage student involvement in all aspects of literacy organisation, training and practice. The literacy service should belong to students and not simply be delivered to them.

NALA believes that central to good literacy practice is the active encouragement and support of the learner to reflect critically on experience and to take appropriate action where necessary. Therefore it is important that student involvement is not just an endorsement of the learner-centred approach to tuition but a commitment to helping students take responsibility for the quality and direction of the service. Some of the key areas for student involvement are in tutor training; representation on management committees of literacy schemes; publicity; accreditation; assessment.

There is an implicit danger in approaching the recruitment of students by only identifying target groups. This may mean that adults with reading and writing problems outside these target groups are neglected. As an increased emphasis is placed on improving the competitiveness of a work force there is a danger that the most vulnerable section of the adult population with severe difficulties in reading and writing will be ignored. We know that one of the more effective methods of recruiting students is by word of mouth from students who have already returned for help. We need to continue developing ways by which

students who have come back for help with reading and writing can assist in the recruitment of others.

CONCLUSION

The coming year will witness many important developments in the literacy movement in Ireland. The National Adult Literacy Agency has the important task of ensuring that the wealth of experience which has emerged from literacy practitioners in all aspects of provision should be taken into account in the formulation of policy. In tracing the development of the Irish literacy movement and the increased partnership with the Department of Education, it is clear that much has been gained by the democratic and voluntary origins of the movement. Perhaps the most significant contributions have been made in the areas of developing materials, a flexible methodology appropriate to adult learners, encouragement of student involvement and the promotion of a better understanding of the literacy problem at a community level. However a piecemeal and random approach to the development of the literacy service is no longer appropriate.

The rapid rate of change within the literacy movement means that it is even more important that students are supported to keep pace with these developments. This means creating forums where students can comment on and assess the value of new initiatives. There is a need to run a wide range of training programmes for students who wish to acquire particular skills e.g. facilitating groups and meetings, making media and publicity presentations, developing learning materials and information news sheets. Measures to enable active student participation need to be put in place or students will be isolated from the decision making process. There is a danger that policy will be decided without an adequate grasp of the needs of these adults for whom the service is designed.