

Adult Literacy Then and Now: An ALO's Perspective

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It would be easy to forget at this point, given that Adult Literacy has attained a status and respectability within the Adult Education sector previously undreamt of, that it was once a movement, campaigning on a platform of human rights.

The Past

As a professional educator who moved from the formal to the non-formal sector in the mid-eighties the lack of status and recognition being afforded to the issue of adult literacy at the time presented a formidable challenge. What came as an even greater shock was that in most areas of the country adult basic education was operating as a charitable function. The most important event in the calendar year of many schemes was the flag day where money was raised for the operating costs of what was essentially a function of the state. Huge energy was being channelled into activities which, by presenting learners as the deserving poor, compounded the stigma already attached to adult literacy. It reinforced the status quo and diverted attention away from the real issue of state responsibility. After all, the very least that should be expected of the state's education system was that its citizens would be equipped with the 3R's on leaving school. Even the most pessimistic of us never imagined the extent of its failure. It was imperative that the thinking within and outside of the movement be challenged. It wasn't aided by the fact that the whole area was cloaked in denial. Those of us working on the ground felt intuitively that we were merely accessing the tip of the iceberg. We remembered our own schooling and the boys and girls relegated to the back of the class in every classroom, second-class citizens. They were the ones frequently kept at home to look after the sick parent or the new arrival. They took on menial jobs at an early age because every penny

counted and as soon as they got the chance they left school behind them, glad of the escape, wanting only never to go back.

Those who did find the courage to go back in adulthood were so low in self-esteem and self-confidence that it soon became apparent that lack of literacy skills was only the presented symptom of a much larger set of emotional, social, economic and educational issues. What the literacy scheme could offer was one hour a week of one-to-one tutoring by a volunteer tutor. Many of the volunteers were emerging either poorly trained or in some cases with no training at all. They were, however, deeply committed people who empathised with the adult learner and understood the human side of the issue. Many lives were changed for the better and tremendous work was carried out around the kitchen table in the homes of either the volunteer or the learner by people whose only reward was the satisfaction of seeing at first hand the development of human potential. Success, however, was hit and miss, very unstructured and the drop out rate was enormous. Failure was too costly as the likelihood of those adults ever again returning to learning was remote and the whole experience only served to compound their own sense of failure.

The Role of NALA

Throughout the whole era of under-resourcing and marginalisation from the eighties through the nineties the work of the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) was crucial. It not only kept the show on the road but provided support, encouragement, recognition and training to practitioners working in the field. In all aspects of its work it embodied the principles of good practice from which all of us took example and applied that practice in our own work. Most significantly it did not prescribe. It recognised the knowledge and skills of those doing the work and drew on that expertise to develop models of good practice which were then disseminated throughout the sector. As a democratic organisation, it kept in touch with the needs of workers and learners through its AGM and assigned resources to meet those needs. It worked tirelessly for the inclusion of all voices so that at the end of the day ownership of each process rested with the members. The NALA training manual "New Ideas for Training in Adult Literacy Work" is one such example of how that process delivered for the organisation. NALA as an agency drew attention, raised awareness and nibbled away at the shroud of apathy which cloaked the issue. It provided a forum for practitioners to come together, air their views and feel less isolated. In a nutshell it was a major source of empowerment for learners and practitioners alike.

The economic upturn of the mid to late nineties and the need for a skilled workforce drew attention to that sector of society which was underskilled and underutilised in the economy. The OECD report in 1997 of the International Literacy Survey highlighted that we were more or less at the bottom of the pile with regard to the literacy level of our citizens, given that it found that 25% were functioning at the very lowest level of literacy and a further 30% were below the level for effective functioning in society. Embarrassment all around in the education system as the agenda changed subtly from being a human rights issue to an economic one of sustaining progress. The Green Paper *Adult Education in an era of Lifelong Learning* published in 1998 placed literacy firmly at the centre of adult education provision and paved the way for the Adult Literacy Development fund. It was the first major injection of funding into provision for the adult literacy sector and initiated a series of profound changes from which there can be no turning back. Even if there is a downturn in the economy and funding may not be as readily available as heretofore it can never again be said that the problem doesn't exist. That myth at least has been laid to rest and the state has taken responsibility both for prevention and remediation in the area. The White Paper 2000 *Learning for Life* set in train the National Adult Literacy Strategy and pointed out the professionalisation of the sector as being a key factor in future development.

Adult Literacy has been better placed than almost any other area of adult education in this regard. It has from the outset placed huge importance on the whole notion of training for its workers. Even in the days when delivery was haphazard there was always an acknowledgement that there was a body of knowledge and a set of skills that had to be acquired by tutors before they commenced tutoring. The development of the NALA pack 'New Ideas for Training in Adult Literacy Work', arising out of a conference of practitioners in Tramore, Co. Waterford in 1992, gave schemes a framework and a model from which they could draw. The partnership of NALA and Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) in developing an accreditation process based on this model has ensured that the ethos and values on which the literacy movement was founded could be maintained and developed. Many schemes throughout the country have succeeded in having their locally developed training programmes approved by NCEA/HETAC¹ through this process thereby enabling their tutors to gain professional accreditation. Organisers and tutors can gain

¹HETAC : The Higher Education and Training Awards Council.

professional qualifications at certificate and diploma level through the NALA/WIT Accreditation Project and many have already done so. It is thanks to the vision and commitment of literacy practitioners and other stakeholders at national and local level in the early 1990s that the accreditation route was in place when the tide came in. This has dramatically improved the quality and type of service available to the learner. It has also ensured the retention in the sector of the many committed volunteers both at organiser and tutor level who kept things going when times were tough and in the process developed strategies, resources and methods which were exemplary.

The Role of the Volunteer

The volunteer ethos has served the adult literacy sector and the state very well. But do they know it? Now that schemes are in a position, due to increased funding, to acquire paid professionals to do the job, it would appear that less value is being placed on the voluntary input. Yes, the pool of volunteers is shrinking; yes, huge time, energy and resources have to go into the recruitment and training of volunteers; yes, they have to be skilfully managed; but the payback to the learner in terms of the empathy, the commitment, going the extra mile, the willingness and the enthusiasm which is part and parcel of what the volunteer brings to a scheme is irreplaceable. It also empowers people in their own communities to take ownership of an issue and to be politicised by it. Society and the concept of lifelong learning can only be enhanced and enriched by maintaining the voluntary aspect of the literacy service. The fact that each scheme now has the wherewithal to progress the volunteer on to a professional status will enable the twin gods of value for money and ethos to be justly served. It is one aspect of the Adult Literacy Service which we cannot afford to lose.

There has been a huge increase in the numbers accessing literacy provision since the Development fund was put in place in 1998. Recruitment is now much more strategic and targeted and operates through Referral networks and partnerships with other agencies such as FÁS, Health Boards, Local Authorities and Area Development groups among others. This has led to an increase in daytime provision and intensive learning programmes. It has also led to a broadening out of the range and type of programmes available under the umbrella of Basic Education with many schemes now being involved in workplace learning and the delivery of Family Learning programmes.

Family Learning

The concept of Family Learning is a very welcome development in that the cyclical nature of the issue is being recognised and addressed. Again, schemes are using expertise developed over decades of front line delivery in developing and sharing programmes which address needs of locally based groups. However, much more dialogue needs to take place between the formal system at primary level and the non-formal adult literacy sector if major inroads are to be made in the area of prevention through family learning programmes and if the concept of lifelong learning is to become a reality.

It is an issue which could be taken up by a broker at national level such as NALA in the development of an understanding which could lead to a productive partnership. NALA's role as broker at national level has worked very effectively in the past in such areas as the FÁS/VEC Return to Education programme and the Local Authority/VEC Return to Learning course. These programmes have proven a major success at local level and enabled schemes to access, target and recruit learners in a structured way who, in the past, had been the most difficult to reach and who were unlikely of their own volition to seek provision. It also raised the status of the work being done in that through the intensive nature of the programmes tutors were now able to bring learners through the accreditation process. Many learners who never dreamed of achieving any sort of qualification have emerged from these short term programmes with upwards of two and three NCVA/FETAC modules and a new sense of motivation and willingness to progress. Such programmes also established the principle of employer responsibility in the area of training and development for employees and furnished schemes with a blueprint for dialogue and negotiation in the wider workplace.

The Role of the ALO

So what has become of the ALO in all of this? The ALOs who were up and doing long before an official decision was made with regard to who they were and what they did. The ALOs who managed, recruited, trained, matched, monitored, listened, learned and tutored, who did the job whatever it was because it needed to be done and who didn't ask, what price? The ALOs who astonished even themselves at a NALA forum in Killaloe in 1991 when formulating a job description in finding that the list of tasks was endless. Well, the list of tasks certainly hasn't shrunk but the nature of the job has certainly changed. Everything is much more planned and strategic now while the management of

budgets, staff and resources has become the primary function in a service which has developed into an integral part of the institution of the VEC. Change has always been part of the territory of Adult Literacy given the developmental nature of the work but the influence of the ALO in initiating and formulating that change and development has been eroded.

The development of the ALO network in 1996 gave a much needed lifeline of networking and communications to organisers affording them an opportunity to exchange ideas, communicate information and disseminate models of good practice. The Adult Literacy Organisers Association (ALOA) at national level provides a voice for organisers through the networks structure and ensures that issues and ideas at grassroots level are communicated upwards and at the very least receive a hearing on DES committees in areas affecting basic education. This is a structure which needs to be strengthened and supported by the DES and by VECs. Many ALOs find it difficult to contribute to the ALOA network structure due to the demands of work on the ground. They need to be facilitated and enabled to contribute to the network. The ALO's role in the future development of the literacy service is crucial and it can only enhance the quality of provision if their contribution through this avenue is supported and encouraged.

Many of the new initiatives which now impinge on the work of the Adult Literacy service are currently being developed outside of it and the values and ethos which served the movement and its members so well are undoubtedly under threat. However, it must be remembered that the guiding principles embodied in the Quality Framework developed by NALA encapsulate the ethical framework on which the service is based and provide the yardstick by which new initiatives can be measured. What must not be forgotten is that the whole thing began with the basic education needs of learners. They have to remain centre stage otherwise we will have lost our way. At the end of the day it's the quality of what emerges when the tutor and learner meet which is important. Whether that takes place around the kitchen table with a volunteer tutor, or in a state of the art adult learning centre, if the quality of that engagement doesn't deliver for the learner then everything else is meaningless. It has to continue to deliver what we have promised literacy will do: that is, to "enable people to understand and reflect critically on their life circumstances with a view to exploring new possibilities and initiating constructive change."¹²

I feel sure that W.B. Yeats would forgive me if in conclusion I take the liberty of paraphrasing some of his work as I believe it applies to many learners: *They have spread their dreams under our feet; tread softly, because we tread on their dreams.*

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²N.A.L.A. definition: "What is Literacy?" in NALA Strategic Plan 2002 – 2006 Dublin: NALA.