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RaPAL



Journal

The Research and Practice in Adult Literacies Network

Welcome

Research and Practice in Adult Literacies (RaPAL) is the only UK-wide organisation that focusses on the role of literacies in adult life. We promote effective and innovative practices in adult literacies teaching, learning and research; and support adult literacies practitioners and researchers. We enjoy engaging in debates that touch on English language and literacy, numeracy and digital skills across homes, communities and workplaces. Through our members, digital journals, conferences and fora, policy and advocacy work, we are active in Europe and have international links.

What we do

- Encourage collaborative and reflective research
- Publish a journal three times a year
- Create networks by organising events (including an annual conference) to contribute to national debate
- Believe in democratic practices in adult literacies
- Emphasise the importance of social context in literacies
- Critique current policy and practice where it is based on simplistic notions of literacy as skill
- Campaign for the rights of adults to have access to the full range of literacies in their lives

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The editorial group for 2023-2024 includes the following researchers, practitioners and practitioner-researchers: Gwyneth Allatt, Angela Cahill, Claire Cullinan, Vicky Duckworth, Sarah Freeman, Tara Furlong, Toni Lambe, Sue Lownsbrough, Jonathan Mann, Juliet McCaffery, Mary-Rose Puttick, Anne Reardon-James, Yvonne Spare and Rachel Stubbley.

RaPAL members are involved in the compilation of the journal as editors, reviewers and referees.

We are a friendly group – open to new members and new ideas. Please contact us with any contributions (views, comments, reports and articles) and do not be put off if you are new to the field or if you have not written for a publication before. The journal is written by and for all learners, tutors/teachers and researchers who want to ask questions about this field of work. It does not matter if the questions have been asked before. We want to reflect the many voices within adult literacies work and to encourage debate.

Why not join us?

Further information can be found at our website: www.rapal.org.uk

The RaPAL Journal is also available from various subscription services: EBSCO, LMInfo and Prenax. The RaPAL journal expresses a variety of views which do not necessarily reflect those of the editorial group. The RaPAL journal was designed by Image Printing Company, Lumsdale, Matlock, Derbyshire



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Note from the Journal Coordinator

Yvonne Spare *Yvonne can be contacted on journal@rapal.org.uk*

Welcome to Volume 109, our Summer edition.

Future editions

Volume 110 (Autumn/Winter 2024) **Theme to be decided**

Volume 111 (Spring/Summer 2025) **Theme to be decided**

Volunteers for both of these editions are urgently needed – please contact us if you would like further information.

Any comments about this or other editions or ideas for future content can be sent to journal@rapal.org.uk. Don't worry if your ideas for an article do not fit one of our themes – there is space in all our Journals for items of interest to our readers. Most Journal editions contain articles by new writers, including adult literacies learners. There are guidelines on our website on the [Write for Us](#) page and we offer as much support as you feel you need. As always, if you have any ideas about articles suitable for peer-review we would ask you to contact us early to allow discussion of your proposal.

Following a productive two days at Aston University, Birmingham, last year, we are again hoping to hold a day away on Friday 27th September at the same venue. There will be no charge for attendance and we will also reimburse reasonable travel expenses. Overnight accommodation is available at the venue for anyone travelling from further afield. The day will include our annual Editorial Group meeting in which we make plans for next year's journals, our AGM, and in the afternoon a strategy meeting to continue to plan for RaPAL's future. Everyone with an interest in RaPAL is very welcome to join us for all or part of the day.

Vacancies

We are still in urgent need of volunteers to put themselves forward for the main management group roles which have become vacant this year, which are **Chair, Membership Secretary, Journal Coordinator and Website Manager**. We are more than happy to discuss any of these roles formally or informally and will welcome enquiries to journal@rapal.org.uk, webweaver@rapal.org.uk or to any other current member of the management group (details inside the front cover of this edition).

We look forward to hearing from you and hope you enjoy this edition of your RaPAL Journal.

We would like to reiterate that the articles we publish are not necessarily representative of the views or position of the membership body, and we do not advocate any given course of action in any given context. We do, of course, support freedom of speech and of academic liberty, and the pragmatic achievement of objectives as a negotiated consensus.

Editorial

Anne Reardon-James and Tara Furlong

Anne Reardon-James is a multi-award-winning adult learning professional, with experience in community education, workplace learning, offender learning, further education and higher education. Anne currently works for a private training provider, supporting tutors, lecturers and assessors to complete learning and development apprenticeships.

Tara is Chair of RaPAL. She is the Director of Designing Futures Ltd, where achievements include designing and delivering national training modules; named literacy consultant on the Channel 4 adult literacy programme, The Write Offs; and research on the international comparative study, Adult Learning and COVID-19. Tara has been a school governor for a decade and holds further elected community roles in her local area.

This edition opens with ‘Reflections on neurodiversity’ by Anne Reardon-James, which provides a whistlestop tour of current inclusive thinking and resources which are available to support learning.

Michelle McGrane then leads us through ‘My journey to find and develop a successful response to a growing need in Adult Education; that of learners with both English language and Literacy needs’. The article describes a decade and a half of identifying firstly a need and subsequently integrating synthetic phonics approaches into teaching and learning before expanding the curriculum development in provision across a large geographical area.

In ‘Low literacy and homelessness: How can research inform learning provision?’, Julia Olisa presents gaps in research findings specific to literacy challenges in the homeless sector. She identifies negligible quantification of the paucity of literacy skills in the homeless population; of barriers to adult learning in those who suffer homelessness; and of effective models of good practice which address the learning needs of this cohort.

Claire Cullinan, Sam Duncan and Esther Kelly elucidate theories of cause and effect in ‘Reading the Way: A social practice approach to reading development in prisons’, with input from Sarah Turvey. Their project focuses on the role of *pleasure* in developing skills via ‘practices’, and the concept of *emergent* readers. The article details the collaborative nature of the pilot projects and, in connection with texts, the evolving identity of the reader in a community. It goes on to discuss what a social practices approach to literacy development means and how Practice Engagement Theory develops emergent readers.

'ESOL provision for refugees who have low vision or are blind' is an evaluation of the impact of technological adaptations for those adult refugee learners who are partially- or non-sighted. Dr Toni Lambe and Liz Kearney-Byrne describe the journey to increasing inclusion in curriculum design utilising Universal Design for Learning principles, and in turn recognise the learner-centred commitment of the adult learning sector.

We are pleased to be able to share a video presentation of our autumn conference keynote speech on *Using digital technologies to teach and support adult skills learners: findings from research and future directions* by Judith Alamprese. This research focused webinar outlined a literature review undertaken for the CREATE Adult Skills Network. Its objective was to use practice to inform research and vice versa, to identify considerations in building knowledge, and implications for research design. The presentation closed with recommendations drawn from looking at the efficacy of individualised text messaging and adult learner outcomes.

Professor Sam Duncan reviews *Adult Learning and Social Change in the UK: National and Local Perspectives* edited by Jules Robbins and the late Alan Rogers. Duncan celebrated 'chapters ... about local initiatives but they are also about far larger challenges, tensions and themes' and encourages readers to 'settle down with a nice drink and read it all the way through, deciding what those "somethings" are.'

We conclude with *News from the Sector* by our Chair, Tara Furlong.

We hope you enjoy settling down and reading this edition of the RaPAL Journal.

Reflections on neurodiversity

Anne Reardon-James

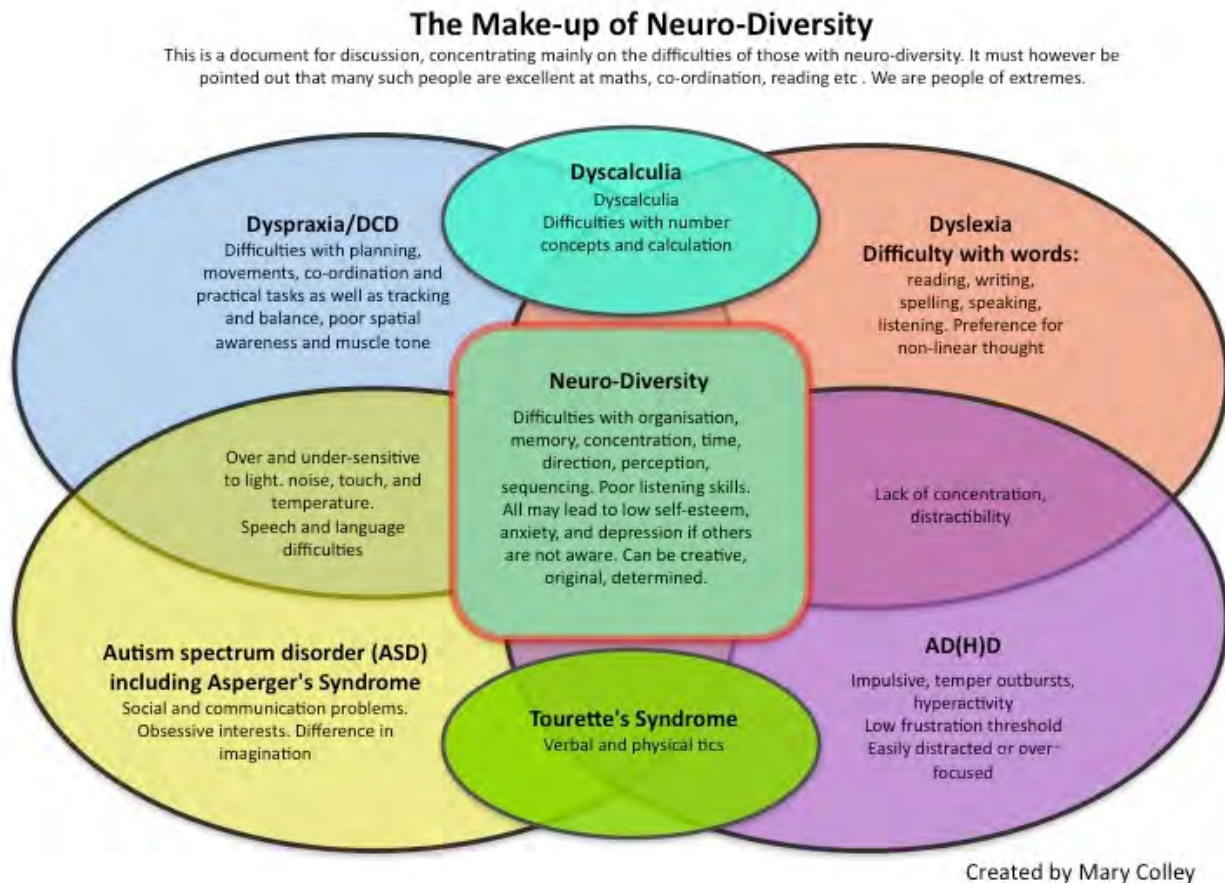
Anne Reardon-James is a multi-award-winning adult learning professional, with experience in community education, workplace learning, offender learning, further education and higher education. Anne currently works for a private training provider, supporting tutors, lecturers and assessors to complete learning and development apprenticeships.

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It feels like neurodiversity is a hot topic at the moment. It was [Neurodiversity Celebration Week](#) in the UK from the 18th - 24th March 2024, which was an ideal opportunity to increase awareness, help reduce stigma and promote acceptance. There appears to be far more reporting about neurodiversity, with increasing numbers of people (particularly women) in the Western world coming forward seeking diagnosis and support, largely due to advancements in research and understanding (Attoe and Climie, 2023; Castañeda, 2023; Moses, 2023). I have started experiencing work-based learners self-report that they either have or think they have ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), due to finding it difficult to prioritise and focus on study tasks. As a result, I felt that I needed to educate myself about it. I do not remember there being much said about neurodiversity when I completed my teaching and training degrees (other than dyslexia) and I am on a journey of curiosity and of discovery. I have attended increasing numbers of talks and courses about the subject (check out [SeedTalks](#) in particular who have knowledgeable and accessible speakers). I am certainly not a specialist or expert in neurodiversity but wanted to share strategies that I have found useful for learners, presenting findings at teacher conferences about techniques to support learners who are neurodiverse. Many of the strategies that can support literacy learners who are neurodiverse are indeed inclusive for any learner, in line with a [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) approach.

First, a description of what neurodiversity is: up to 15% of the population are thought to be neurodiverse, though this figure is likely to be higher due to underdiagnosis (ADHD Aware, 2024). Neurodiversity refers to the natural differences between people's brains, a term coined in the late 1990s by Australian sociologist Judy Singer. It is an umbrella term used to refer to differences such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC), Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia and Tourette's Syndrome. Neurodiversity behaviours and traits can cluster and overlap, affecting executive functions and can lead to dysregulation of emotions. It is important to note that there is no such thing as a 'typical' person with neurodiversity. As the term suggests, people are unique and gloriously different. There is no 'one size fits all' and people should be treated as individuals. The image below (Figure 1) shows this overlapping in pictorial form, with key features of each condition described. ADHD can lead to people being more easily distracted and to hyperfocus on subjects of interest. ASC can affect a person's ability to communicate while causing them to be good at remembering facts and pay attention to detail. Dyslexia is a

more widely recognised language processing difficulty, with strengths in problem solving, creativity and verbal communication. Dyspraxia can affect physical coordination and fine motor skills such as handwriting, which can lead to increased determination and creativity. Dyscalculia can result in challenges in acquiring mathematical skills, and strengths in intuition and strategic thinking. Last but not least, Tourette’s syndrome can cause sudden, repetitive and uncontrolled muscle movements, with people often being high-achieving and empathetic.



(Fig. 1 - taken from: <https://adhdaware.org.uk/what-is-adhd/neurodiversity-and-other-conditions/>)

There are many strategies associated with adopting an inclusive approach that can help overcome potential challenges for learners. Digital tools can be useful too, and I have included links to just some of the vast array that are out there, often with a basic version that is free to use. I would recommend trying out a couple at a time in conversation and dialogue with each learner. Otherwise, it can be a little overwhelming. What works for one person may not for another, so offer some options.

Tips for literacy learners

- ✓ Ask learners what they find helpful – use collaborative, empowering conversations.
- ✓ Focus on positives – use a strengths-based approach to learning, scaffolding from what learners feel they can do well and working towards more challenging activities over time.
- ✓ Break complex tasks down into manageable chunks – SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) targets are best.
- ✓ Use active learning strategies, such as multisensory learning, discussion and encourage note taking. The [British Dyslexia Association](#) has useful resources, factsheets and guides for teachers.
- ✓ Give learners additional time for thinking – such as ‘think, pair, share’ and planning time for any assessed discussions or presentations.
- ✓ Use planning and proofreading tools such as mind mapping, project management and text-to-speech programmes. There are many digital tools available to help, such as MyStudyBar, [Call Scotland](#), [Canva](#), [SimpleMind](#), [Trello](#), [NaturalReader](#), and [Grammarly](#) to name but a few.
- ✓ If possible and allowed by an awarding body, offer alternatives for summative assessments. For example, use recorded discussions to assess knowledge and understanding instead of assignments, or vice versa.
- ✓ Formative assessments can be fun, with so much variety in format and structure available e.g. [Kahoot](#), [Quizlet](#), [Edpuzzle](#). Bear in mind that timed activities can be discriminatory for neurodiverse learners who may need additional thinking time.

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My journey to find and develop a successful response to a growing need in Adult Education; that of learners with both English language and Literacy needs

Michelle McGrane

Michelle has a long history in Adult Education including ESOL, Literacy, Community Outreach and Family Learning. She is currently the coordinator of ESOL-Literacy Provision in Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board (DDLETB). Michelle's mission is to develop and disseminate a phonics-based learning programme for ESOL students, along with tutor training, and nationally recognised certification. Michelle welcomes comments on the ideas expressed here and can be contacted at: michellemcgrane@ddletbaes.ie

Introduction

Inspired and motivated by the growing number of voiceless learners who lack both literacy and language skills, and my endeavours to meet their learning needs, I have embraced phonics-based methods as an essential element in progressing the learning of this cohort. Moreover, my experience has been that a phonics-based approach is of huge benefit to a wider range of learners for whom literacy is a challenge. I describe some of the challenges encountered along the way and my hopes and plans for the future.

The first 10 years

I came into the world of Further Education through ESOL in 2007. At that time ESOL was very much 'an emerging practice within adult literacy in Ireland'. The largest immigration groups into Ireland (after British) were Polish and Lithuanian, followed by Romanian and Nigerian. As a tutor, my classes generally included a majority of students who had at least a basic level of education. These students would also have been familiar with 'classroom' learning and, in many cases, traditional language learning methods. However, invariably I would discover one or two had no formal education. I felt ill-equipped to respond to the needs of those learners.

Luckily, I had a brilliant coordinator and colleague who shared my interest in finding solutions; Bernie McGinley encouraged me to complete a phonics training course and then 'try it out' on those students with low/no literacy skills. I did precisely as advised and, a few short months later, we were all (students included) in agreement that the methodology held some value for us. Over the next few years of teaching and experimenting with my wonderfully patient and cooperative students, I became convinced that a phonics-based programme of learning was not only helpful to ESOL learners with little or no previous education, but that learners would be unlikely to progress past the most rudimentary level of learning without some phonics instruction.

Thus began a long journey which has been slow and not without its challenges.

Some of the challenges

My first attempts to share my thinking and collaborate with like-minded colleagues met with mixed reviews. I became aware of some attitudes which were counter to my own. Not everyone was sure that phonics was even appropriate for adults as many equated phonics with the hugely successful 'Jolly Phonics' program which had become very popular in primary schools. Without any adult-friendly material, many expressed fears that anything phonics-based meant singing, dancing and cute cartoon characters. Additionally, many tutors spoke about feeling ill-equipped to implement phonics-based methods into their teaching. Few felt trained in basic phonics knowledge or strategies. Nonetheless, my experience showed that phonics could be taught in an adult-appropriate way.

On the other hand, my lack of experience in strategic planning and project development meant it took me a while to realise that enthusiasm and anecdotal evidence was not sufficient. In order to garner support from an organisation equipped to nurture and grow my idea, I needed hard data and statistical evidence. I was going to have to back up my qualitative evidence with quantitative data.

A further challenge lay within the structuring of most adult education services. At this time, Literacy and Language were developing as somewhat separate services. Those with English as a first language were generally directed to literacy whereas those with English as a second or other language were directed to ESOL. This division presented distinct disadvantages as neither side seemed equipped to respond to the needs of learners with both deficits and traditional methods struggled to respond to new cohorts.

ESOL tutors, who tended to be trained in English as a Second Language (ESL), were at a particular disadvantage. They were more used to working with learners who had already achieved basic literacy. While these excellent practitioners made great efforts to adapt the ESL approach to the needs of their ever-diversifying class groups, many discussed their sense of helplessness when a learner presented with no literacy skills.

Despite these challenges, I remained convinced that for a growing cohort in our community, education without a fundamental 'nuts and bolts' grounding in key reading skills would lead to nothing more than a merry-go-round of disappointment and an increased sense of social exclusion. My convictions were supported by the positive feedback received following presentations at National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) conferences. I was also encouraged by the responses from management in both the ESOL and Literacy services who agreed that my presentations and proposals were of value.

Why phonics?

Certain languages, such as Finnish and Portuguese are transparent in nature. That is to say, there is just one spelling for every one sound. It is an easier spelling system than English and learners can grasp the rules quite quickly. In English, we have approximately 45 phonemes, (sounds) represented by approximately 176 graphemes (spellings). In other words, the

English language is especially opaque, (as opposed to transparent) when compared to other languages

To illustrate this, consider the phoneme 'ɪ', for example. (Note: I am using International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) Symbols here, precisely because we don't have one easy spelling for the sound). This sound (phoneme) can be carried by a number of spellings (graphemes), including:

- 'ai' as in 'rain'
- 'ay' as in 'say'
- 'ea' as in 'great' (*although this can also be a spelling for the 'i:' sound as in 'seat', and the 'ɛ' sound as in 'bread'*).
- 'a-e' as in gate (*A split digraph! The letters are not even beside one another!*)
- 'a' as in April (*although this grapheme is most commonly used for the 'æ' sound as in 'apple'*).
- 'aigh' as in 'straight'
- 'eigh' as in 'weight'
- 'ei' as in reign

Add to this bewildering array, the sounds which don't even have a 'one letter sound' to call their own. Consider the sound 'ʃ' carried by 'sh' in 'shoe', 'ti' in 'action', 'ci' in 'special', 'ss' in 'mission', 's' in 'sure'. What about the fact that many graphemes carry a range of phonemes? The letter 'y' can even boast doing the work of both consonant (as in 'yes') and vowel (as in 'any'). We begin to get a sense of the complexity and confusion that faces anyone attempting to grapple with this very arbitrary code.

Put simply, English is hard!

Synthetic Phonics

I found that *synthetic phonics* approaches provided a way of decoding this arbitrary and complex code. Synthetic phonics aims to organise the code into a manageable system of learning. The skills required are identified and embedded in the learning programme. The knowledge is conveyed in a systematic and sequential way. The process combines reading (decoding) skills with writing (encoding) skills. Furthermore, I have discovered that the approach is diagnostic in as much as it helps to identify the roadblocks which may have hampered learning in the past. As a teacher, I feel equipped to address the learning needs of my learners. My students report a previously unknown level of understanding, a confidence when decoding (reading) and a subsequent sense of empowerment, with many expressing a sense of relief and joy that 'finally' they have found a way to learn reading. They demonstrate measurable and significant progress in their reading skills. Attendance

rates and tests results also reinforce my view that phonics-based learning is and should be a key element in literacy teaching.

How does it work?

Learners embark on a systematic acquisition of both knowledge (e.g. phoneme awareness) and skills (e.g. blending). This is what defines synthetic phonics. The vital role of sound cannot be understated here. Learners develop an ability to hear sounds both individually and as blends. It is only after this learning that the application of the visual element (the written letters) is incorporated. This is perhaps the most different part of the process when compared to the more 'visual' approach used in traditional classrooms, where analytic phonics is more common. My own experience has been that the synthetic approach lends itself more comfortably to smaller groups or one-to-one situations (a luxury few of us have). Nonetheless, its benefits are undeniable when it comes to making sense of the incomprehensible for many learners. I have seen the benefits in many who previously had found reading to be an unreachable goal.

Two lines of attack

Ultimately when planning a phonics-based program, one important consideration must be made. The English language is not conveniently designed so that the most commonly used words are the simplest. Consequently, when planning any programme, the practitioner must decide what the priority is to be. We can teach all reading skills and knowledge, beginning with the most simple of words (consonant vowel consonant (CVC) words are the most common starting point), and systematically building to the most complex of spellings and word formations. With this approach, the words 'hat' and 'man' would come before 'coat' and 'children', for example. Approaching reading instruction in this way is especially appropriate for absolute beginners. However, I have also looked at how current ESOL lessons can incorporate a 'phonics' element. This involves analysing any piece of text and utilising the content to highlight the various spellings and unusual structures in the English language. This is probably more suitable where learners are at a more advanced point (Quality and Qualifications Ireland level 3 and up). These learners already have some understanding of the language and may benefit from a rounding out of their understanding of spelling structures.

I have discussed and debated the different angles of this conundrum, attacking the issue from different starting points. My view is that both hold merit. However, I am primarily focused on developing an intensive phonics model, which aims to teach the learner the fundamentals of reading, from the beginning. The assumption here is that the learners will then be better positioned to progress to other courses, which might include language learning or other subjects.

The journey continues

In 2017, armed with my convictions, a degree of determination and increasing support from Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education & Training Board (DDLETB), I worked on writing a

programme which could be delivered to adult learners. This would be a foundation reading programme, using synthetic phonics strategies, which could be adapted to different learning groups, including native Irish and ESOL learners. In 2020 I gained increasing support from the DDLETB, and I am now in the process of expanding a programme across the South West of Dublin. Many wonderful tutors have now completed a tutor training in-service and some of those tutors are bravely pioneering the delivery of the programme to groups of students. We are collecting data on these groups and I am delighted with the feedback to date. Perhaps more encouragingly is the feedback from the learners themselves, who report a newfound empowerment. 'Finally, I can read'; 'I don't feel stupid any more'; 'Everyone should learn like this'; 'I love this'.

Conclusion

My eventual aim is to create a programme of learning which can be rolled out across the country, and delivered both as tutor training and as a programme delivered to learners. This approach, I feel sure, can be developed into certified qualifications. This will be the next step of development, so that the learning can be transferred to other services. I also believe that the vast majority of (and maybe all) learners can learn to read with this programme. Work is ongoing here, and progress is accelerating, as is support (thank you DDLETB!).

I am optimistic. I am excited. I am hopeful.

Low literacy and homelessness: How can research inform learning provision?

Julia Olisa

Julia Olisa is a literacy and dyslexia specialist who spent her career in primary, secondary and higher education. In response to her experiences as a volunteer literacy tutor at a homelessness organisation, Julia co-founded Literacy100. The charity campaigns for more accessible literacy provision for adults with experience of homelessness and trauma.

The body of evidence around low literacy and homelessness is growing but insufficient. This paper discusses some of our existing understandings, and explores the need for further research into prevalence, barriers to learning, and effective approaches to teaching and supporting adult literacy learners.

Background

Those of us who are able to read and write fluently do not need to think too hard about the contribution of these skills to our daily activities or to the control we exert over them. In contrast, adults with low basic skills are more vulnerable to crucial disadvantages in terms of their independence, employment, and sustainable, safe places to live. It is perhaps no surprise that an estimated 50% of adults with experience of homelessness have inadequate literacy (Olisa et al., 2010; Dumoulin & Jones, 2014). They are members of a cohort of at least five million adults in England identified by the OECD as having literacy skills below national standard Level 2 (Kuczera et al., 2016). Unfortunately, people affected by homelessness often struggle to benefit from opportunities to improve their reading and writing. For example, they were identified by the London Skills Commission (London Development Agency, 2006) as some of the least well served by the 2001-2010 Skills for Life strategy. One factor may be poor mental health, which is suffered by 80% of street homeless adults in England (Centre for Homelessness Impact, 2023).

This is a broad overview of the ongoing challenge to people with often multiple disadvantages, including low literacy and homelessness. To make a substantive difference to their prospects, we need to delve into the details of the picture, and to fill some important gaps in existing knowledge. Literacy100's recent report (2023), highlights a number of areas in which further research would inform better practice.

The prevalence of low literacy and barriers to learning

To develop our understanding about weak literacy and homelessness, we need to bring up-to-date the earlier prevalence estimates of 50%. Literacy100 (2023) recommends that homelessness and social housing organisations use consistent client questions to collect and pool data. Further academic research would add to the picture of prevalence across the country, and record participants' experiences of life with inadequate reading and writing. One study is already underway, and we await its outcomes with interest.

We recognise that low literacy adds layers of complexity to the daily tasks of adult life. Those of us who support people in the homelessness sector witness the regret and shame associated with their lack of skills. But regret does not always translate into determined or consistent action. The body of evidence identifying common barriers to learning is growing, but not complete.

There has generally been greater reluctance by adults in England to engage in learning during the last decade. The government's 52% funding cut to the Adult Education budget between 2011-12 and 2019-20 has, for example, coincided with a 63% decline in participation in English courses (Learning & Work Institute, 2021). Reduced financial resources inevitably diminish the availability, content and flexibility of provision, with knock-on effects on enrolment and sustained engagement.

Some people are already highly fearful of venturing into the classroom. Amongst adults affected by or at risk of homelessness, poor mental health and a range of other complex needs can commonly be rooted in inadequate resilience-building during childhood. In some cases, the stress arising from unaddressed specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, alongside inconsistent inclusion in learning, extended into their families (Maguire, Johnson, Vostanis & Keats; 2010). Traumatic memories are deep-seated and long-lasting, with ongoing aversion to the risk of repeated failure in later years.

If you spend all your childhood being told that you're stupid, then that's what you believe. It's affected my confidence to learn, and going into a classroom again brings back bad memories. (Maria, 50)

The teachers sat me at the back doing word searches to keep me quiet while they concentrated on the kids who could read. My dad shouted at me every day and called me lazy. We still don't have a good relationship. (David, 57)

It should be noted that the prevalence of dyslexia amongst adults with experience of homelessness is unknown. Research participants can be difficult to recruit and retain for a number of reasons, including apprehension about testing (Olisa, 2010). Diagnostic test results may themselves be unreliable. For example, assessment of memory capacity can be confounded by the effects of poor mental health and substance abuse.

Literacy services that aim to address the struggles of fearful adult learners include those offered by St Mungo's, Thames Reach and Crisis in the homelessness sector, or by organisations such as Read Easy. However, this kind of support remains undervalued in terms of funding, and is too sparse to meet the extent of the need (Jones, 2020). Evidence of its efficacy and consequent benefits to broader society would confirm its value as an alternative to college provision.

Further and adult education colleges will nonetheless always be the main providers of adult learning. Literacy100 (2023) identifies steps that institutions might take to encourage and retain reluctant learners, including training in trauma. Pilot projects of model initiatives would provide a lead for institutions throughout the country to adopt best practice.

Teaching basic literacy skills to adults: What works?

A large body of evidence supports the developmental basis and effectiveness of early literacy teaching methods for young children, most notably phonics. The positive outcomes of mastering phonics have been suggested most recently by the 2021 Progress International Reading Literacy Study of 9-10 year-olds (PIRLS), in which England came fourth amongst 43 countries (Department for Education, 2021). In recognition of the benefits of this approach, it has increasingly been adopted as a literacy-teaching tool by post-16 mainstream providers (RaPAL100 Project, 2020). Charities for adult learners such as *Read Easy*, and schemes including *Turning Pages*, *Yes We Can Read* and *Citizen Literacy* have made systematic phonics their primary approach.

But, in terms of hard evidence, what works for low-skilled adult literacy learners is an unresolved issue. First, we cannot apply to adults the cognitive developmental models of early reading and reading difficulties in children. Adults have, for example, more developed language and broader life perspectives. Second, researchers have so far been unable to provide a substantial evidence base for the superior efficacy of one teaching method over another in the field of adult literacy education. Moss (2018) attributes this paucity of evidence in part to high attrition rates during random control trials with adults.

Why have learning providers and researchers including Moss and her colleagues (2019), nonetheless maintained their confidence in phonology-based teaching? The following arguments were made by Olisa and colleagues in their report on literacy and homelessness (2010).

- Methods used in the past were less successful. For example, adults taught whole-word visual memorisation as a primary approach to initial reading and spelling, may have resorted to this strategy for years in any case (Worthy & Viise, 1996), self-evidently with limited success. To retain, recognise or recall thousands of words in isolation and without an understanding of our spelling system requires an exceptional visual memory (Stuart et al. 2000). Learners are not equipped with the transferable skills of analogy that will help them to become more independent in building a written vocabulary.
- It has been well-established that competent readers and spellers of all ages recognise the relationship between the spoken sequences of sounds in words and their written forms (Torgeson et al., 2002; McBride-Chang, 2004). Children who successfully learn this phonology-based system understand the systematic building blocks of spelling. Their skills become transferable, allowing them to tackle unfamiliar words for reading or spelling. (Carroll et al., 2011). This principle, it could be argued, should apply to older literacy learners. As Rice and Brooks (2004)

commented nearly 20 years ago: ‘Adult literacy learners need to be taught how their writing system works.’

Since you taught me those letter sounds, I sit on the bus and try to work out the signs on the shops. And yes, it’s beginning to work! (Patience, 45)

Technology

Information technology has become ubiquitous as a tool for modern living. It is essential to broad inclusivity, and more specifically helpful as a support for literacy. There is no data to identify how many adults with experience of homelessness own a digital device, and little is known about their digital skills and activities. This information would be a starting place for organisations to plan support for clients needing access to written information and the ability to record their own thoughts.

Summary

Amongst the growing number of adults in this country who have been affected by homelessness, a high proportion are likely to have weak or no literacy. Some face significant barriers to engagement with learning. A resolution to address these issues is in the interest not only of the individual, but also of the national economy and society. Commitment by organisations, policy-makers and funders will be more likely if we have sound evidence of need and benefits. This paper has highlighted the following gaps in research:

- The current prevalence of low literacy amongst people with experience of homelessness, with documentation of how this affects their lives and the barriers to learning
- The effectiveness and value of person-centred, trauma-informed learning opportunities
- Models of good practice in the accommodation of vulnerable, fearful learners by the adult and further education sectors
- The efficacy of phonological skills training and phonics instruction for adult literacy learners
- The potential of technology and digital skills to support low literacy adults who have been affected by homelessness.

Learning to read has to me been like a gift from heaven. There’s so much I want to do now, and I’m going to try hard to make my family proud. (Raoul, 36)

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Reading the Way: A social practice approach to reading development in prisons

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Sarah Turvey is co-founder and director of Prison Reading Groups (PRG) which sets up, funds and supports informal reading groups in prisons. PRG celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. For further information see our website <http://www.prisonreadinggroups.org.uk/> or contact sarah@prg.org.uk (PRG is part of registered charity Give a Book).

Introduction and Overview

Reading the Way (RtW) is a mission to create spaces in prisons to practise and enjoy reading and listening, and to talk with each other about reading and what we read. It was initiated in 2022 by Prison Reading Groups (PRG), part of the charity Give a Book and led by Sarah Turvey, in collaboration with adult literacies experts, Professor Sam Duncan and Claire Cullinan, and a prison education expert, Esther Kelly, who is the Reading Strategy Lead for prisons in Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Cheshire, employed by the education provider Novus. We four have come together here to share our understanding of how the RtW project helped us to think more carefully about what it means to say that one is taking a Literacy as Social Practice approach to reading or wider literacies development; how the approach may add to our understanding of Practice Engagement Theory (PET) (Reder, 1994; Reder et al, 2020) and what this might tell us about the complexities of assessing the influence of adult literacies interventions and projects (we use 'influence' purposely instead of the more usual 'impact,' arguing that influence allows for more reflection on causality and forms of effect over time); and, finally, how we expressed RtW as for 'emergent

readers’ and why this terminology and the conversations behind it matter in prisons and our wider communities.

Genesis of Reading the Way

Reading the Way was inspired by an inspection report in England in 2022: ‘Prison education: a review of reading education in prisons’ (Ofsted/HMIP, 2022). This report stressed the need for more attention to developing reading in prisons, emphasising a perceived lack of focus on supporting prisoners’ abilities in decoding and the need for more phonics-based approaches. However, while this report also mentions the importance of reading for pleasure, it provides little direction in how to foster it, particularly for those learning to read or less confident in their reading. Furthermore, it devotes little attention to the crucial relationship between enjoyment, reading practices and the development of reading skills. Drawing on our experiences of the work of Prison Reading Groups (PRG, 2024), research into reading circles and adult literacy development (Duncan 2012, 2014) and our wider adult literacies work, we decided to try to develop reading groups aimed at those in prison who feel they cannot read or are less confident in their reading.

What we did in the Pilots

Reading groups (that is, groups of people coming together to read together or talk about what they have read, where the emphasis is on the collaboration and discussion) are very popular in prisons. However, we were aware that most existing groups were unlikely to appeal to emergent readers who feel they cannot read and/or struggle with reading. We therefore developed two pilot reading groups specifically aimed at emergent readers (a concept discussed below), at HMPs Thameside and Liverpool, with an emphasis on discussion and shared interests.



Image by Erika Flowers

Each pilot group ran for five weekly sessions of around 90 minutes. They were facilitated by a team of two or three from our planning group, including at least one person who regularly works within the prison and one adult literacy expert. The choice of venue within each prison depended on the local situation, with one group held in the library and the other in a rearranged classroom. We selected a story (‘My Polish Teacher’s Tie’ by Helen Dunmore) to break into five short chunks to read gradually over the five-week period. We supplemented this continuous narrative with short, varied texts to explore themes and ideas raised by discussions of the story and, crucially, participants’ interests. We planned to start each pilot

group with reflections on the nature of reading and reading experiences as we felt it was important to share our thinking about the social nature of reading and what it might mean to be a 'good' reader of a particular text or in a particular context (see the discussion below on Literacy as Social Practice). While we did a small amount of this important discussion work, in practice though, the usual pattern each week involved a greeting and welcome, refreshments and seeing how everyone was, followed by a recap of what we remembered about the story so far. We then read the next section of the story aloud (taking turns as desired, with us as facilitators kicking off the reading aloud and then opening it up, tentatively, to see if anyone else wanted to read, and they always did) and had a discussion about what we had read, what struck us, what might happen next etc., followed by reading and discussing some other texts. The group members shared topics they found interesting and text types they wanted to read, and each week the facilitators brought in materials based on these suggestions (for example, song lyrics from favourite songs, recipes for popular dishes and letters from admired activists or politicians). As the weeks went on, we as facilitators said less and the other group members spoke more.

Participants were invited to read aloud during the sessions but also assured that it was fine to listen, follow along in the text and participate through discussion. We felt it was particularly important to spend time talking about how this reading group would be a space where we support each other, and to agree 'ways of working'. For example, agreeing to take turns in reading and say 'pass' if we wanted to decline reading aloud; the importance of listening to people when they're reading, and deciding when and how we might interrupt, help or join in if somebody was struggling with a word. We also discussed the 'rights of the reader' (Pennac, 2006) and other topics that we felt would contribute to critical explorations of what it means to be a reader and help 'apprentice' RtW group members into 'the guild of knowers' (here, people who are 'good at' reading and feel free to enjoy discussing texts and ideas within texts that they find meaningful, or not), drawing on Sadler (1989) in Marshall and Wiliam (2006, p.5.)

From the beginning, some group members were keen to read parts of the texts aloud. As the weeks went on, everyone wanted to read aloud at least part of the time, and did. As facilitators, we noticed early on that some group members had solid phonic decoding skills, that is, they could 'sound-out' and verbalise most of the words in the text. But we also noticed that sometimes those more confident with word-level reading had trouble remembering what they had read or building up meaning presented over a paragraph or two. Others were stronger at understanding the meaning being built up, but read much more slowly, struggling with fluency. This was a lesson in the range of strengths and needs in a group who all feel they 'cannot read' or 'cannot read much', and who, following from shared experience of being stigmatised as 'slow' or 'stupid,' wanted to read in a 'safe' and supportive group.

The concept that every participant and facilitator had different strengths in regard to reading and different ways to approach texts became key to the group members' increasing confidence and knowledge of their place as readers themselves. Realising that there are

often many 'correct' ways to read a text allowed participants to feel happier to attempt reading new and unfamiliar material, safe in the knowledge that they couldn't really 'get it wrong'.

Overview of Evaluation

At the end of the pilot process, prior to launching RtW across the UK, we undertook an evaluation of our work (PRG, 2023). We drew on feedback and reflections we had gathered throughout the process, from prison reading group members and group facilitators. The evaluation report can be accessed via the [RtW webpages](#). This report allowed us to share our understanding, for example, of what worked in terms of recruitment. This included not promoting the sessions as 'education' and facilitators or RtW advocates who were based in prisons 'walking the wings' to have conversations with potential members. We



Image by Erika Flowers

considered the significance of confidence and the development of this in the reading groups, alongside a shared understanding with group members of what it is to be a 'good reader'. We also reflected on the facilitators' approaches and what makes a 'good facilitator', with 'being intrigued by stories' as an ideal attribute noted by RtW group members. Further, we identified the importance of giving group members as much autonomy as possible about what they read. As we noted:

the privileging of choice, personalisation and autonomy, important in any reading group, is even more important in the prison context where prisoners have "such a lack of agency over a lot of their life all the day, to have that choice, to have someone who'll actually listen to that and go, ok, well, we got you what you asked for. I think it goes a long way" (quotation from a facilitator) (PRG, 2023)

We also touched on some theoretical ideas that were raised in our team discussions of the pilots. We would like to explore these in more detail below and include:

- how we followed a social practice approach to literacy development;
- how Practice Engagement Theory (Reder et al, 2020, Reder, 1994) can help articulate the influence of RtW, as well as what RtW might tell us about Practice Engagement Theory
- what we have learnt about the idea of an 'adult emergent reader'

Discussion Area 1: *what it means to follow a social practices approach to literacy development*

If someone says they are following a Literacy as Social Practice approach to their adult literacy teaching, do we all know what this means? There seems to be important agreement on what it means to see *literacy* through the lens of social practice theory. We can look at the work of Heath on literacy events, communities and power (Heath, 1983), Street's ideological vs autonomous views of literacy (Street, 1984), Barton and Hamilton's powerful chapter 'Literacy as Social Practice' (Barton & Hamilton, 2000), Papan (2005) on *Adult Literacy as Social Practice*, Prinsloo & Baynham (2008) on *Literacies, Global and Local*, and Street's (2016) later use of the term 'Literacy as Social Practice', finding a rich body of work on this socio-cultural conceptualisation of literacy that stresses the contextual, power-bound nature of literacy. Importantly, 'there are different literacies associated with different domains of life [...] Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices,' and, crucially, 'Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making' (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 8).

This body of work tells us something about how we can see literacy and its role in adult lives. It is not self-evident, though, what this means for the teaching or development of adult literacy. It certainly suggests that discussions of context and power are important, but beyond this, what does it really mean to be using a social practice approach to literacy development? One answer is that the curriculum itself (the *what* you are teaching more than the *how*) is the crucial factor, with a social practice approach building a curriculum from learners' lives, goals and desires. But what else? We thought about this a great deal in our discussions leading to the development of the RtW project and arrived at a sense of the importance of discussing with the reading group members a vision of literacy which recognises that literacy and reading practices vary, are carried out in different contexts, for different purposes, with different meanings and power structures at play, and so what it means to be good at reading also varies. This usefully takes us away from an idea that some people are 'good' at reading and some are not, and reminds us that we are all continuously developing our reading as we take part in new reading practices in new contexts or for new purposes. It also reminds us of how often reading practices are communal in nature and that working together, supporting one other (what Kalman, 2008, and others call literacy 'mediation'), is not something abnormal done to make up for individual deficiencies, but rather a common and fruitful way of working together on a common goal, with each person contributing their specific expertise (echoing the collaborative exchange of expertise central to all or most reading groups, Duncan, 2012).

These ideas were central to how we ran the RtW groups and our understandings of literacy and reading. They are also key to the ideas of Practice Engagement Theory, and what it means to be an 'emergent' reader, both explored next.

Discussion Area 2: revisiting Practice Engagement Theory in terms of what we observed from the pilots

One of the most influential and important thinkers in adult literacy education is Stephen Reder in Portland, Oregon. His work (Reder et al, 2020; Reder, 1994) examines a range of studies on adults' engagement in adult literacy provision and found that taking part in adult literacy programmes may not produce dramatic changes in 'proficiency' as tested using assessments designed to measure skills increases, but taking part in



Image by Erika Flowers

literacy programmes does produce changes in adults' engagement with a range of literacy practices (that is, what adults do with literacy in our daily lives), and that, over time, these changes to practices lead to changes to proficiency (and increases in proficiency lead to further development of daily practices). This seems to be a particularly important message for those involved in adult literacy education. Not only is engagement in adult literacy provision likely to produce greater participation in a range of literacy practices, and this participation is likely to produce increases in skills over time, but also, if the purpose of adult literacy provision is to support adults to do something they could not do before (read to their grandchildren, write a report at work, etc.), then changes to practices should probably be our end goal anyway. Usefully, in his 1994 chapter 'Practice Engagement Theory: A Sociocultural Approach to Literacy Across Languages and Cultures,' Reder (1994: 42) stresses that 'literacy practices develop through collaborative activity,' echoing our reflections on social practice theory and our notions (discussed next) of what it means to be an 'emergent' reader.

We were reminded of this work as we heard the reading group members talking about how taking part in the reading group has influenced them to do more with literacy around the prison, for example reading more signs, volunteering to 'read out' in other classes and recommending poetry to peers. The men spoke of these changes in terms of 'doing more' with literacy and also in terms of increased confidence, both of which seem crucial in understanding the power of a seemingly simple, low-key activity like a reading group as well as how it relates to both the concept of literacy as social practice explored above, and the complex idea of an emergent reader explored below.

The wider influence of the pilot groups on participants was obvious to those facilitating them. We observed the changes in those who spent the first session silent but were reading sentences aloud by the end of the programme, those who said they didn't read at all in week one but were recommending poems to prisoners unconnected to the programme in

week five and those who were unable to answer when asked for preferences on texts at the start who were leading discussions in response to texts at the end. However, in a prison environment, those who provide space, time and resources to allow groups like RtW to take place often require measures of impact in quantitative terms which can be used to justify resources and influence decision making.

This provides a challenge for us, as RtW is not a formal education programme but a way for participants to engage in the practice of reading, to increase their confidence and see themselves as readers. There is no test which can be conducted to assess participants before and after the group, and as already noted, skills tests are not always the best way to capture the changes produced by taking part in something like RtW. What we do have to help us understand the influence of RtW is feedback from participants and from facilitators' reflections, which look at participants as readers, as part of a community, their confidence and wider changes to practices or behaviours outside of the group itself. Practice Engagement Theory gives us a language to argue for the significance of changes to practices.

Discussion Area 3: *what we have learnt about understandings of and classifications of the idea of an 'adult emergent reader'*

It seems that word 'emergent' was first used in the context of children's literacy by Marie Clay in her work on leading to the Reading Recovery movement (Sulzby & Teale, 1991) and that its use may have moved into the context of adult education in the 1990s, see for example (Conner, 1995) and gained wider use in the early 21st century (see for example, Duncan, 2014) as writers grappled with the complexities of talking about adults at the beginning of a reading journey. In our early RtW discussions, we felt the term 'emergent reader' was preferable to 'beginner reader' as it acknowledges that all adults living in literate societies have some knowledge of reading and writing and are rarely at the very beginning of a learning-to-read journey. Further, the term 'emergent' carries with it a recognition of the range of barriers experienced by those who feel they cannot read or can read very little, as well as the complexity of the relationships between past experiences, confidence and the ability to read a particular text on a particular occasion (see, for example, Mace, 1992; Schwab, 2010).

Notably, those who feel they cannot read may actually have significant existing reading skills (for example, some knowledge of sound-symbol relationships or awareness of the layout of a formal letter). It is therefore crucial to understand the impact of an individual's reading confidence and self-image. Further, we need to remember that confidence plays a crucial role in reading; to decode a written word into a spoken word, to build meaning up in a sentence or over a series of sentences or paragraphs, this all requires confidence in one's judgement (*Am I decoding this word right; is this the word I think it is? Am I correct in arriving at this understanding of a sentence? Am I right to interpret the meaning of these two sentences in this way, and therefore understand the next sentence in this light?*). Confidence is therefore not only desirable for reading (as it is for most things we do), but

fundamental. Whether someone is or is not an adult 'emergent' reader is therefore extremely difficult to try to measure. 'Emergent readers' may be a complex and imperfect category, containing a range of needs, confidences and competences, but as a defining principle for a reading group, it works: it is a group for those who want to develop and practise reading in a supportive environment.

We'd like to end this section with two thoughts. Firstly, our pilot reading group members noted that reading aloud and listening to others read (particularly when following along on the written text) is a powerful tool for reinforcing and developing knowledge of how spoken words are encoded as written words. As facilitators we also observed that reading aloud means that those who can read less themselves can still listen and join in conversations, while developing decoding knowledge through listening and following along. We were keen to stress that listening to others read aloud is nevertheless a form of reading (Duncan, 2021).

Secondly, the pilot studies revealed something about the importance, in the prison context, of the materiality of the texts we were using. We supplied photocopied sheets, in colour where possible, and the men appreciated being able to take these back to their cells, share with their cellmates and pin on their walls: to read again, to share, and to have. There is something about the physical nature of these texts, something to own, keep, remember and that they had chosen, that was particularly important, a) in the prison context where the outside digital world is so absent and b) in the context of 'emergent readers' (and Practice Engagement Theory, and Literacy as Social Practice theory) where the idea of being someone who has, holds, reads, shares texts is so important.



Image by Erika Flowers

Next Steps, Hopes, Conclusion

Our Reading the Way partnership was initiated by the publication of a government report about poor reading education in English prisons, in particular for prisoners identified, in our terms, as emergent readers (Ofsted/HMIP, 2022). However, our early discussions were not centred on how people might improve their reading ‘abilities’ but, rather, how they might connect with texts, all kinds of texts, and practise reading as part of a community. We also discussed how reading group members might collaborate to determine what we read and the direction of our discussions. We have explored these themes of community and collaboration in this article: in thinking through ideas for adult literacy development, in the nature and power of reading groups of all kinds, in ideas of literacy as social practice, in the idea of Practice Engagement Theory (we develop practices in a context, with others to lesser or greater degrees), and the idea of emergent literacy.

As a team of four, we have learnt a great deal from one another, with our various understandings of adult literacies and literacy development and prison life and education. RtW group members’ ideas, suggestions and discussions added greatly to this learning and we feel sure these are messages that could be shared, through networks like RaPAL, to people in prisons and in our wider communities. While support for people to decode is critical as part of prison education, we found that all kinds of emergent readers can take part in and benefit from RtW groups; from those with very little understanding of the English written code, to people who don't like reading, who are embarrassed by their pronunciation of words or who lack confidence making meaning from texts. We have seen the positive outcomes of practising reading in a space where participants can collaborate, have control over what they read and experience reading in range of ways. As one participant put it: ‘It’s like a live podcast’.

We are happy to say that RtW groups have so far been established in nine prisons in England and Wales, and the number of people being given the opportunity to practise reading and see themselves as readers is growing. There is an open, supportive RtW community, where we share ideas for reading materials, how to source texts that people request, and how to set up and facilitate the groups. We think RtW has the power to transform many people’s experiences of reading and, for the people who facilitate the groups, it is a chance to explore some important ideas and add to our understanding of adults’ reading practices and development.

Partnership initiatives are challenging in prison. Restrictive regimes and contracts based on quantifiable ‘outputs’ make collaborative working across departments and with other organisations difficult. In this context, the success of the pilots and the new groups being established is especially pleasing and we hope it will encourage the development of more initiatives to support a widespread reading culture throughout prisons.

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What happens when your usual teaching methodologies are redundant?

Dr Toni Lambe and Liz Kearney-Byrne

Toni is currently working with the Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board (DDLETB) Adult Education Service. She co-ordinates ESOL provision for a group of Ukrainian refugees who are based in a large hotel complex in the outskirts of Dublin. Toni's background is in adult literacy and she has a particular interest in the links between literacy and social justice.

Liz has a background in ESOL and currently works with Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board (DDLETB) as an ESOL tutor. She also works with Toni in co-ordinating Ukrainian refugee provision.

Introduction

In this article we discuss our experience of providing ESOL tuition to Ukrainian refugees who either have low vision or are blind. In a previous issue of RaPAL our colleague describes the challenges faced working with students who are 'directly impacted by an active war' (Cooney, 2023: 7), living in a monolingual environment, and who are learning English out of necessity rather than interest or pleasure (Cooney, 2023: 7 – 11). Here we consider the extra challenges faced when working in the same environment but with students who have low vision or are blind (LVB). We share what we have learned, our frustrations, and our small successes. We hope this article will provide the impetus for a broader discussion amongst others working in a similar situation.

Background

Following the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the European Union (EU) adopted the Temporary Protection Directive (European Commission, 2024). This emergency measure allows those fleeing the war in Ukraine free movement and rights to welfare, work and accommodation in the EU. In our catchment area, the state took a long-term lease on a large hotel which houses 2,700 Ukrainians. The hotel complex is leased by the government and is not open to guests. Most of those accommodated here are families, generally women with children although there are many with disabilities, a significant cohort of whom are blind or have low vision.

A large number of the adults housed in the hotel came to the local adult education service looking for English classes. The Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board (DDLETB), who are responsible for adult education provision in the area, now provide classes in the hotel. These classes are provided at different levels on the Common European Framework Reference for Languages (CEFR). The CEFR organises language proficiency in six levels, A1 to C2 and covers the four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Classes run from Mondays to Thursdays in two-hourly sessions from 09:30 to 21:00 and on Fridays from 09:30 to 13:45.

As this is an outreach centre, there are no on-site facilities for photocopying and there is no computer access for students. Likewise, the rooms we have access to in the hotel are not exclusively ours, so it is not possible to store materials or equipment on site. There are interactive whiteboards in each of the rooms and the tutors use multiple online resources from dedicated English language learning websites and/or those from the *Headway* and *English File* publications – see resources section below. Currently we have 50 classes including conversation classes for a group of students with low vision and a group of students who are blind. It is these two groups of students who are the focus of this article and we address each in turn.

Low vision group

During the summer of 2022 we started offering classes in the local adult education centre to a very small number of Ukrainians accommodated in the hotel. One of the students had low vision but a reasonable command of English and access to a certain amount of technology on his phone, which alongside adaptations made by the tutor allowed him to take part in these mainstream classes. This student, who I will call Serge, played a key part in the expansion of provision to other low vision and blind students as, once we had classes up and running in the hotel, he approached us about setting up a class for students who had low vision. In total there were eight students all of whose English was at A2 level on the CEFR. A2 is the second level on the scale and corresponds with a pre-intermediate level. As neither Liz nor I, nor any of our tutors, had any experience of working with low vision students, we initially offered what we called a conversation group and Darren, a very experienced ESOL tutor, agreed to take the class.

Conscious that the conversation class would not be sufficient to meet these students' needs long-term, and aware that we had no experience of working with low vision students in an education context, we made contact with the National Council for the Blind Ireland (NCBI). NCBI were very supportive and provided us with online and in person training. This training was very helpful in that trainers drew attention to some very practical issues of which we would not have been aware. For example, issues like room set up – classroom style is better suited to those with low vision where in the adult education context we tend to favour U shaped or hollow square style.

Classroom style



U style



We were also advised to make a point of recording all or some of the lesson for students to practise later. For low vision students the audio would take the place of regular class notes.

As helpful as this training was, it did not address the specific issue of delivering ESOL tuition to those with low vision and the tutor was disappointed he could not liaise with any other tutor who had direct teaching experience with this specific cohort of students. We attempted to find tutors in Ireland, or anywhere in the world, who were teaching a class of refugees who are all blind or have low vision, but we were unable to find any.

Challenges

English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction typically makes heavy use of visual materials such as photos, pictures, movies and videos, flash cards, demonstrations and pantomime. These strategies work very well with sighted students because they connect the language with concrete, real-life examples. They do not work so well with students with low vision. In addition, when a student’s main piece of digital equipment is their phone, tutors, even those committed to implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles – (see table 1 below) face many hurdles. For example, while tutors can provide, in advance of the class, digital documents that can be manipulated by the students to suit their individual needs, working off a mobile phone screen is not conducive to effective learning – for any student.

Core UDL Principles

Multiple means of Engagement	Provide a variety of way of engaging with the material
Multiple means of Representation	Present information in different ways to suit different learning styles/abilities
Multiple means of Action/Expression	Offer different ways of demonstrating learning including choice in assessment type.

Adapted from Ahead 2024

However, during the training with NCBI we had been introduced to a piece of equipment called a **Looky Book Pro**. This is a 12.5-inch portable video magnifier. It comes with optical character recognition (OCR) and text to speech and operates like a desktop device.



Immediately we recognised how useful this type of technology could be for students with low vision and applied for a Reach Grant (funding which aims to increase the participation of disadvantaged students). We were awarded sufficient funding for four Looky Books – they are an expensive piece of equipment, costing almost 3,000€ each.

By the time the grant was processed and the various procurement requirements fulfilled, it was autumn 2023 when we took possession of the Looky Books. We were aware that the Looky Book is not suitable for all people with low vision and had already identified four students who might benefit from them. We consulted with NCBI and the providers of the Looky Book and followed their recommendations around how to proceed with introducing them to staff and students. The first step was to give the tutors and coordinators the Looky books on loan to take home so they could familiarise themselves with how they might best be used in the classroom. Everyone was impressed at how easy the equipment was to use.

The Looky Books are not like a computer which can be set up with a number of different profiles. Each book needs to be adjusted to the specific needs of the individual and we therefore decided to assign and loan a Looky Book to each of the four identified students. The students were given the Looky Books and asked to familiarise themselves with them. They were told that further training could be provided though NCBI or the provider of the Looky Books but the students found the equipment very user-friendly and none of them required further training.

Successes

All four students were able to use the Looky Book and it has enhanced their learning experience both from a pedagogical perspective and from a socially inclusive aspect. Two students, Serge mentioned above and a student I will call Eve, were already attending a general group class with students who did not have low vision. Prior to receiving their Looky Books, and despite the tutors' best efforts, they were excluded from many of the activities in the classroom, for example, board work, which is a key factor in all language classrooms.

However, as there is a camera on the Looky Book which reflects what is on the whiteboard onto a magnified screen on the desk in front of the student, these difficulties were eliminated.

The teacher working with Serge and Eve reported that the difference in their learning experience since they received the Looky Book has been incredible as they can now fully partake in all aspects of the class. As Eve put it, 'now for the first time ever I feel like a "normal" student in an English classroom'. In addition, Serge and Eve have now completed the non-verbal communications module accredited under Quality Qualifications Ireland (QQI). This module involves visuals and, prior to receiving the Looky Books, the students struggled to access these. The other two students, who preceding this were attending only the conversation class for students with low vision, have also now been able to join other groups.

Blind Group

Alongside the low vision group, we also run ESOL classes for students who are blind. This was a direct outcome from the conversation group. As noted earlier, there are a significant number of people who are blind or have low vision accommodated in the hotel. As news of the conversation group spread the numbers began to increase. However, while the original group were all the same pre-intermediate / A2 level, the new cohort of students were very much beginners. Darren suggested starting a new group for these students and offered (he would say he was coerced!) to teach the class. He suggested a one-hour class as opposed to the usual two hours, given the students' low level of English, and the students agreed.

Although our experience with the low vision group and Darren's unending cheerfulness and inventiveness meant we were not quite as at sea, we were still facing what for us was an unprecedented situation as hitherto we were unable to find others who were doing something similar. Nonetheless, the class has now been running for almost a full academic year and we have added a second one-hour class with tutor Eamon. Eamon came on board as a very experienced ESOL tutor but, as with the rest of us, had no experience of working with blind students.

Challenges, workarounds and frustrations

Generally, ESOL classes can be quite large but in this instance we felt four to six students was the ideal number as the tutor could speak to each of the students individually. Likewise, the tutors reported that a one-hour session was 'perfect' as any longer became tiring for the students. Clearly, the usual teaching methods were not suitable in this context and tutors reported making the class a 'pure conversation session' where they sat amongst the students asking questions and eliciting responses. Through the course of conversation, tutors were able to pick up on grammatical issues that presented naturally and they planned the next session accordingly. As noted by Eamon, 'the nature of the class meant it could be a bit chaotic at times - with Ukrainian, Russian, English and the students' phone apps all being heard'. Nonetheless, both he and Darren 'rolled with the punches' and report that attendance and participation in these classes is high.

We are currently applying for funding for smartphones for the two tutors working with the blind group. These students are heavily reliant on their phones for communication purposes and have asked that we set up a WhatsApp group where voice notes could be used to record the words they had learned. This would also allow tutors to set homework. However, DDLETB does not generally issue work phones to tutors. General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) make the use of tutors' personal phones problematic; the inappropriateness of tutors using their personal equipment for work purposes notwithstanding. We are continuing to investigate various possibilities and hope to resolve this matter soon.

Conclusion

The students we are working with who have low vision or are blind are in Ireland as a direct consequence of the war in Ukraine. It can be surmised that the relatively significant number accommodated in the hotel was a deliberate decision given the long-term nature of the government's contract. This decision has led to a comparatively large number of low vision or blind students accessing English classes through the local adult education service. It is perhaps a combination of these factors that makes our situation somewhat unique and contributes to our difficulties in finding others working with a similar cohort of students. On the other hand, if now or in the future there are tutors with a group of students with a similar profile, we hope that our experiences as described in this article will be of benefit and help inform their practice.

Reflection

Having worked in adult education for over 30 years it never ceases to amaze me (Toni) how, regardless of the challenges, adult educators' student-centred ethos continues to shine bright. Confronted with a situation that was very much outside their experience and comfort zone they did not hesitate to put the student first. The key concern of all involved was, and continues to be, the needs of the student and how best these needs can be met.

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Resources

Headway Oxford University Press <https://elt.oup.com>

English File Oxford University Press <https://elt.oup.com>

Using digital technologies to teach and support adult skills learners: findings from research and future directions

Judith A Alamprese

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Keynote speech from RaPAL's autumn joint *English, maths and ESOL Conference 2023*



Click the image above or the link below to watch the keynote speech from RaPAL's autumn joint *English, maths and ESOL Conference 2023* with Learning and Work Institute, NATECLA, UCL Institute of Education and City and Guilds:

<https://youtu.be/QJYuyaH7Se0>

Adult Learning and Social Change in the UK: National and Local Perspectives

Edited by: Jules Robbins and Alan Rogers (2023)

Cost: Between £26.09 (paperback) and £81.00 (hardback),

Publisher: Bloomsbury London

ISBN: 9781350262126

Reviewed by Sam Duncan (Professor of Adult Literacies at the UCL Institute of Education)

This book, part of the Adult Learning, Literacy and Social Change series, is an inspiring and invigorating collection of ten varied and challenging contributions, with an insightful 'concluding reflections' from the editors. Lyn Tett has a chapter on 'adult learning and social justice: health, well-being and the inequalities of power', John Gordon on 'vernacular expression' in informal adult reading groups and Mahesh Pant on a Norwich community gardening scheme. The contents page will make anyone smile. Within a day of its arrival, I had read each chapter, despite everything else going on in my life. There is a clear reason for this: the chapters are all different enough to maintain interest (and a bit of intrigue) but all resonate with a love of adult learning in all its forms, fitting for a volume dedicated to Professor Alan Rogers, who passed away in April 2022, as the book was being finished.

It would be an interesting exercise (and perhaps one for a group of students on a PGCE or doing a MA in adult education) to go through the book and after reading each chapter, complete the sentence 'Adult learning is...' or simply 'Adult learning...'. Another thought, having read them all, is how powerfully this volume demonstrates the complex relationships between the local and the 'larger than local'. A number of chapters report on case studies happening around Norwich, which the *Preface* (which I read last) explains is because some authors, and the editors, were part of the AdultEducation100 project in Norfolk in 2018. These chapters are about local initiatives but they are also about far larger challenges, tensions and themes. After my second reading, I also felt that these chapters mark both the end of *something* and the beginning of *something else*. This book is not cheap, but I encourage you to ask your libraries to order a copy, settle down with a nice drink and read it all the way through, deciding what those 'somethings' are.

News from the sector

Tara Furlong

Tara is the Chair of RaPAL and can be contacted on chair@rapal.org.uk

English, Maths and ESOL Conference 2023

Last autumn's joint conference was the first in person since COVID and enjoyed contributions from Department for Education; Abt Associates (USA); The Bell Foundation; The Education and Training Foundation; Literacy100; UCL Institute of Education; Novus; Prison Reading Groups; NATECLA; South Bank Colleges; The Adult Literacy Trust; New City College; National Numeracy; and West Midlands Combined Authority. It was good to see people face-to-face after a long break and we hope to see some of you this autumn.

Coalition for Language Education

The Coalition for Language Education (in the UK) launched recently. The Coalition was initiated by colleagues at HELD (Hub for Education and Language Diversity) at King's College, London and draws together practitioners and researchers from various fields of language education: ESOL, EAL, modern foreign languages, and literacy. The founding statement is here: <https://wpull.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/WP323-Founding-statement-for-Coalition-for-Language-Education-16mar24.pdf>. The main contacts are Ben Rampton (ben.rampton@kcl.ac.uk) and Melanie Cooke (melanie.cooke@kcl.ac.uk). RaPAL are currently drafting a supporting statement: please contact us if you are interested in becoming involved.

Dr Juliet McCaffery



The first book formally published by RaPAL, *Literacy research in the UK: adult and school perspectives* in 1988, was authored by Dr Juliet McCaffery with Professor Brian Street. The book was an early contribution to collections published informally and formally from the mid-eighties by RaPAL, the University of Lancaster, ALBSU, Sheffield City Polytechnic and others, by authors including Mary Hamilton, David Barton, Roz Ivanic, Karin Tusting, Uta Papen and Yvonne Hillier as adult literacy provision in the UK transitioned from informal to funded education. More can be seen here

[https://unesdoc.unesco.org/search/0a01b1f4-a449-48ad-b0af-](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/search/0a01b1f4-a449-48ad-b0af-6e9b2e1b4d5c)

[6e9b2e1b4d5c](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/search/0a01b1f4-a449-48ad-b0af-6e9b2e1b4d5c)

Juliet passed away in June. A tribute to her can be read on <https://balid.org.uk/>.

Unions and learning: Lessons from the past for today

Tom Wilson, Director of Unionlearn at the TUC from 2007 to 2015, penned a compact snippet on the recent history of union learning, for those not up to the minute, and put forward recommendations for revisions to funding streams:

<https://learningandwork.org.uk/news-and-policy/unions-and-learning-lessons-from-the-past-for-today/>

Learning and Work Institute Research

In case you missed them, the Learning and Work Institute released two reports since our last edition: *Modelling Essential Skills Needs Across England*

<https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/modelling-essential-skills-needs-across-england/> highlights discrepancies in skills across regions and argues for a targeted plan to respond to identified and localised needs.

How can migrant communities be supported to access adult learning through the Adult Education Budget? <https://learningandwork.org.uk/news-and-policy/how-can-migrant-communities-be-supported-to-access-adult-learning-through-the-adult-education-budget/> argues for the role of adult education to “both improve [learners] own wellbeing and contribute to the economic growth and competitiveness of the national economy”, not just in ESOL provision. The report details specific recommendations.

European Basic Skills Network (EBSN)

RaPAL are continuing institutional members of the EBSN, who held their annual conference in Spain last month. In their most recent newsletter, they highlighted the following publications relevant to adult education and basic skills development,

1. Open access to an editorial introduction, ‘Learning from the past for the future: Signposts and landmark anniversaries in adult learning and education’. This editorial discusses key aspects of adult learning and education, emphasizing the role of basic skills in lifelong learning: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s1159-024-10089-3>
2. Follow-up on CONFINTEA VII, the Seventh International Conference on Adult Education, is available as a special issue of the PIMA Bulletin. This publication provides an in-depth look at CONFINTEA VII, focusing on global adult education policies and practices, including basic skills development: <https://www.pimanetwork.com/post/pima-bulletin-no-50>
3. A special issue of the subscription-based *International Review of Education: Journal of Lifelong Learning* titled *Signposts to a Sustainable Future*, which covers topics such as adult learning and education (ALE) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlighting the importance of basic skills in achieving these goals: <https://link.springer.com/journal/1159/volumes-and-issues/70-2>

Webinar: harnessing digital tools for greater community involvement in the tourism narrative

UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning recorded a freely available webinar on inclusion, co-creation and harnessing digital storytelling practices. There is a particular focus on different forms of disability and difference: <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/coding-future->

[unesco-webinar-sustainable-tourism-fosters-community-empowerment-digital-storytelling](#)

A Day Away with RaPAL

If you're interested in joining us in Birmingham on Friday 27th September for

- our Annual Editorial Meeting, which is a great opportunity to get involved in collegial editorial and writing development work,
- the Annual General Meeting, or
- to find out more about RaPAL and the adult literacy sector generally,

please get in contact on info@rapal.org.uk

Why not write something for the RaPAL Journal?

We invite contributions from anyone involved in the field of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL education to write and share ideas, practice and research with RaPAL readers. This can be writing from learners, ideas linking research and practice, comments about teaching, training or observations about policy. Our journal is now produced online and so we welcome articles, reviews, reports, commentaries, images or video that will stimulate interest and discussion.

The journal is published three times a year and represents an independent space, which allows critical reflection and comment linking research with practice in the field of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL nationally and internationally.

The RaPAL network includes learners, managers, practitioners, researchers, tutors, teacher trainers, and librarians in adult, further and higher education in the UK. It also has an international membership that covers Ireland, Canada, USA, New Zealand, Australia, South America, Europe and Africa.

Guidelines for contributors

All contributions should be written in an accessible way for a wide and international readership.

- Writing should be readable, avoiding jargon. Where acronyms are used these should be clearly explained.
- Ethical guidelines should be followed particularly when writing about individuals or groups. Permission must be gained from those being represented and they should be represented fairly.
- We are interested in linking research and practice; you may have something you wish to contribute but are not sure it will fit. If this is the case, please contact the editors to discuss this.
- Writing should encourage debate and reflection, challenging dominant and taken for granted assumption about literacy, numeracy and ESOL.

We want to encourage new writers as well as those with experience and to cover a range of topics. We aim to have three different kinds of articles in the journal plus a reviews section; these are slightly different in length and focus. We welcome illustration and graphics for any of the sections and now have the facility to embed audio and video files into the journal. The journal has a different theme for each edition but we welcome general contributions too.

Below you will see more details about the different themes and topics:

1. Ideas for teaching

This section is for descriptive and reflective pieces on teaching and learning. It is a good place to have a first go at writing for publication and can be based on experiences of learners and teachers in a range of settings. Pieces can be up to 1,000 words long.

2. Developing Research and Practice

This section covers a range of contributions from research and practice. In terms of research this could be experience of practitioner research, of taking part in research projects, commenting on research findings or of trying out ideas from research in practice. In terms of practice this could be about trying out new ideas and pushing back boundaries. Contributions should include reflection and critique. Pieces for this section should be between 1,000 - 2,000 words long including references.

3. Research and Practice: multi-disciplinary perspectives

This section is for more sustained analytical pieces about research, practice or policy. The pieces will be up to 4,000 words long including references and will have refereed journal status. Although articles in this section are more theoretically and analytically developed they should nevertheless be clearly written for a general readership. Both empirical work and theoretical perspectives should be accessible and clearly explained. Writing for this section should:

- Relate to the practices of learning and teaching adult literacy, numeracy or ESOL
- Link to research by describing and analysing new research findings relating this and any critical discussion to existing research studies
- Provide critical informed analysis of the topic including reference to theoretical underpinning
- Write coherently and accessibly avoiding impenetrable language and assumed meanings. The piece should have a clear structure and layout using the Harvard referencing system and notes where applicable. All terminology should be explained, particularly for an international readership.

Reviews

Reviews and reports of books, articles and materials (including online materials) should be between 50 to 800 words long. They should clearly state the name of the piece being reviewed, the author, year of publication, name and location of publisher and cost. You should also include your name, a short 2 to 3 line biography and your contact details. You can write the review based on your experience of using the book, article or materials in your role as practitioner, teacher trainer, and researcher or as a student.

Submitting your work

1. If you are responding to a call for articles via the RaPAL email list or directly by an editor you will have been given the email address of the editor(s) for submitting your work, together with a deadline date and the theme of the journal.
2. If you are submitting a piece of work that you would like RaPAL to consider for publication that has not been written as a result of a call for articles, please send it to journal@rapal.org.uk in the first instance. The journal coordinator will then let you know what the next steps will be.
3. All contributions should have the name of the author(s), a title and contact email address and telephone number. You should also include a short 2 to 3 line biography. Sections, sub-sections and any images should be clearly indicated or labelled (further guidance on image size is on the website www.rapal.org.uk).
4. All referencing should follow the Harvard system.
5. Articles should be word processed in a sans serif font, double-spaced with clearly numbered pages.
6. The article should be sent to journal@rapal.org.uk

What happens next?

1. Editors are appointed for each edition of the journal. They review all contributions and will offer feedback, constructive comment and suggestions for developing the piece as appropriate.
2. Articles submitted for the third category 'Research and Practice: multi-disciplinary perspectives' will be peer-reviewed by an experienced academic, research or practitioner in the field in addition to being edited.
3. The editor(s) will let you know whether your article has been accepted and will send you a final copy before publication.

If you have any questions, please contact the journal coordinator by emailing journal@rapal.org.uk

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RaPAL is an independent
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