



Journeys into Literacy

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Abstract

This article revisits a 2006 study on adult literacy in Ireland, exploring the enduring relevance of its core themes within contemporary educational discourse. Using a retrospective narrative inquiry approach, the research foregrounded the lived experiences of adults who had not acquired reading and writing skills during childhood, highlighting the interplay of emotional, social, and contextual factors in shaping literacy struggles. Findings reveal that illiteracy is sustained by cycles of negative affect—shame, fear, and frustration—compounded by unsupportive school environments and rigid pedagogical norms. The study argues that literacy learning is not merely a technical process but a deeply personal journey requiring empathetic, learner-centred approaches that address emotional barriers alongside cognitive challenges. By situating literacy within a holistic framework of social justice and inclusion, the paper underscores the need for interventions that foster resilience, trust, and psychological safety in adult education.

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Introduction

When I completed my PhD thesis on adult literacy in 2006, adult basic education in Ireland was undergoing significant transition, reflecting a broader national commitment to lifelong learning and social inclusion. This shift was largely driven by the White Paper *Learning for Life* (2000), which laid the groundwork for a more structured adult education sector. As the first comprehensive national framework for adult learning, the White Paper marked a crucial policy milestone, identifying literacy as a national priority, acknowledging the scale of adult literacy needs, and committing to expanded services and increased investment. It also encouraged cross-sectoral collaboration among statutory, community, and voluntary providers, laying the groundwork for future developments in the field.

This growing policy interest was further reinforced by the findings of the OECD's 1997 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). The survey revealed that 25% of Irish adults scored at the lowest level (level one) on the document scale, with an additional 32% at level two. These stark statistics brought national attention to the adult literacy issue and helped elevate it within Irish educational policy discourse. Since then, literacy has continued to gain prominence through targeted strategies such as the *Further Education and Training Strategy* (2014) and *Adult Literacy for Life* (2021). These documents frame literacy within a broader context of lifelong learning and social inclusion, emphasizing access, flexibility, and integrated support.

It was within this early evolving policy landscape that my thesis was situated. The study aimed to explore the personal experiences of adults who had not acquired reading and writing skills during their school years. It sought to understand the reasons behind this non-acquisition from the learners' own perspectives. Using a retrospective narrative inquiry approach, the study foregrounded the voices of adult learners, revealing how their literacy journeys were shaped by individual identity, negative formative educational experiences, and issues of social exclusion. In doing so, it highlighted the complex interplay between personal and contextual factors that contributed to their early disengagement from literacy success.

This paper revisits that 2006 thesis, arguing that its core themes remain highly relevant today, particularly the emphasis on placing the learner at the centre of the educational process. As one participant, Sean, poignantly expressed: "Until I learned to read at over forty years of age, literacy was a word that instilled fear because it represented my shame, my inadequacy, my failure as a human being" (Sean, 2006).

The study was informed by my own professional experience in the field of adult education. During my time as an Adult Literacy Coordinator in Limerick City, I came to understand that the effects of illiteracy extended far beyond the functional limitations of not being able to read or write. For many, it left a lasting sense of personal inadequacy and failure, an emotional burden that often outweighed its practical consequences. My intention in undertaking this research was to give voice to adult literacy learners and illuminate the factors they believed contributed to their childhood underachievement in reading and writing. Sean's words (above) proved particularly significant, serving as a guiding force throughout the study. While it was understood that literacy difficulties could stem from a wide range of interrelated causal factors, this study focused specifically on the emotional and psychological dimensions of the issue. In particular, it examined how negative affect (shame, frustration, and fear) blocked their engagement with learning in any constructive way.

School-based disaffection

Boldt's *Listening and Learning* (1994) and Fagan's *Culture, Politics and Irish School Dropouts* (1995) offered compelling insights into the school-based factors that contributed to student disaffection. Both studies are unsettling, particularly for the intensity of resentment expressed by early school leavers, most notably toward their former teachers. Although their focus was primarily on early school leaving, the findings were directly relevant to this study's focus on the literacy problem. They revealed how negative formative educational experiences could undermine learners' engagement and contribute to long-term educational disengagement.

Boldt (1994) emphasised the significance of school-related influences in shaping disaffection. Drawing on testimonies from early school leavers and teachers, the study identified poor student–teacher relationships and negative classroom dynamics as central to students' premature departure from school. The word most frequently used by participants to describe their schooling was "hate." Many recalled being picked on, humiliated, and even abused. Teachers were often perceived as indifferent or incapable of connecting with students, leading to a pervasive belief among participants that educators neither cared about them nor attempted to understand their needs.

Resistance theory and learner agency

Resistance theory provided a useful framework for understanding how learners had actively responded to alienating educational environments. Central to this perspective is the concept of human agency, the recognition that students did not passively absorb school norms but often engaged in behaviours that challenged, defied, or withdrew from them (Giroux, 1983; Apple, 1990). While such

defiant behaviours could be interpreted as expressions of resistance, they also had the potential to entrench students further in cycles of failure and to reproduce existing patterns of class-based disadvantage (Willis, 1977; Giroux, 1983).

This concept of resistance proved particularly salient in my study, which explored how adult literacy learners recalled and interpreted their past school experiences. Resistance theory illuminates how learners from marginalised backgrounds may have developed coping strategies, whether overt or internalised, in response to schooling environments they had experienced as repressive or invalidating. While structural critiques of education often dominate resistance literature, my study privileged the perspective of the individual learner, exploring how their own agency, shaped within a constraining environment, had also contributed to their literacy challenges.

In the Irish context, Fagan (1995) presented an analysis of resistance among early school leavers. Her participants understood schooling not as a pathway to advancement, but as a mechanism of social control. Their hostility, particularly toward teachers, reflected a recognition that education had not been designed with their needs in mind. Fagan demonstrated how oppositional behaviours, including withdrawal and non-participation, had functioned as expressions of resistance. Yet, paradoxically, such behaviours had often reinforced students' marginalisation. As Fagan noted, many participants attributed their underachievement not to intellectual limitations but to disengagement from classroom learning, they avoided participation and so failed themselves" (Fagan, 1995, p.106).

Fagan also identified a continuum of resistant behaviours, ranging from passive non-engagement to more disruptive or confrontational actions that damaged teacher-student relationships. Her participants exhibited a learned defensive sensitivity, a heightened awareness of being "put down", that had necessitated emotional self-protection. While Giroux (1983) interpreted such behaviours as politically expressive, they could also be understood in psychological terms as responses to a perceived threat to one's identity and self-worth. It was shown how the narratives from my study revealed an internalised sense of inferiority, suggesting that resistance, while oppositional, also served as a protective function.

Fagan's theoretical orientation aligns with the discourse of cultural reproduction and working-class resistance, linking personal stories of struggle to broader themes of social control and empowerment. Her emphasis on the learner as an active agent resonated closely with the core concern of my study: the dynamic interaction between the learner and their environment. This interactional focus, placing the learner as active agent in their own learning journeys, underpinned the theoretical framework for my research.

Further support for this perspective came from Humphreys (1996), who argued that schools could present emotional and social risks, particularly for vulnerable learners. In such contexts, both students and teachers may have adopted defensive behaviours to shield themselves from perceived psychological harm. What was often labelled as resistance or defiance might, in fact, have represented a creative and adaptive response to emotionally unsafe learning environments.

Taken together, these studies highlighted the profound influence of school-based factors in limiting learners' educational opportunities. The participants' accounts offered valuable insights into the emotional and social dynamics that had contributed to their disengagement. In this context, the concept of resistance was especially relevant, not only in relation to structural theories of inequality, but more importantly, as a lens for understanding the subjective, emotionally driven responses of adult literacy learners. I proposed that those who had struggled with literacy had developed subtle forms of resistance, perhaps more passive or internalised than overtly disruptive, shaped by the emotional risks posed by the learning environment.

From this perspective, resistance was viewed as a protective mechanism, an adaptive response to the threat of failure, humiliation, or exclusion. The retrospective accounts of the participants in my study offered a rich methodological tool for exploring the interplay between personal history and environmental influence. Through these biographical narratives, I began to understand how individual agency, shaped within school-based constraints, had contributed to the literacy journeys of adult learners.

Biographical narrative

The study employed biographical narrative as its primary methodological tool, selected for its ability to capture the lived experiences of participants and to illuminate how they assigned meaning to their past. This approach prioritised the insider perspective, offering participants the opportunity to own their stories and frame their experiences in their own terms. By enabling participants to construct and share their personal worldviews, biographical narrative facilitated a deeper understanding of the emotional, social, and psychological dimensions of their literacy struggles.

The decision to adopt biographical narrative was rooted in the belief that literacy is not simply a technical skill, but a deeply personal journey shaped by a range of emotional and contextual factors. Unlike traditional research methods that may impose external theoretical frameworks or psychological models, biographical narrative allowed the research to remain open to participants' unique perspectives. This openness fostered a more empathetic and grounded exploration of literacy

challenges, emphasizing the individual meanings participants attached to their experiences, rather than imposing predefined categories (Bruner, 1990).

By centring participants' voices and allowing them to construct their own narratives, the study moved beyond conventional academic interpretations. It embraced the complex, multifaceted nature of adult literacy, recognizing that the barriers to literacy are not solely technical but deeply intertwined with personal histories, emotional responses, and social realities. Through this methodology, the study was able to examine the ways in which participants had engaged with literacy, as well as how they navigated both emotional and practical challenges in their learning journeys (Freire, 1994; Josselson & Lieblich, 1995).

My research unfolded in two interrelated phases. Phase One explored the nature and impact of the reading and writing difficulties that the five participants faced in their daily lives. This initial phase offered a foundational understanding of the issue, setting the stage for a deeper investigation into its underlying causes. Phase Two focused on the retrospective reflections of three participants, examining their home and school experiences to uncover how they interpreted their past educational circumstances and the key influences that had shaped their literacy journeys. This two-phase design reflected the study's inductive approach, aptly captured by Bogdan and Biklen (1992): "You are not putting together a puzzle whose picture you already know. You are constructing a picture that takes shape as you collect and examine the parts" (p. 32).

The findings from Phase One raised some key questions:

1. What personal, social, and environmental vulnerabilities did the learners (as children and adults) bring into the learning space?
2. What circumstances triggered negative affect or emotional responses?
3. How did these emotional experiences shape their engagement with the learning process?

Through documenting participants' prior educational experiences, the study aimed to generate a nuanced, qualitative understanding of the factors that contributed to their literacy underachievement. It became clear that learning to read and write was not a linear progression toward proficiency but rather a vicarious journey marked by early school failure and later, courageous efforts to re-engage as adult learners. The metaphor of a "journey" from the study's title, captured both the learners' personal struggles to find meaning and coherence in their literacy development as well as my own engagement with the research process over many years. This was a challenging task for me, given the

range of possible influences: cognitive, social, cultural, physical, and environmental, that could have contributed to the problem (Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

Finally, I approached the study with a set of guiding beliefs and values, or what Lynch (1999) referred to as "domain assumptions" (p.4), shaped by my professional experience as an adult educator. These assumptions, as Lynch explains, are the values and interpretive lenses through which we understand and assign meaning to phenomena. In my case, they were grounded in a commitment to social justice, encompassing a belief in the importance of promoting equality, fairness, and inclusion within educational practice. I viewed literacy not simply as a personal deficit but as a socially constructed issue, influenced by structural and contextual factors. Central to this perspective was the conviction that all learners are capable of achieving meaningful literacy outcomes when the learning environment is supportive, respectful, and sufficiently challenging.

Findings: a retrospective account

In revisiting the findings of my 2006 study, it became evident that, despite the diverse life experiences of the five participants, the most pervasive theme across their narratives was the profoundly debilitating impact of literacy difficulties on the overall quality of their lives. While each participant's story was unique, all placed significant emphasis on the emotional dimension of their struggles. A key insight that emerged was the widespread lack of self-esteem, which led each learner to adopt a primary coping strategy centred around concealing their perceived inadequacies.

I theorized that adult illiteracy was sustained by the powerful interaction between negative emotions and repeated experiences of failure. This dynamic formed the heart of the ongoing cycle of failure. In other words, literacy difficulties could not be understood purely in technical terms; they were deeply rooted in vulnerability factors, such as lack of support, poor school performance, and emotional responses like shame and self-protection. These factors interacted to reinforce and perpetuate further setbacks. The findings supported the interactive perspective that had guided the study from the beginning: learners' actions and experiences were mutually influential, triggering one another and creating self-reinforcing patterns of failure.

Several shared features across the five participants' stories stood out clearly upon revisiting the data:

1. **Adverse Environmental Learning Conditions:** These included unsupportive schools and difficult home environments, which, from the outset, shaped their learning experiences.

2. Pervasive Negative Affect: Internalized feelings of shame, fear, and failure that shaped their sense of self-worth and engagement with learning.
3. Self-Protective Coping Strategies: Withdrawal or avoidance, leading to non-productive engagement with literacy learning and further entrenching difficulties.

It became evident that negative affect did not simply result from literacy failure; rather, it contributed to its continuation, creating a cycle that was difficult to break.

Case examples

The experiences of specific participants, such as Denis, provided valuable insights into the complexity of literacy difficulties. Denis described how he had difficulty with unfamiliar words, phonemic awareness, misspelling, and an inability to organize ideas coherently in writing. He explained his struggles:

I get confused, like bridge... is the D before the G, what way does it go? I'd have to write it out two or three times to let it sink in. I would have written a piece with no paragraphs, words all over the place, no structure, nothing in sequence, jumping from one thing to another instead of going from beginning to end.

Upon reflection, it became clear that Denis's literacy challenges were not solely about a lack of technical skills. His struggles were exacerbated by a deep sense of frustration and anxiety, creating a vicious cycle. These feelings often manifested in violent outbursts, underscoring the emotional toll literacy difficulties took on him. Denis stated:

I often flung the book across the room with anger... I have so much anger in me... my escape was through violence, the only room I had was through physical force or verbal abuse.

Denis's case exemplified how literacy struggles were not just cognitive obstacles but profoundly emotional experiences. His anger and frustration were closely linked to his literacy difficulties, reinforcing a cycle of failure. It also highlighted the adverse impact of his schooling on his literacy development. He provided a deeply troubling account of his deteriorating relationship with the education system, culminating in his expulsion at the age of eleven. His criticisms of schooling focused on three key aspects: the adversarial relationships with teachers, the negative consequences of his learning struggles, and the lack of empathy from educators regarding his difficult home life. Denis described school as "torture" and a "dangerous thing" that stifled his self-worth and exacerbated his learning challenges. His perception of teachers was uniformly negative, characterizing them as "strict,"

"stern," "violent," and "bitter," and his relationship with them described as "a battle and a sick situation." The following was his recollection of one particular teacher:

His idea was to throw out the information, and if you didn't catch it or if you were slow, he wouldn't tolerate you. There were about four or five of us in the one class, and he would always pick on us. We all had some sort of dyslexia or some learning blockage. If you hadn't an exercise done, or if you misspelled something or misread something, he'd single you out and then you wouldn't be able to see it. You wouldn't be able to understand it.

Denis painted a picture of the classroom as a place of fear and humiliation, where failure and disrespect were constant threats:

It's the fear of failure and being disrespected as well. All that fuelled the anger. If you couldn't learn, you were singled out straight away, you were degraded. This brings frustration, which was your biggest enemy in learning. The anger comes out in the class. You do something then that will provoke the teacher against you, and then it became a battle between the child and the teacher at school that was never cured. You just got so bogged down in the battle with teachers.

Denis's testimony underscored the emotional and psychological toll of his educational experiences and highlighted how school-based factors, especially teacher attitudes and punitive pedagogical practices, could undermine a learner's agency, self-worth, and educational progress.

Similarly, Sean's narrative provided crucial insights into his literacy struggles and the deep-seated sense of failure that can persist despite academic success. Although Sean passed his Leaving Certificate in all subjects except English, his internalized sense of failure remained. He reflected:

I passed my Leaving Certificate in all subjects except English. I got that more out of my intelligence rather than anything I learned. I picked stuff up in class. It was a process of elimination, having to figure out what the question was then making a shot at it.

Despite academic success, Sean's internalized sense of inadequacy remained. His story highlighted the dissonance between external markers of success, like exam results, and internal self-perceptions. He felt that, despite passing exams, he was still "stupid." His struggle with literacy was deeply entangled with feelings of shame, which he explained as:

Because I wasn't able to read and write very well after leaving school, I thought that I was a failure. I brought all of the failure beliefs with me from school. It affected me all my life up to the last couple of years. If qualifications are my value, then I have no value. I have since realised that it doesn't matter what anyone thinks about me, it's what I think about myself that counts.

Like Denis, Sean's sense of self-worth was deeply impacted by feelings of inadequacy and failure, which in turn shaped his identity. For many adult learners, the journey to literacy is not only about acquiring skills but also about reclaiming dignity and self-worth.

Sean firmly believed that he had the capacity to successfully acquire reading and writing skills had he been given the opportunity to learn "at my own speed." He emphasized that his difficulties with literacy did not arise from a lack of ability but from an educational system that failed to accommodate his slower pace of learning. He described his educational experience thus:

I didn't learn to read and write because I was too slow picking it up in the beginning. I should've been allowed to grow at my own speed. You see the class moves on and I move behind, and once you start to move behind, you're compensating and you're covering up and you're generally lost.

Importantly, Sean did not equate his slow pace of learning with a lack of intelligence but saw it as a mismatch between his individual learning needs and the educational system's rigid expectations. In his view, learners who could not keep up were vulnerable, both academically and socially. The competitive classroom climate had a detrimental impact on his educational development. Fear of punishment, ridicule, or exclusion deepened his sense of alienation and powerlessness. He reflected:

The only thing that school didn't have was an environment that allowed me to be slow. The school system never allowed you not to be able to read. I fell behind, but the system wasn't open enough for me to be able to say that I have a problem. I would've been ostracised or punished for not being able to do it. I wasn't able to articulate my problem because of the system. I didn't trust the system. If I have a problem, I need to say it, but the environment needs to be there. It's the teacher's job to make me feel comfortable enough to come forward with it. You had to fit in with the norm, and there was nothing outside of that. They should've allowed us to be who we are rather than measuring us up against what the norm is.

Sean's self-reflection revealed his acknowledgment of the role he himself played in his own difficulties. He described how his coping strategies, including deliberate actions to protect his emotional well-being, ultimately hindered his progress:

The reason I don't blame the teachers was because my own intelligence was my downfall. I was so defensive, I told them lies, I never told them the truth. How can I honestly blame them when my own coping mechanisms were my downfall? It was my intelligence that got me to copy from the person beside me. It was my intelligence that got me to stutter. It was my intelligence that made sure I didn't make eye contact with the teacher. It was my intelligence that told me not to tell the teacher the truth because they would abuse me with it. It was my intelligence that told me not to tell and be ridiculed in front of the class. And the slower you are to learn, the more you depend on your intelligence to survive.

Sean concluded that he had "orchestrated my own disaster," an acknowledgment of how he internalized blame. Yet, his coping strategies were formed in response to a school environment that offered little tolerance for vulnerability or diversity in learning styles. As he poignantly observed:

I was too damn good at hiding. That was my demise. I orchestrated my own disaster - totally, totally. I completely participated in it.

He went on to explain how his survival mechanisms in the classroom were tied to emotional self-preservation:

Ninety five per cent of my energy went into avoiding being found out.

In such circumstances, it is no surprise that Sean's literacy progress remained minimal. His account underscored the importance of emotional safety and learner agency in achieving educational success. Like Denis, Sean's inner world was filled with fear, defensiveness, and pain, as he navigated a system that valued conformity over care.

Together, these narratives revealed how early experiences of marginalization, shame, and rigid educational expectations contributed to long-lasting educational disengagement. Both Denis and Sean followed emotional trajectories that shaped their literacy journeys, creating a reciprocal process where emotional distress and institutional rigidity perpetuated literacy failure. Their stories affirmed the centrality of the learner's internal world, emphasizing the need for pedagogical approaches that respect diversity, empathy, and psychological safety in the learning environment.

In hindsight, the findings of my study underscored the deeply interdependent relationship between skills deficits and negative affect in the context of literacy learning. Denis and Sean's stories, along with those of the other participants, showed that illiteracy is not merely a lack of technical ability; it is a complex interplay of emotional, psychological, and social factors. The emotional toll that accompanies literacy struggles, the shame, frustration, and pervasive sense of failure, created self-reinforcing cycles, making it increasingly difficult for learners to engage with education in any meaningful or productive way.

The key insight from these findings is that literacy challenges extend beyond cognitive obstacles. They are intrinsically tied to emotional and psychological barriers that significantly affect a learner's ability to thrive. Addressing adult illiteracy, therefore, requires more than just imparting technical skills; it necessitates a deep understanding of the emotional and social contexts in which these skills are developed. Literacy must be viewed holistically, acknowledging not only the cognitive but also the affective dimensions of the learner's experience. This broader perspective calls for a shift in how literacy interventions are designed, one that fosters not only the development of technical literacy skills but also supports the emotional resilience and self-efficacy needed to navigate those challenges.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the lived experiences of adult literacy learners, providing a platform for them to share their narratives and uncover the underlying reasons for their struggles with literacy. The aim was to understand the barriers to literacy acquisition by documenting the retrospective accounts of participants, shedding light on their formative literacy experiences, and examining the profound impact these experiences had on their later lives. While the study primarily focused on the historical aspects of these participants' literacy journeys, it also recognized the progress they made as adults, despite continuing to experience literacy deficits.

Despite years spent in formal education, they had not acquired basic reading and writing skills, and their journey toward literacy mastery remained incomplete. The childhood environments, both at home and in school, were not conducive to literacy development. A lack of support in both areas created conditions that stifled progress, exacerbating their literacy difficulties rather than alleviating them.

Moreover, as evidenced by the stories of all five participants in my study, the fear of exposing their literacy struggles often led to a reluctance to seek help. As Sean poignantly described, "The more help I got, the more pressure it put on me. I used to try to avoid getting help. I actually needed to be allowed

to be slow.” This insight illuminated the emotional tension experienced by these learners, an internal conflict between the need for assistance and the fear of being stigmatized or judged for their perceived inadequacies.

Reflecting on the study’s findings, it became clear that while environmental factors played a very substantial role in the participants' literacy failure, personal and emotional factors were equally critical in shaping their experiences. The participants' ongoing struggles with literacy were compounded by feelings of frustration, shame, and inadequacy. These emotions were triggered by constant comparisons to their peers, which left them feeling perpetually behind. The emotional toll of persistent failure, particularly in such a fundamental domain as literacy, was devastating. The repeated negative feedback from teachers only served to reinforce their sense of isolation and incompetence.

The study was interdisciplinary, drawing from multiple fields, including literacy education, sociology, and educational psychology. While a psychological dimension inevitably emerged, I intentionally avoided deep engagement with technical psychological theories, as this could distance the reader from the emotional truths expressed by the participants. This approach resonates with the educational philosophy of Carl Rogers whose humanistic perspective emphasizes understanding, compassion, and relational support in education. Rogers’ vision of the teacher as a facilitator of growth, one who nurtures and supports rather than controls and punishes, aligned with the needs expressed by the participants (1983).

Rather than offering prescriptive conclusions, as there is an extensive body of literature on effective literacy instruction, the study focused on the emotional dimension of literacy struggles and the need for a more empathetic, supportive approach to teaching. In this respect, it is fitting to end this paper with some thoughts from one of the participants. Denis, reflecting on his educational experience, emphasized the importance of teacher empathy and understanding:

“A bad teacher is someone who doesn’t notice when a student is frustrated. They create barriers between themselves and their students. They’ve got some sort of problem within themselves. They won’t change, because change means admitting they were wrong.”

Denis's words encapsulated the core message of this study: effective literacy instruction is not just about teaching skills; it’s about creating an environment of trust, compassion, and emotional safety. For adult learners, particularly those with a history of failure, the teacher’s role is not only to teach but to recognize and respond to the emotional challenges that accompany the learning process.

In conclusion, this study has highlighted the emotional complexity of adult literacy struggles, illustrating how fear, shame, and isolation can undermine even the most determined efforts to learn. It suggests that literacy learning is not simply a matter of developing technical skills but also requires addressing the emotional barriers that often stand in the way. Through a deeper understanding of these emotional dynamics, educators can better support their students and help break the cycle of literacy failure.

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