

**PRACTITIONERS' REFLECTIONS ON THE  
BENEFITS OF AND OBSTACLES TO  
INTEGRATING LITERACY**

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports on a small scale research study on the reflections of vocational educators who have been working to integrate literacy support and development with other teaching and learning on accredited vocational education and training courses. The overall purpose of this study was to learn from the insights and experience of the practitioners in order to inform the development of supports for teachers and centres in implementing inclusive, learner-centred approaches to integrating literacy and vocational learning.

Semi-structured interviews were held with seven vocational teachers and one centre manager. The research question that framed this study was: What are the benefits of and obstacles to integrating literacy with vocational teaching and learning in further education and training, in the perception of practitioners who have been working to do so?

The study focused on practitioners' accounts of **practices** in integrating literacy into their vocational programmes, the **benefits** they perceive from the approach, and the perceived **obstacles** to implementing the approach. Interviews were transcribed and the resulting data analysed using a thematic approach. The study was informed by a review of research on embedding or integrating literacy with vocational learning, and by a literature review focusing on theoretical perspectives on literacy and on literacy learning as elaborated by Paulo Freire, by writers in the New Literacy Studies (NLS), and by Thomas G Sticht's model of Functional Context Education (FCE).

The interviewees identified a range of benefits to learners from the integrated approaches they had used. The perceived obstacles to integrating literacy included some at practitioner level and centre level, both of which were bound up with factors at the institutional level. Most of the practitioners interviewed identified as obstacles factors related to the implementation of the (then) new FETAC Common Awards System and to forms and frameworks of evaluation and assessment. The findings and analysis from this study have informed the development of a set of guidelines on integrating literacy and the design of professional development programmes offered by NALA.

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# CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Purpose of the study

This thesis focuses on the question: What are the benefits of, and obstacles to, integrating literacy support and development with vocational teaching and learning on formal further education and training courses, in the perception of practitioners who have been working to do so? The purpose of the study is to inform the development of supports for practitioners in using inclusive integrated approaches to literacy and vocational learning.

The thesis reports on a small scale study on the perspectives of vocational education practitioners, from four different sites, who have been working to integrate literacy support and development into their work with learners on full time, accredited further education and training programmes. Seven of the eight practitioners interviewed for the study are vocational teachers or instructors or tutors - the term varies between the settings and roles - and the eighth a manager of a vocational education and training centre. Six of the teachers had taken part in the NALA-NUIM Certificate Course in Integrating Literacy and another had organised and taken part in in-house professional development programmes on developing language and literacy as part of other teaching and learning. The study is not an evaluation of these professional development programmes. Each of the research participants had been involved for at least two years – most for significantly longer – in integrating literacy development with vocational teaching and learning.

Chapter 2, Methodology, presents the qualitative approach taken in the research, the semi-structured interview method used in the data-gathering phase, and the thematic analysis approach used. Chapter 3, Literature Review, considers theoretical literature on literacy and literacy learning. Chapter 4, Review of Research, considers a number of international and national studies on integrating or ‘embedding’ literacy in vocational education and training. Chapter 5, Findings and Analysis, presents the themes emerging from analysis of the data and discusses these in the light of the

literature reviewed in Chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 6, Conclusion, summarises the key points of this work and considers outcomes and recommendations arising from the study.

## **1.2 Terminology**

### ***1.2.1 Literacy***

The following definition of literacy informed the research project:

Literacy involves listening and speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. It includes more than the technical skills of communication: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new possibilities, and initiate change.

Good practice in adult literacy work starts with the needs and interests of individuals. It is concerned with personal development and building confidence as well as technical skills.

(Derbyshire et al 2005:3)

In this thesis, the word ‘literacy’ is used in this sense. How we understand ‘literacy’ is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, Literature Review. It is a question that is of course critical for what we mean by integrating ‘literacy’ with vocational education and training.

### ***1.2.2 Integrating literacy***

The definition provided in the revised edition of NALA’s *Integrating Literacy Guidelines* (2013) was written during the course of, and partly informed by, this study:

On further education and training courses, ‘integrating literacy’ means developing the subject knowledge and skills and the related language, literacy, numeracy and ICT as interwoven elements of a single process. In the vocational or subject classes, it is a planned approach *and* a moment-by-moment attitude and practice on the part of teachers and learners. It involves the whole group,

not just selected individuals. In integrated courses, subject teachers and learners use differentiated active learning methods to engage with the course content (rather than relying solely on reading and writing). As part of learning the course content, they explicitly teach and learn its particular language, literacy, numeracy and ICT. Vocational teachers and literacy and numeracy specialists work together to integrate language, literacy, numeracy and ICT support and development with the various subjects and other centre activities. Integrating literacy is not just the business of the subject teacher or of the literacy specialist, but is a whole-centre approach involving learners, managers, teachers and all staff.

(Ni Chinneide 2013: 9)

That definition refers to integrating literacy and vocational / academic learning in formal further education and training contexts which is the focus of this thesis.

### ***1.2.3 A whole-centre approach***

The same document summarised the features of a whole-centre approach to integrating literacy as follows:

- There is a centre policy and plan on integrating language, literacy, numeracy and ICT across the centre's programmes and services. It is based on shared understandings of literacy and is driven by senior management.
- There is continuing professional development to help managers, teachers and all staff develop and sustain the approach.
- There are literacy-friendly procedures and practices at all phases of the programme: access, induction, teaching and learning, assessment, and progression.
- Learners have course-related literacy support built into their vocational or subject classes, and they have access to specialist literacy, numeracy and ICT supports according to need.
- There is clarity on roles and a working partnership between all involved, particularly between subject teachers, literacy specialists and learning support staff.

### ***1.2.4 Teacher, educator, practitioner, tutor***

I use these terms interchangeably in the thesis, and in each case it refers to the role of the person whose main responsibility is to facilitate learning in the vocational or academic subject area. Some of the research participants describe themselves as



teachers, some as tutors or instructors or trainers or facilitators - different terms were used in different settings and for different roles. Whatever the 'title', all expressed their role as a facilitator of the learning process. I acknowledge that teacher is a problematic term and can have connotations of over-directive, teacher-centred methodologies. However, teacher is also a term used proudly by many practitioners of learner-centred and learning-centred education.

### **1.3 Why integrate literacy?**

The Review of Research in Chapter 4 outlines research that indicates a range of benefits for learners on vocational courses when literacy support and development is integrated into their programmes. These are often described in terms of persistence on courses and achievement of qualifications, important benefits which make an influential case for policymakers to support and resource the approach. Practitioners I meet in the course of my work also highlight the increase in learners' confidence and self-esteem that arises from being able to use their own language and literacies and intelligences as resources for learning, and from teachers' respecting and drawing on different literacies as a powerful resource for learning for all in the group.

### **1.4 Context**

#### ***1.4.1 Developments in promoting an integrating literacy strategy***

NALA has been working to promote integrated approaches to literacy and vocational learning since 1985 with the publication of *Literacy in the Workshop*. The strategy has included the development of accredited professional development programmes for practitioners, (NALA-NUIM Integrating Literacy Course and the NALA-WIT Certificate in Extending Literacy), of resources and guidelines for centres and teachers, and of policy and research. The strategy has involved collaboration with a range of organisations - the third-level institutions concerned, and further education and training organisations such as Teagasc, FAS and VECs.

FAS Community Training has provided the NALA-NUIM Integrating Literacy course for FAS instructors and centre administrators and managers in most years since its inception, and has had a sustained strategy for supporting FAS community training centres in developing a whole-centre approach to integrating literacy. At a series of seminars in 2007, FAS encouraged centres to develop whole-centre plans for integrating literacy across the curriculum, using NALA's Integrating Literacy Guidelines (2002) as a framework. The seminars were addressed by researchers from the UK who presented findings from their studies on 'embedded literacy' and on 'literacies for learning in further education' (see Chapter 4). In the same year, NALA and NUIM organised a national conference on integrating literacy, at which Dr Thomas G Sticht gave a keynote address and facilitated workshops based on his Functional Context Education theory, outlined in the Literature Review in Chapter 3. Dr Sticht also addressed seminars organised by NALA with Irish education and training policymakers.

VECs have also provided the aforementioned accredited courses for teachers on adult and further education programmes, and the VEC adult literacy services throughout have continued to provide professional development and other supports for integrating literacy in vocational programmes, both to their VEC colleagues and to other education and training providers. On a national basis, Department of Education and Science guidelines for Back to Education Initiatives have endorsed an integrated approach to literacy and outlined the key features of a whole centre approach (DES 2009:6). The Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) and NALA formed a joint Working Group on Integrating Literacy in 2009. The group organised a joint conference in 2009 for practitioners from VEC, FAS and other settings, at which two NALA research reports on integrating literacy were launched (Hegarty and Feeley 2009; McSkeane 2009). In 2012 the IVEA-NALA Working Group developed an agreed policy paper on integrating literacy (IVEA 2012) and an agreed set of guidelines for centres and practitioners (Ni Chinneide 2013). VECs and FAS therefore have engaged in various ways with an integrating literacy strategy, sometimes in partnership with NALA and on a national, regional and local basis.

### ***1.4.2 National policy context***

Integrating literacy in vocational programmes is now a feature of Government policy and strategy in further education and training. For example,

- A policy to embed literacy into all publicly funded education and training programmes was adopted as part of the National Skills Strategy (EGFSN 2007: 93 and 101).
- The Programme for Government 2011 committed the government to the integration of literacy in vocational training (Dept. of An Taoiseach: 2011)  
The Department of Education and Skills in *Adult Literacy Programme: Operational Guidelines for Providers* (DES 2012) supports integrating literacy in all FET provision, and a whole organisation approach, and calls for a supporting role from the adult literacy services, ‘in the context of an integrated service approach...to develop programmes that incorporate literacy, numeracy, ICT and learning to learn’. (DES 2012:5)
- Legislation for the establishment of the new further education and training authority, SOLAS, may include a commitment to a strategy for integrating literacy.

There is a need to examine carefully, in the new policy context and with the development of new structures for further education and training, the meanings given in policy to concepts like ‘literacy’ and ‘integrating literacy’. For example, ‘programmes that incorporate literacy, numeracy, ICT and learning to learn’, while welcome and necessary, may not automatically be programmes where learners experience ‘integrated literacy’ in the sense defined in this work. They could, for example, be programmes that incorporate literacy modules, rather than programmes where learners experience literacy-friendly education in all their modules. Structural features alone will not ensure that learners with different literacies, especially those who may not be comfortable with academic or schooled literacies, are enabled to participate and succeed on further education programmes that suit their vocational or content-related aptitudes.

### ***1.4.3 A culture of audit or professional trust?***

The frameworks and paperwork currently patterning the field of adult literacy and further education in Ireland seem to reflect a trend towards increasing ‘technologies of audit’ (Shore, 1998:2) and a ‘new accountability’ of data surveillance (Derrick, in Tett, Hamilton and Hillier 2006; Lawn and Ozga 2009). Webb (2007) outlines how technologies of audit have helped enact a shift in the UK from a culture of professional trust in educators to one of mistrust and surveillance, involving the

‘extraterritorialisation’ of teachers’ situated knowledge (Webb 2007:282). According to Webb (2007:284-285), the new accountability in education is characterised by ‘epistemic violence’, eliminating the ‘event-structured nature of (teachers’) contextual knowledge’. It also reduces ‘learning’ to ‘achieving...what the accountability system has already determined are students’ realistic identities and predetermined economic futures.’ Webb explores how paperwork associated with new accountability operates to re-define professional identity of teachers and to constrict learning. He discusses various ways that educators attempt to resist this process, and/or to transgress the dominant technicist discourse, and that many become complicit in this discourse through a hegemonic process of ‘epistemological suicide’.

In considering the question of accountability in adult literacy work, Merrifield (1998, and in Tett, Hamilton and Hillier 2006) calls for the translation of ‘top-down’ lines of accountability in adult literacy work into ‘a mutual web of accountability that involves different stakeholders (learners, teachers, managers, policymakers as well as taxpayers)’ (Hamilton and Hillier 2006:159). This has echoes of the *Evolving Quality Framework for adult basic education* (NALA: 2004) a participative or multi-stakeholder system NALA developed in anticipation of ‘top-down’ development of quality assurance regimes, and with the aim of having in place a framework that would reflect the principles of learner-centred and collaborative adult literacy work.

The increasing development of a top-down managerialist culture of audit and performance measurement is a significant part of the context within which practitioners in adult literacy and vocational teaching work, and therefore forms part of the backdrop to this study.

#### ***1.4.4 Rationale for the study***

This is a time of re-structuring of the further education and training system in Ireland, with the establishment of Solas and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). ‘Integrating literacy’ has been embedded in national education policy and is likely to feature in Solas and ETB strategies. There are ‘jostling discourses’ at play: integrating literacy in further education and training policy and procedures can be done in ways that promote equality and fairness for people who have been

disadvantaged by earlier experiences of education, or in ways that reflect the marketised, standardised discourse that acts to further exclude and disadvantage those who are not skilled in schooled or academic literacy.

At the heart of an inclusive and effective ‘integrating literacy’ approach is the belief that proficiency in school or standard literacy is not the hallmark of a person’s ability to engage with the content and concepts of education or training courses. Literacy-aware teaching and learning, in every subject and at every course level, ensures that all who have the content-related aptitude and motivation can participate, learn and achieve within the courses. The rationale for this study, from my perspective, was to hear from practitioners who have been trying to work in this way with their learners – what might they need to help them to keep up the good work?

## **CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Purpose of the research study**

This was a small-scale study on the perspectives of vocational education practitioners, from four different sites, who have been working to integrate literacy support and development into their work with learners on full time, accredited further education and training programmes. The overall purpose was to learn from the insights and experience of the practitioners in order to inform the development of supports for teachers and centres in implementing inclusive, learner-centred approaches to integrating literacy and vocational learning.

### **2.2. Research approach and analytical lens**

This was a qualitative study. I believed this was more appropriate than a quantitative approach to achieving the practical objective of the study, which was to elicit the considered reflections, views and insights of the research participants, and that it would be an approach congruent with adult learning methodologies. In the research conversations with participants I was influenced in particular by the insights of Sue Wilkinson (in Silverman 2004). My experience confirmed her view that participants in the research conversation can be surprised (as I was), by the process of social construction and reconstruction of 'knowledge' in the course of formulating thought in and through speech and in dialogue with others. My experience of the interview process chimed with Wilkinson's view of talk as 'constituting the social world on a moment by moment basis' (Silverman 2004:187), and of the research conversation as 'a social context in its own right.'

I approached the interview process within what Bryman describes as a radical social constructionist paradigm (Bryman 2004). This involved respecting the validity of the research participants' subjective experience and interpretations, which does not prevent critical analysis of the data. I was also influenced by the analytical lens I had chosen, a theory of literacy as social practice, which is considered in Chapter 3. This

encouraged me to see the research process as a series of interconnected and differently situated ‘literacy events’, involving affective, social, cultural and identity dimensions, patterned differently and dynamically by local and global purposes and values.

### **2.3 Ontology**

I was influenced too by my personal lens, the various values, beliefs, biases, commitments, concerns and hopes that colour how I see and ‘understand’ the aspect of the social world I was setting out to study. Being aware of this helped me sustain a practice of reflexivity through the project, aided by the practice of keeping a research log. I found that my perspective and understandings were influenced and in some ways changed by engaging with those of others involved in the research.

My view of the social world, and of that part of it under study in this project, involves a belief that our society is marked by systemic social, economic, cultural and affective inequality and oppression, and that the education system plays a crucial role within that. Educational practice and research is not a neutral ‘service’ or activity; it will inevitably either reflect and reinforce the status quo or help promote positive change towards emancipation and democracy. This perspective includes the belief that it is important for educators and educational researchers to be conscious of the ‘relationship between the oppressors and the oppressed’, and to consciously ‘take sides’ - in the practical and democratic sense elaborated by Horton and Freire (1987:103-104), not in the sense of ‘imposing ideas’, but in simply adopting and encouraging an attitude and practice of curiosity, critical reflection and awareness: a ‘skeptical reflexivity’ (Brookfield 2005).

### **2.4 Epistemology**

I approached the research with a view of ‘knowledge’ and what it means to know and learn as a process involving the whole person, their memories, emotions, perceptions, thoughts, intuition and senses; and also a social process, with knowledge a social

construct, contingent, contested and evolving. Different people experience and ‘know’ the same social event or phenomenon differently, and in that sense there is no one-size-fits-all ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ that can be measured and weighed. We create knowledge and understanding about the social world in dialogue, cooperation and contestation with others, around shared interests and concerns, contributing our own perspectives and insights and being open to those of others. A social-cultural-cognitive perspective on learning underpins the ‘integrating literacy’ project, as does the concept of language, speech, as the process of verbal thought (Vygotsky 1978; 1986), which also informed my choice of research method.

## **2.5 Data gathering method**

The research method was semi-structured interview as discussed above. The aim of the interviews was to enable the interviewees to reflect on and express their perspectives and interpretations of issues of shared concern.

In selecting potential interviewees, I used purposive sampling, based on ‘the typicality or interest of research participants or existing data’ (Ryan, in Antonesa et al N/D: 85). I used the criteria that interviewees would be vocational teachers in education and training centres who have taken part in some staff development initiative around integrating literacy with other subjects or activities, and who are interested in contributing to the research study by reflecting on and sharing their perspectives on their ‘integrating literacy’ experience.

## **2.6 Research participants and model of interview**

Seven of the eight practitioners interviewed for the study were vocational teachers and the eighth a manager of an education centre. Six of the teachers had taken part in the NALA-NUIM Certificate Course in Integrating Literacy, and another had organised and taken part in in-house professional development programmes related to language and literacy development as part of subject teaching and learning. All had many years’ experience teaching in vocational education and training programmes,



and had over two years' experience of integrating literacy systematically into their work with learners. It should be noted that the study did not set out to evaluate the professional development programmes the interviewees had engaged in; it set out to explore the benefits of and obstacles to integrating literacy support and development into the teaching and learning of other subjects, from the perspective of those particular practitioners.

The model of interview depended in part on the pre-existing relationship I had with the interviewee/s: in most cases a shared understanding model was used (Ryan, in Antonesa et al N/D:77, 78) and in one case a discourse model seemed appropriate in the context of a longstanding professional relationship and for allowing a reflective 'research conversation' based on shared beliefs.

I used a short semi-structured interview guide and I informed the interviewees in advance of the key questions or topics I wished to explore with them. This helped ensure that the research focus was maintained while also allowing scope for participants to pursue related concepts and questions that arose as important to them in the discussion.

**The focusing topics were:**

- Changes to practice that teachers made as part of integrating literacy
- Benefits perceived or observed from those changes, for learners and for teachers
- Factors perceived as helping teachers to apply the 'integrating literacy' approach
- Perceived obstacles to applying the approach.

I prepared a Consent Form and an Information Letter for interviewees, as part of ensuring informed consent to take part in the interview. I worked to carry out the research in an ethical manner to the best of my understanding and ability. I understood this to involve being aware of the power relations inherent in the researcher-respondent dynamic; always ensuring that respondents/participants in the research give fully informed consent; guaranteeing anonymity to research participants. In writing up this study I am aware of my responsibility to do justice to

the work and insights of others, and avoid plagiarism. I believe that in research, as in education, the first principle has to be 'First, do no harm'.

Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 ¼ hours; all were audio-recorded with interviewees' permission and transcribed for later analysis. After the interviews, I made immediate notes of aspects of process and content and of the themes that seemed to be emerging. To a great extent, those notes concerned the process of the interview as much as the content, the 'how' of interviewees' engagement in the process as well as the 'what'. I was surprised at the difference between these conversations and previous conversations on similar topics with the same people in either an informal situation or in the formal situation of a professional development course. Interviewees invested time - including preparation time - and energy and emotion in the process. I had been concerned that in choosing interview as the method I might be slipping into a process of 'data raid' despite my best intentions. However, as it turned out,

The process was as important as the content – the content was accessed and created through an active participation of interviewee on all sorts of levels of thought and communication; so not a data raid after all, and interviewees not passive 'muggees' of a novice researcher, but active contributors.  
(Personal Research log)

I also learned from the interview process not to assume I already 'knew' this topic. This was a field of education practice that I was deeply familiar with, and on one of my first interviews, I felt a slight worry when I saw the excellent learning materials that the interviewee had brought, in case we would spend 'too much time' going through these examples. However

The data emerging was rich, embedded in local realities, identities and relationships and expertise or knowledge and insights. I was concerned when I saw (interviewee's) notes and examples, that this would not yield much data because I had seen similar before; will this take up (waste) time? But no: in process of describing how they were used, how they were generated, the materials and worksheets took on new life and meaning and depth as artefacts locally produced within particular learning dynamics and relations: powerful authentic materials...  
(Personal Research log)

The power of the locally produced 'literacy artefacts', materials created with care and love by committed professionals in cooperation with and for their learners, was striking. I learned to re-know what I thought I knew.

## **2.7 Data analysis and writing up the findings**

I used thematic analysis based on themes that emerged in the interviews. I transcribed the interviews myself, enabling me to do some initial coding in the process, and to make memos concerning points or themes that had been indicated in what I remembered of the 'how' of the person's communication, rather than solely in the spoken words.

In coding the completed transcripts, I read and re-read the transcripts and found certain themes and issues recurred in the data. I initially coded the text using the three guiding questions as focusing categories, and from reading and re-reading the transcripts found certain themes and issues recurred in the data. I used the guiding questions as the framework for organising the presentation of the findings, and present the emerging themes as subcategories within that.

I am aware of the influence of my own immersion in this particular topic, and the danger of bias in analysing the data, particularly as the themes emerging in my analysis chimed with those emerging in my interactions with other 'integrating literacy' practitioners in the course of my work. The scope of this study was small; its nature was exploratory. In the interviews I tried to keep the focus on each person's unique perspective and meaning. I make no claims that the findings are generalizable, just that they may inform understanding of the topic from the respondents' perspective.

## **CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The research on which this thesis is based involved interviews with eight vocational educators from four different further education and training centres. Seven of the interviewees were vocational teachers; of these, six worked in youth education and training centres and one in a further education college. One of the interviewees was the manager of a youth education and training centre. The research focus was on the interviewees' experience of integrating literacy support and development with other teaching and learning on the vocational courses, and their perceptions of the benefits of and obstacles to doing so. The research participants were all working within the formal education system, and the thesis focuses on integrating literacy in that context. How we go about integrating literacy development with other processes in the formal further education system will depend firstly on our perspective on education. Also, how we understand literacy and the process of developing literacy confidence and skill is central to how we go about integrating 'it' with other learning. This chapter therefore considers theoretical perspectives on education, literacy and literacy learning that have informed this research project. I will start by considering some concepts from Paulo Freire's writings. I will then consider the concept of literacy as social practice as elaborated by the New Literacy Studies (NLS). I will conclude by considering Thomas Sticht's concept of Functional Context Education.

### **3.2 Paulo Freire**

The work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator has had, at the risk of understatement, a significant influence among educators throughout the world. His writings, some co-authored with other education theorists and activists (Freire 1996; 1998; Freire and Macedo 1987; Freire and Horton 1990; Macedo 1994), have offered a guiding light for educators who wish to 'maximise the limited space for possible change that is available to them' (Freire and Macedo 1987:127) to engage with

learners in a democratic and liberating pedagogy. In this section I will consider Freire's conceptualisation of 'education' and 'literacy'.

### ***3.2.1 Education***

Freire has said that two concepts informed all his education proposals: that education is always a political act, and that education always involves the application of particular theories of knowledge (Freire 1996). A basic Freirean proposition is that 'neutrality in education is impossible' (Freire 1996:100), that education is always a political act that can either be domesticating or liberating. The domesticating model of education operates to maintain and reproduce an oppressive status quo: it cultivates practices of compliance, passivity, credulity, and an ahistorical fatalism - an acceptance of what 'is' and what 'will be':

Education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of adapting them to the world of oppression.  
(Freire 1970:59)

Such a model achieves its adaptive purpose by conceptualising knowledge as an asset or object – a 'gift' the teacher bestows on the students. It constructs students as passive 'receptacles' for fragmented knowledge deposited by 'well-intentioned bank clerk teachers' (Freire 1996:54). This 'banking' concept of education involves an unequal teacher-student relationship in which the teacher dominates, knows, thinks, acts, talks, chooses the programme content, and is the 'Subject of the learning process while the learners are mere objects' (Freire 1996:54). It is a model of education that serves the interests of those who profit most from the world as it is, being based on the view that 'the educated person is the adapted person, because he or she is better 'fit' for the world' (Freire 1996:57).

Freire urges educators who have a commitment to a humanizing and liberating education to abandon a 'banking' model of education, including practices that position teaching and learning as 'giving' and 'receiving' knowledge. Teachers can work, within the limited space available within tightly controlled education regimes, to develop with learners an alternative, liberating pedagogy, in what Freire describes as a 'problem-posing model' of education.

The problem-posing model necessitates a transformation in the teacher-student relationship and in the conceptualisation of knowledge. Teachers and students become

co-investigators and co-constructors of knowledge: teachers are also learners, and learners teachers – they are equal subjects of the learning process. All involved learn with and from each other in their shared interaction with the ‘problematized’ aspect of the world under study. It is a process that relies on dialogue and on praxis – *‘people’s thinking on reality and people’s action on reality’* (Freire 1996: 87). The process awakens and develops a consciousness of present social reality as something that is changeable, and encourages an orientation of hope and agency towards the future as one that people can re-imagine and co-create.

Freire encourages teachers – in any subject area - to develop and apply a ‘progressive and democratic’ pedagogy. Teachers and students are equal partners in the learning process, each is a learner, and each brings particular experiences and knowledge to the learning situation. Freire is clear that this does not mean that teachers abandon their responsibilities to share their knowledge in their particular subject or content area – in fact, they have an ethical responsibility to do so as part of a practice of equality and respect:

[I must] teach well and competently the contents of my discipline. [However] I cannot reduce my teaching practice to the mere transmission of these contents. It is my ethical posture in the course of teaching these contents that will make the difference...It is a posture of unconditional respect for the students, for the knowledge that they have that comes directly from life.  
(Freire 1998: 94)

Freire’s exposition of the role of the ‘teacher of contents’ has particular relevance to this thesis, which focuses on the perspectives of (vocational and academic) ‘contents’ teachers. Teachers can help to awaken and affirm learners’ curiosity in the content area (Freire 1998:105-106) and can assist them in pursuing it in ways that help develop cognition in the particular content area *and* meta-cognition in relation to the learning process:

My role as a ‘progressive’ teacher is not only that of teaching mathematics or biology but also of helping the students to recognise themselves as the architects of their own cognition process.  
(Freire 1998: 112)

Within formal education settings (schools, colleges) most learning happens *informally*, and teachers and all staff need to be aware of the pedagogical value of

their informal interactions with learners and with each other. Freire stresses that all informal interactions need to be respectful; that the physical environment in which the learning is taking place should be maintained in a 'cleanliness and beauty' that also shows respect; and that teachers need to value the emotions and sensitivities involved in teaching and learning, working in respectful and productive ways that displace fear and build confidence and courage in learners (Freire and Macedo 1987).

Respect therefore underpins the model of education that Freire proposes. For this thesis, it is particularly pertinent that Freire states the 'point of departure' as respect for the learners' '*cultural universe*' including a commitment to ensure the '*legitimation of student discourses: that is, their own linguistic codes that are different but never inferior*' (Freire and Macedo 1987:127).

For those of us involved in 'integrating literacy' in the context of the Irish education system, Freire's writings challenge us to ask: whose literacy, whose language, and within which model of education? I consider Freire's 'problem-posing' model which takes as its starting point respect for the learners' cultural universe and linguistic codes, as the optimum model for integrating literacy support and development within the formal education system. It is not the dominant model in education, and individually educators have limited immediate power in that regard; however while acknowledging (from his experience) the difficulties involved, Freire encourages us to believe that even in a system or institution where a 'banking' model dominates it is always possible, with others, to create a space for democratic pedagogy.

### **3.2.2 Literacy**

Freire's views on effective and ethical literacy development strategies influenced the perspective of many involved in the adult literacy movement in Ireland (as elsewhere) in the last three decades of the twentieth century and continue to be acknowledged as informing 'good adult literacy work' in Ireland today (NALA 2012). His approach to literacy education involves the same processes of conscientisation, dialogue, praxis and problem-posing discussed above, and the same starting point: respect for the learners' 'cultural universe' and linguistic codes and identities.

In a concept that goes to the heart of what 'integrating literacy' is about, Freire describes literacy and literacy learning as reading and writing the word *and* the world (Freire 1996; Freire and Macedo 1987; Freire 1998). The inclusion of 'writing' is important as it captures the crucial concept that even those who cannot (yet) write the word, can engage critically with, and help re-author, the world:

...we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or rewriting it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work.

(Freire and Macedo 1987:35)

The particular methods Freire describes for starting to learn the written code involve learners identifying 'generative words': that is, words which have particular social and emotional significance for the learners, carry an engaging power, and also containing the basic sounds of the language and the capacity to quickly generate more words for further work. These should come from the learners' own '*word universe*'. Freire's method also involved the use of 'codifications' - images associated with the generative words; the discussion and decoding of these images assisted learners to understand (rather than just memorise) the word.

Freire's approach to literacy development rests on respect for cultural and linguistic equality. However, this is not the main hallmark of the 'banking' model of education, which declares the culture of dominant social groups as the standard against which all other cultural currency is weighed and found wanting:

the dominant class, which has the power to define, profile, and describe the world, begins to pronounce that the speech habits of the subordinate groups are a corruption.

(Freire, in Macedo 1994)

The alienating effect of this on children and young people in particular is significant and goes some way towards explaining why '*many people...passed through school and came out illiterate because they refused to read the dominant word*'(Freire in Macedo 1994:103).



Language and thought are intimately connected and bound up with individual and group identity (Freire, in Macedo 1994). Respecting and genuinely validating and engaging the learners' language is therefore morally and pedagogically essential. It does not mean refusing learners access to proficiency in the 'standard dialect'. Rather, it enables (as Macedo puts it in dialogue with Freire) a *critical* mastery of the standard dialect

which can never be achieved fully without the development of one's voice, which is contained within the social dialect that shapes one's reality.  
(Macedo 1994:121)

This has implications for any project to integrate literacy support and development into formal further education and training: whose literacy, and with what type of educational processes? What is clear is that language and literacy issues are central at all levels of education, that they are bound up with questions of personal and group identity, and that they arise in the context of unequal relations of power. Freire proposes therefore that a '*critical literacy*' is essential within education. A Freirean-influenced approach to integrating literacy into the teaching and learning of any subject in further education will therefore involve enabling learners to bring their own cultural and linguistic resources to bear in the process of learning.

### **3.2.3 Freedom**

Writing in 1998, Stanley Aronowitz pointed out that,

The banking transmission theory of school knowledge, which Freire identified more than thirty years ago as the culprit standing in the way of critical consciousness, has returned with a vengeance.  
(Freire 1998:4)

Freire advocated a democratic model of education that involves time for teachers to prepare adequately for their tasks, and to engage in dialogue with each other, with learners, managers and relevant others in doing so, as part of a participatory curriculum process. Democratic pedagogy requires scope for learners to work together with their teachers with a 'creativity and a taste for the adventure of the spirit' (Freire 1998:111). Towards the end of his life, Freire expressed his concern at the signs that freedom was being '*subjugated to a process of standardisation of formulas, models against which we are evaluated*' (Freire 1998:111). By 'we' he meant both teachers and learners: '*pedagogical evaluations of teachers and students*

*are becoming progressively more dominated by 'top-down' forms of discourse'* (Freire 1998:103).

This is evocative of current trends in the Irish context, where Hegarty and Feeley have pointed to (in my view) similar factors as obstacles to a critical literacies pedagogy:

funding imperatives, accreditation targets and the increasing demands of a narrow, job-related curriculum. Any mention of critical thinking [in further education] is left to individuals and certainly not structurally resourced or encouraged. (Hegarty and Feeley 2009:28)

The kinds of evaluation and assessment processes that teachers and learners work within will, I believe, inevitably influence how they will be able to integrate literacy development with other teaching and learning. It would be important that 'integrating literacy' does not itself become incorporated in managerialist 'top-down' evaluation models as distinct from democratic, participatory evaluation models.

### **3.2.4 Conclusion**

Freire has been criticised for his use of gendered language, particularly in his earlier writings. This was a criticism which he accepted and a practice he attempted to change in later writings.

James Paul Gee critiqued the content of extracts (reproduced in Freire and Macedo 1987) from one of the Notebooks (workbooks) Freire produced for a National Literacy Campaign in Sao Tome and Principe (Gee 2008: 63-65). Gee describes as 'startling' the Notebook's repeated calls for learners to 'think correctly':

Learners are told not to repeat what others say, but then the problem becomes that in 're-saying' what they read for themselves they may say it wrong, i.e. conflict with Freire's or the state's political perspective.

(Gee 2008:64)

However, Gee, who describes Freire as 'great' precisely because he did not try to hide his political perspective, states that these comments had never been intended as a criticism of Freire's work. *'Freire argued for a number of points which are as important today as when he first made them'* (Gee 2008:65) and which are integral to the arguments that Gee himself makes.

Having re-visited some of Freire's writings, I find the concepts discussed above at least as relevant today as when I first read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in the early 1970s. In the next section I will consider some of the concepts underpinning a view of literacy as social practice, which has also informed this study.

### **3.3 New Literacy Studies**

Since the 1980's, following the publication of works by Scribner and Cole (1981) and Heath (1983), a body of work has been developed by theoreticians and researchers from a range of disciplines around the concept of literacy as social practice (Street 1984; Gee 2008; Lankshear 1997; Barton and Hamilton 1998; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic 2000; Tett, Hamilton and Hillier 2006; Papan 2005; Crowther, Hamilton and Tett 2001). This 'New Literacy Studies' (NLS) has been defined by Gee, as

a way to name work that, from a variety of different perspectives, views literacy in its full range of cognitive, social, interactional, cultural, political, institutional, economic, moral and historical contexts.  
(Gee 2008:2)

In this section I will consider some concepts from the NLS that I believe have particular relevance to this study.

#### ***3.3.1 Literacy as social practice***

Brian Street (Street 1984; Street 1988; Street 2003; Street in Crowther, Hamilton and Tett 2001) proposes that we can conceptualise literacy as either 'autonomous' or 'ideological'. The autonomous model depicts literacy as a universal, unitary skillset, which once learnt can be transferred unproblematically across contexts, and which carries effects and consequences in its own right, independently of context. Street warns against the '*reification of literacy in itself at the expense of the recognition of its location in structures of power and ideology*' (Street 1988:59). He posits a model of literacy as 'ideological', explaining that it does not deny the cognitive and skills dimensions of literacy, but 'understands them as they are encapsulated within cultural wholes and structures of power' (1995:161). Research based on that model would entail the recognition of literacy as a social practice. (Street 2003:1).

The autonomous model of literacy dominates in the education system, which is a factor that needs to be taken into account in any strategy to integrate literacy development with other learning in further education. The autonomous model sees literacy as ‘a ladder which people have to climb up’ as demonstrated in ‘standardising literacy accomplishments, tests, score skills and uniform learning outcomes specified in advance of the learning process’ (Crowther, Hamilton and Tett 2001: 1-2). Any strategy for integrating literacy in further education and training will, I suggest, be best served by adopting a social practice or ‘ideological’ concept of literacy.

The writers in the New Literacy Studies (NLS), in considering and researching literacy as social practice, use the concepts of literacy *events*– social interactions mediated by texts and other literacy artefacts - and literacy *practices*. Literacy practices involve not just the observable elements of the event, but also the values, attitudes, feelings, purposes, identities, social relationships and meanings people bring to the event. These are shaped by the broader social practice in which the event is embedded, and by the social rules which determine ‘who may produce and have access to texts’ (Barton and Hamilton, in Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic 2000:7-8, drawing on Gee 1993:12).

These have been among the conceptual tools NLS researchers have brought to studies of local and vernacular literacies - people’s uses of literacy across a range of situations and contexts in their everyday lives. These studies have brought to light and have validated the richness and variety of people’s everyday literacy practices, and raise questions about the dominance of ‘standard’ literacy as the only valid literacy within the education system in particular. The concepts can also inform an integrated, literacy-aware curriculum development process: learners and teachers can research the various literacies they use or encounter inside and outside the education setting , making ‘ literacy’ itself an explicit focus for discussion and analysis within any education programme (Papen 2005). Learners can be facilitated to bring their own language and literacies to bear for learning the course content , and to also increasingly ‘fold’ these with the new vocational or academic language and literacies they wish or need to use (Ivanic 2008; Ivanic 2009). Such a process would be part of what it means to ‘integrate literacy’ with other learning on formal education courses.

### **3.3.2 *Taming social practice?***

Papen (2004:135) cautions that a theory of literacy as social practice can be ‘tamed’ if researchers, practitioners and learners omit the element of critical analysis. She outlines how a framework of literacy as social practice can be used to critically analyse literacy events and practices, and as a curriculum resource for adult literacy development. Students can be facilitated to research their vernacular literacy practices: making these visible can help students to recognise how they already use literacy competently for a range of real-life purposes. Critically analysing literacy events as part of the curriculum involves a focus on whose interests and meanings are served and whose are marginalised within the event. Papen’s alertness to the potential for ‘taming’ social practice theory chimes with that of Street (1995) who cautioned that:

it is possible...for ethnographical accounts of literacy to be conducted within the autonomous model, with all the problems and flaws that entails.  
(Street 1995:166)

Maclachlann (2008) also calls for a greater critical focus within the social practice framework, and Crowther, Hamilton and Tett (2001:1-4) stress the importance of ‘making power visible’ in literacy practices and events, because ‘literacy is deeply and inescapably bound up with producing, reproducing and maintaining unequal relations of power.’

However, the resonance between the critical literacies approach within the NLS and that propounded by Freire and Macedo is strong in my opinion. I agree with Hegarty and Feeley (2009) that ‘NLS has become an alternative voice challenging assumptions about the meaning and use of literacy by individuals and in communities’ (Hegarty and Feeley 2009:28).

### **3.3.3 *Conclusion***

The writings of the NLS have elaborated an interpretation of ‘literacy’ as multiple and varied: in fact, as ‘literacies’ varying across space and time and purposes. We are socialised and apprenticed into particular literacies over time and across the more or less porous boundaries between life contexts: home, local area/community, cultural communities, workplace/s, religious contexts and of course educational contexts.

Literacy development therefore is always about ‘more than skills’: it is embedded in broader, situated processes of ‘becoming’ and ‘belonging’. A view of literacy as social practice complements theories of situated learning that view learning as participation in sustained ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998).

Seeing literacy as a contextualised social practice has implications for a project to integrate literacy with other learning in further education and training. It will need to take account of the personal, social, cultural and identity dimensions of literacy, for each person and for the group or community as a whole; it will need to facilitate the informal as well as the formal interactions and processes by which we learn, in such a way as to enable learners bring their own language and literacies – their own ‘cultural and linguistic universes’ – proudly and actively to the learning situation.

As Gee (2008) describes it, language and literacy development is part of becoming a member of particular ‘Discourses’, defining ‘Discourse’ as ‘saying/writing-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations’, a ‘sort of identity kit’ (Gee 2008: 154).

This section has considered aspects of the writings from the field of New Literacy Studies. In the next section I will consider Thomas G Sticht’s model of Functional Context Education.

### **3.4 Functional Context Education**

Sticht (1987, 1997, 2005, 2007) has elaborated a theory of Functional Context Education (FCE) based in considerable part on his work as a cognitive psychologist researching literacy development programmes in various adult and youth education contexts in the US over the decades since the 1960s. A basic proposition of FCE is that literacy is being developed as it is being applied in contexts and for purposes that are personally meaningful to the learner:

Regarding literacy, a general thesis is that the idea that literacy is something one "gets" in one program, which is then "applied" in another is misleading. Rather, it is argued that literacy is developed while it is being applied. This means that for the large numbers of students in secondary or out-of-school programs for youth or adults who read between the fifth and ninth grade levels, literacy and content skills

education can be integrated. Through this means, the need for special "remedial" literacy programs to get students to "prerequisite" levels of literacy before they are permitted to study the "real thing," are obviated (Sticht 1997:47)

Sticht (1997: 2005) outlines a number of principles initially distilled from research studies involving short intensive programmes with new recruits in the US military in the 1970s, many of whom were unable to read the material that they would have to use in their jobs. As an alternative to the general literacy programmes that had been provided, Sticht's programmes involved a detailed analysis of the jobs for which new recruits were being trained, and used the relevant real-life materials and tasks as the learning resources on the programme (Sticht: 1987). In the decades since then Sticht has carried out research studies with young people and adults in different contexts (1997; 2007), each of which confirmed that people develop language, literacy and numeracy best while using them in the context of their primary purpose and activities. In many ways FCE echoes the social practice view of literacy and a view of learning as situated and social (Lave and Wenger 1998) and as social and cognitive (Vygotsky 1978; 1986). Sticht proposes six FCE principles for education and training courses for 'out-of-school' youth and adults:

1. Explain what the students are to learn and why in such a way that they can always understand both the immediate and long term usefulness of the course content.
2. Consider the old knowledge that students bring with them to the course, and build new knowledge on the basis of this old knowledge (facilitates entry learning)
3. Sequence each new lesson so that it builds on prior knowledge gained in the previous lessons.
4. Integrate instruction in reading, writing, arithmetic, and problem solving into academic or technical training programs as the content of the course poses requirements [for these];  
avoid decontextualized basic skills "remedial" programmes.
5. Derive objectives from careful analysis of the explicit and tacit knowledge and skill needed in the home, community, academic, technical training, or employment context for which the learner is preparing
6. Use, to the extent possible, learning contexts, tasks, materials, and procedures taken from the future situation in which the learner will be functioning.

(Sticht 2005: 5)

In discussing its relationship to social practice theory and critical theory, Demetrian (2001) suggests that Sticht's FCE avoids a narrow definition of 'functional'. Referring to work by Lytle and Wolfe (1989), he reports their view that while 'earlier

definitions of functional literacy are based on the attainment of particular competencies linked to the alleged mastery of pre-defined daily tasks' there are other 'more relativistic' definitions that are 'ideological in nature':

... these definitions situate functional literacy within the needs and characteristics of different groups and cultures.  
(Lytle and Wolfe, 1989: 8, in Demetrian, 2001:16)

Broader definitions of functional literacy also try 'to capture the thinking required in the interaction among reader, task, and specific types of text' (Lytle and Wolfe 1989: 9, in Demetrian 2001:17) and prioritise

[the] skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfil their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job-holders, and members of social, religious, or other associations of their choosing.

(Hunter and Harman 1985:7, in Demetrian 2001:16)

Sticht bases his FCE principles on this less behaviourist and 'more complex understanding of functional literacy' and there is 'an important socio-cultural strand that grounds his work' (Demetrian 2001:17). Sticht himself relates FCE to concepts such as

the social basis of cognition and literacy, constructivism, situated cognition, situated practice, contextual learning, anchored instruction, problem-based learning, cooperative learning, multiliteracies, and multiple modes of representation.  
(Sticht 1997: 7)

Just as it is possible to 'tame' social practice theory and apply it in ways that accommodate rather than help to change the existing social order, so too with FCE. Sticht however outlines a broader perspective than often associated with the term 'functional', illustrating FCE with reference to 'lions of literacy' such as Septima Poinsette Clark, the educator from the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee whose 'functional context' for literacy teaching was the movement of African-Americans for civil rights, and Paulo Freire whose 'functional context' was the struggle of the poor against oppression (Sticht 2005: 26-27).



### **3.5 Conclusion**

The research on which this thesis is based explored with eight vocational educators their perceptions on the benefits of and obstacles to integrating literacy support and development with other teaching and learning. The research participants were all working within the formal further education system, and the thesis focuses on integrating literacy in that context.

How we go about integrating literacy development with other processes in the formal further education system will depend firstly on our perspective on 'education'. Also, how we understand 'literacy' and the process of developing literacy confidence and skill is central to how we go about integrating 'it' with other learning. This chapter considered theoretical perspectives on education, literacy and literacy learning that have informed this research project, including Paulo Freire's critical literacy, the concept of literacy as social practice as elaborated by writers in the field of New Literacy Studies, and the Functional Context Education model elaborated by Thomas G Sticht.

In the next chapter I will present a review of empirical research on the topic of integrating or embedding literacy in further education and training.

## **CHAPTER 4: REVIEW OF RESEARCH**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter considers a number of research studies on integrating literacy with other learning on further education and training programmes. A particular focus of the review is to learn what these studies can tell us about the factors that might enable or hinder vocational teachers in integrating literacy support and development into their practice.

### **4.2 NRDC (UK) research in embedding literacy**

In the UK, research carried out by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) investigated the impact of ‘embedding’ language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) in vocational education programmes in England and Scotland (Casey *et al* 2006). NRDC researchers worked with 15 further education colleges and one private training provider in a mixed methods study involving teachers and students on 79 vocational courses. The courses were designed to lead to qualifications at Levels 1 or 2 of the UK’s framework of qualifications, roughly the equivalent of Levels 3 and 4 of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). The research aimed to identify the impact of embedded approaches mainly in terms of learners’ persistence on their vocational programmes (‘retention’) and learners’ achievement of vocational and LLN qualifications. The study also aimed to identify the processes characteristic of successful embedding of LLN in vocational programmes and the organisational structures needed to support them. Defining ‘embedding’ as any form of intentional linking of LLN and vocational learning, the researchers developed a four point scale to characterise courses: from ‘not embedded’, through ‘partly’ and ‘mostly’ embedded, to ‘fully’ embedded or ‘integrated’. On fully integrated courses, learners experienced LLN and vocational learning as integrated throughout their programme; they perceived the LLN teachers and vocational teachers as cooperating to support the learners’ course

goals; and they perceived LLN work as relevant to their vocational learning objectives.

#### ***4.2.1 Benefits and enabling factors***

Casey *et al* (2006) reported a number of benefits from embedded approaches, in findings that were influential in promoting the embedded or integrated approach to policymakers and providers. They found that on the vocational courses in which LLN was embedded, learner persistence or retention was higher, learners were more likely to achieve vocational qualifications *and* LLN qualifications and learners reported feeling better prepared for their vocational role. In relation to factors that assist successful embedding, the researchers identified four categories of features: teaching and learning practices that connect LLN to vocational content; teamwork between LLN teachers and vocational teachers; shared staff understandings, values and beliefs; and enabling policies and organizational features. NRDC case studies (Cooper and Baynham 2005; Roberts *et al* 2005) also found that an ethos and practice of empathy and care, and the quality of relationships among and between teachers and learners, were critical to the success of integrated or embedded programmes.

#### ***4.2.2 No single model of embedded provision***

Vocational teachers were found to have a crucial role in motivating learners to develop LLN as an integral part of developing a professional identity in their chosen vocational area. The vocational teachers often represent the vocational role to which the learners aspire and are therefore in a good position to successfully engage learners in developing the knowledge and skills for that role – including the embedded language, literacy and numeracy. However, the research found that when vocational teachers took *sole* responsibility for vocational *and* literacy and numeracy development, learners did less well in terms of achieving literacy and numeracy qualifications. They concluded that such sole responsibility would be counter-productive *unless* the vocational teachers were ‘highly skilled and qualified in each area of teaching’ – the LLN and vocational areas. The researchers recommended that in most cases learners would be ‘taught by teams of staff, each with their own different areas of expertise, working closely together.’ (Casey 2006: 23). They also

found that learners who availed of Additional Learning Support (additional to the embedded literacy support in their vocational classes) were more likely to complete their course than classmates who had not received that additional support.

In findings that were later echoed in case studies in New Zealand (Leach *et al* 2010), the NRDC researchers concluded that there is ‘no single model of embedded provision’ (Casey *et al* 2006: 45). They stress that structural features alone, while important, did not guarantee success – it was crucial that all concerned shared a commitment to ‘making these features work for learners and treating LLN as an integral part of vocational learning’ (Casey 2006: 45).

#### ***4.2.3 Reflection on NRDC research findings***

The findings of the NRDC research fit well with the socio-cultural theories of literacy and literacy learning as discussed in Chapter 3, which share the view that we develop language, literacy and numeracy best in contexts that are personally and socially meaningful to us, and in the course of using them to meet our primary purposes at any given time. The findings on the important literacy-related role of the vocational teacher also chimes with those theories which see literacy development as intimately linked to questions of identity, belonging and participation: we take on new literacy practices as part of ‘becoming’ - and coming to be recognised as – members of particular ‘Discourse’ communities (Gee 2008) and communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). In the case of learners on vocational courses, the vocational teacher in many cases represents the role and (vocational/professional) identity to which the learner aspires, and is therefore well placed to model the relevant literacy and numeracy practices and to motivate learners to develop skill and confidence in those.

The NRDC finding that learners were less successful when vocational teachers took *sole* responsibility for areas of learning- the vocational and the language, literacy and numeracy areas – is significant. It should be kept in mind that this finding refers to success as indicated by the achievement of vocational qualifications and qualifications in language, literacy and numeracy, in which regard learners did less well if they did not have supports from LLN specialists as well as from their

vocational teacher. Of course, ‘literacy’ is more than literacy tests can measure, and vocational teachers ‘on their own’ can have a powerful role in supporting learners’ development of confidence and skill in the situated literacy and numeracy practices appropriate to the particular vocational area. Also, the NRDC ‘proviso’ is also welcome – that some vocational tutors may have ‘dual expertise’ and qualifications in both areas, in which case ‘sole responsibility’ for both areas would be possible. This fits with experience in Ireland, where some vocational teachers, following ‘integrating literacy’ training with NUIM, went on to achieve qualifications in literacy and numeracy development through the Literacy Development Centre in Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT). However, overall the NRDC finding on this fits with my experience and with the findings of NALA research, and with its recommendation that learners should be supported by vocational teachers *and* literacy specialists working together in a ‘whole-centre’ approach to integrating literacy and vocational learning.

The NRDC findings on the importance of shared understandings of literacy and learning, and on the important role of the vocational teacher in supporting course-related literacy development, are echoed in the ‘literacies for learning’ project in the UK, which is discussed next. This project was underpinned by a social practice perspective on literacy as multiple, varied, contextualised, and bound up with personal and community identity, values, feelings and meanings.

### **4.3 Literacies for learning in further education (UK)**

The Literacies for Learning in Further Education project (LlLFE) was a three-year project jointly coordinated by Lancaster University, England, and Stirling University in Scotland (Ivanic *et al* 2008; Ivanic *et al* 2009; Mannion and Ivanic n/d; Mannion and Hillier 2005; Edwards and Smith 2005; Edwards and Miller 2008). The project was led by prominent theoreticians and researchers in the field of New Literacy Studies (NLS), which is discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis. NLS interprets ‘literacy’ not as a set of standardised skills, but as multiple and varied practices (‘literacies’), embedded in broader social practices. The LlLFE project brought that theoretical lens to bear on the question of vocational and academic learning in the

formal setting of further education colleges, with a process and findings that contribute significantly, in my view, to deepening understanding of what it means to integrate literacy with other learning and teaching.

The university researchers cooperated with four colleges of further education, each of which seconded four teachers to work as practitioner researchers on the project. The teachers/practitioner researchers were supported to use a range of media and methods to facilitate students to research the everyday literacy practices in which they (the students) engaged inside and outside the college. They also analysed the literacy demands of the curriculum areas involved, identifying the specific literacies that students were expected to use for learning and assessment purposes.

It was found that students used a rich array of literacies in their everyday lives for personal, family, work and social purposes, including ‘formal’ literacies used in dealing with officialdom. The research assisted students and teachers alike to see, understand and value the vernacular literacy practices and capabilities that students bring with them to the formal learning situation. The research therefore gave a more accurate picture of students’ literacy capabilities than would be given by decontextualized ‘literacy tests’.

The researchers identified a number of characteristics common to learners’ everyday literacies: they were found to be **purposeful**; oriented to a clear **audience**; **generative** (involving meaning-making and creativity); **shared** (interactive, participatory and collaborative); in tune with the learners’ **values and identities**; **non-linear** in terms of ‘reading paths’; **contextualized**; **multi-modal** and involving **multi-media**. The everyday literacy practices were also **self-determined**, varied, and they were learnt through participation (Ivanic 2008:2). In the college contexts, the researchers identified four categories of ‘literacies for learning’:

- literacies for learning to be a student;
- literacies for learning particular subjects;
- literacies for assessment and
- literacies for ‘doing the job’ (in real or simulated work environments)

(Ivanic, 2008:2)

The researchers found that literacies for assessment dominated on the courses – for example, that most of the writing learners did was for assessment purposes – and they noted the ‘washback’ effect of qualifications-focused summative assessments on teaching and learning practice.

This evokes, for me, concerns expressed by other researchers that

narrow, prescriptive outcomes and criteria used for accountability and national measurement cannot easily serve the educational purposes of formative assessment (Derrick and Ecclestone 2006:5).

and that there is

growing evidence of the impact of strongly target -driven summative systems [which] makes it important to differentiate between activities that look like formative assessment but which may be little more than coaching or continuous summative assessments.

(Derrick and Ecclestone 2006:2)

#### ***4.3.1 Changes to practice***

The Literacies for Learning in Further Education project explored ‘ways of mobilising students’ everyday literacies’ (Ivanic 2008:1) as a resource for learning and assessment within their courses. Teachers were supported to make small changes to aspects of course literacy practices in order to change the literacy demands on students and to get a better resonance between the literacies of the course and those the students used outside the course. The researchers developed a framework to assist in analysing and modifying literacy practices (Figure 2.1). If any one aspect of the literacy practice is changed, it will alter the nature of the practice.

<b>Aspects of a literacy event or practice</b>			
	<b>Content (What?)</b>	<b>Purposes (Why?)</b>	<b>Audiences (Who?)</b>
<b>Under what conditions?</b>	Languages Genres Styles Designs	Flexibility and constraints	Roles, identities and values
<b>How?</b>	Modes and technologies	Actions and processes	Participation

*Figure 2.1: A framework for analysing literacy practices (Ivanic 2008)*

The researchers report the following key recommendations arising for practice:

- ‘Fine-tune’ reading and writing activities on the courses to resonate more with the students’ everyday literacy practices
  - Make the nature of the reading and writing involved in the vocational/academic learning and assessment more explicit and visible to students
  - Value what students can do with reading and writing
  - Facilitate students to provide evidence of learning in their subjects without having to acquire special ‘assessment literacies’.
- (Ivanic 2008:3)

#### **4.3.2 Benefits to learner**

The research team found that ‘changes in practice which incorporated characteristics of students’ everyday literacy activities increased their engagement, recall and confidence’ (Ivanic 2008:3). Overall the project directly challenged pedagogical assumptions and practices that construct learners as ‘deficient’ in literacy (Black and Yasakawa 2011).

#### **4.3.3 Implications for institutional supports**

Teachers should have opportunities for sharing practice ‘within and across curriculum areas’ and institutional policy should ‘encourage a culture of experimentation in pedagogic practices’ (Ivanic 2008:4). For awarding bodies the researchers



recommend that ‘qualifications in communication skills should accredit the literacies which are part of the courses themselves’ (Ivanic 2008:1). The narrow range and academic nature of assessment on vocational courses should be reviewed as they could present unnecessary literacy obstacles to learners’ demonstrating their vocational or academic learning. The researchers noted the difficulties caused by the tension inherent in ‘dual purpose’ courses which try to address both vocation-specific and general academic purposes. This and features of an ‘academic drift’ in vocational education are also considered in Edwards and Miller (2008).

#### **4.4 Frameworks, guidelines and models, New Zealand**

The New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission has published a Theoretical Framework for integrating or embedding literacy in vocational education and training, and a companion series of guidelines for providers (TEC, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d, 2009e). The Ministry of Education also funded research (Leach *et al* 2009; 2010) which has helped to illuminate the ways in which organisations can embed language, literacy and numeracy [LLN] development in programmes for young people and adults. The research by Leach *et al* involved a comprehensive review of the literature (2009) followed by case studies involving five education and training providers (2010). From the literature review, Leach *et al* (2009) distilled a set of guidelines for embedding LLN in programme development and delivery (2009:5-7). These include a recommendation that in developing programmes, providers should ‘ensure the notion of literacy as social practice is integrated’ and that teaching and learning practice should balance skills building, task mastery, critical thinking and democratic participation. In common with much of the research reviewed for this study, (e.g. Cooper and Baynham 2005, Hegarty and Feeley 2009), the Leach *et al* guidelines (2009) promote constructivist and holistic approaches, emphasise authentic, contextual learning, learning in groups, and crafting learning cultures that build trust, honour diversity and develop confident learners.

From the empirical research strand seven features common to all five case study sites were identified as supporting effective integrated/embedded literacy:

1. An ‘embedded literacy champion’ within the organisation
2. Strong philosophies underpinning the approach to embedding
3. A ‘whole organisation’ commitment to the approach
4. A range of planning and policy documents to support embedding
5. A strong emphasis on learners and on learning, and the use of constructivist, learner-centred approaches
6. Tailoring literacy learning to the context for which learners are preparing
7. A very strong commitment to training and professional development of staff

Because of subtle differences between sites in relation to each of the above findings, the project reported as their eighth and most important finding that ‘one size does not fit all’ and there is no one perfect model of embedding (Leach et al 2010:61).

#### **4.5 Frameworks, guidelines and models, Australia**

In Australia, ‘built-in’ literacy has been defined as ‘concurrently developing’ language, literacy, numeracy (LLN) and vocational learning ‘as interrelated elements of the one process’ (Courtenay & Mawer 1995: 2). From research on ‘built-in’ delivery of an accredited vocational programme (or ‘training package’) in different sites, McKenna and Fitzpatrick (2005) identified the following features required for effective delivery: vocational tutors’ competency in understanding and planning integrated or built-in LLN ; their competency in delivering integrated programmes; and resources (time and financial) for LLN specialists/learning support staff to collaborate with vocational teachers and to directly support learners.

Stephen Black and Keiko Yasukawa (2011) have also explored how LLN is integrated in Australian vocational education and training (VET) , with a particular focus on how LLN teachers support vocational learners’ LLN development, the extent to which they collaborate with vocational teachers in this, and the nature of that collaboration. Their research involved semi-structured interviews with LLN and vocational teachers and managers and three case studies of integrated LLN support programmes. They identified three models of delivery of LLN support, which they respectively termed a deficit model, a team teaching model and a shared delivery model. Overall they concluded that in the sites studied the LLN support was provided in a ‘deficit’ model. They described ‘deficit’ provision as having the following

features: a strong focus on pre-assessing and screening learners; LLN addressed as skills in which learners were deficit; the LLN provision was for only some students rather than the whole class or course group; the vocational teachers' pedagogy was not contested or subject to reflection and possible change, nor was the content of the vocational curriculum; LLN teaching was the responsibility of the LLN teachers only: LLN was not being integrated into the delivery of the vocational content (Black and Yasukawa 2011b:5).

In contrast to the deficit model, Black and Yasukawa propose a 'shared delivery' model based on a 'vocational literacies and numeracies' conceptualisation of LLN (as distinct from a 'basic skills' conceptualisation). In the shared delivery model, LLN and vocational teachers share responsibility for the student cohort, students co-enrol in a vocational course and a LLN course, LLN and vocational teachers work together to plan their lessons, the LLN teacher actively engages in the vocational course and the vocational teacher reflects on their pedagogies to make changes that would make explicit the LLN practices needed in the course (Black and Yasukawa 2011b: 19).

#### ***4.5.1 Institutional supports***

Black and Yasukawa make recommendations for the kinds of institutional supports that support a shared model of integrated provision, including the need for recognition in policy of the 'specialist pedagogical role' of the LLN staff involved in vocational education and training. On a centre and practitioner level, this chimes with NALA's recommendations concerning the role of 'literacy facilitator' in vocational education programmes (Ni Chinneide 2002; 2013; McSkeane 2009) and with the development of the NALA-WIT (Waterford Institute of Technology) professional development module tailored to that role, and reminds us of the need to ensure this issue is addressed at the level of national policy and strategy for further education and training. Black and Yasukawa also state that integrating LLN and vocational learning needs to apply to 'the whole range of course levels and not only those at the lower end of the AQF [Australian Qualification Framework]' (2011b: 27) – a perspective that informed the initiation of the two Irish empirical research studies discussed below.

## **4.6 Literacy-friendly further education and training in Ireland**

NALA's strategy for integrating literacy has been based on the understanding that it is an approach required at all levels of education and training (Ni Chinneide 2002; NALA 2009; IVEA-NALA 2012). However, most of the initiatives prior to 2008 had involved practitioners and learners working mainly on programmes at Levels 1-4 of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (NALA 2005; DES 2008). To develop understanding of and explore effective responses to course-related language and literacy issues at NFQ Level 5 in the context of formal further education provision, in 2008 NALA initiated a research project in partnership with a VEC Further Education College, publishing the final report in December 2009 (McSkeane 2008; Hegarty and Feeley 2009). The research aimed to identify, from an ethnographic study of practice in one college, the language and literacy issues arising for learners and teachers, the strategies used by teachers, learners and management to address those, and emerging guidelines for a whole-organisation approach to language and literacy in the further education and training sector. The methods used included one-to-one and focus group interviews with 13 students from a range of courses and with 21 academic staff and 3 non-academic staff. It also included short 'vox pop' interviews with 100 students, and observations of study support workshops.

### ***4.6.1 Practical strategies and institutional supports***

From the literature review and case study, the authors identified affective (emotional/caring) strategies and pedagogical strategies for integrating language, literacy and vocational learning. They identified four categories of affective strategies: a learner-centred ethos, harnessing motivation, groupwork/peer support, and good learning relationships. Pedagogical strategies were also identified including strategies for literacy-friendly assessment for certification. The latter included the use of integrated assessment of FETAC Communications with other modules, and the use of a more varied range of non-text-based assessment methods. Recommendations were made in relation to policies at Government and provider level, as well as for whole-organisation systems at college/centre level. A set of generic guidelines for FE colleges/centres were distilled from the analysis:

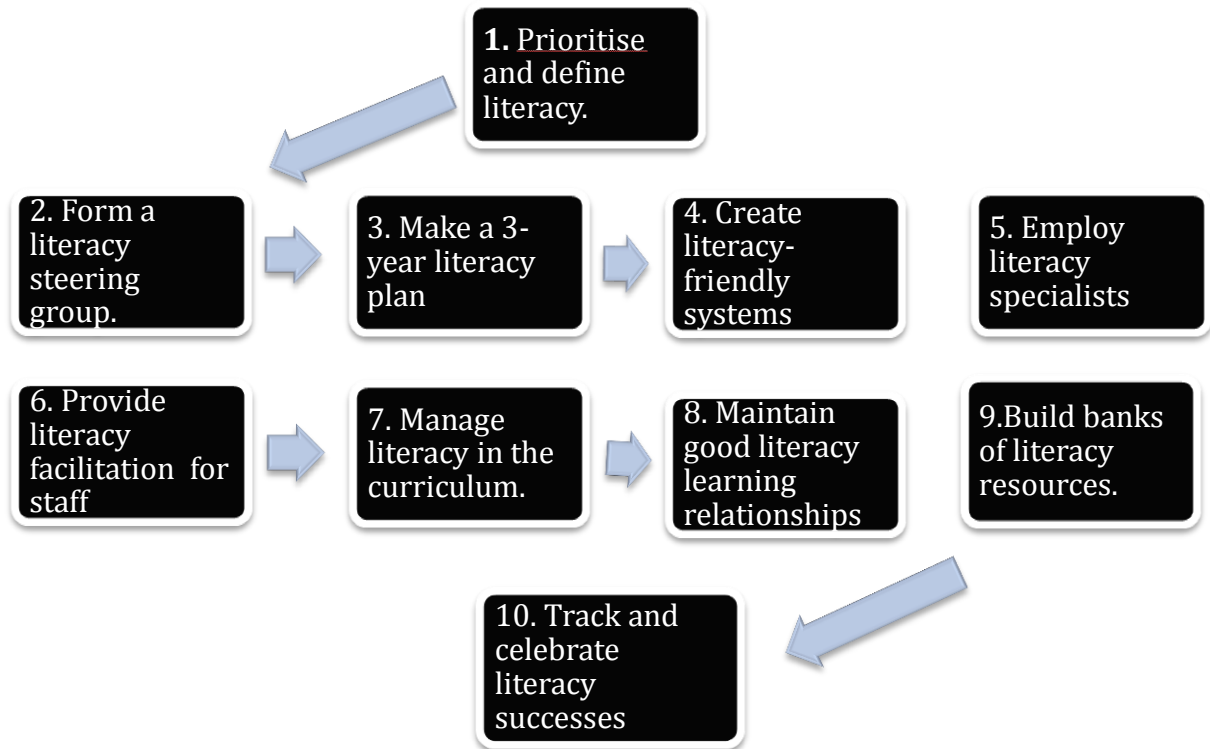


Figure 4.1: Guidelines for literacy-friendly further education and training

Source: Hegarty and Feeley 2009

Hegarty and Feeley highlight the de-stigmatising potential of integrated approaches to literacy and vocational/academic learning, which would make language and literacy development a normal part of learning for all on the course. They highlight too the *moral imperative* to integrate literacy support and development in further education and training, based on the initial education system's failure to equally or fairly meet the needs of all learners, and the *pedagogical imperative* involved, based on the understanding that language and literacy on FE courses are 'best developed in the context of challenging subject matter where the student has a genuine and sustainable level of interest' (2009:42). They identify partnership between literacy and vocational teachers as central to achieving the benefits of integrated literacy and vocational learning (2009:71). They highlight the need for national policy and adequate resources to underpin the approach, but in ways that allow:

time for reflection and dialogue that is restricted in places where standardised curricula and accreditation systems are imposed and linked to funding. This top-down way of changing educational policy and structures can be stressful for teachers and confusing for students.  
(Hegarty and Feeley 2009:71)

The research report and guidelines, along with those from the Living Literacy project discussed below (McSkeane 2009), have informed subsequent development work by NALA.

#### **4.7 Living Literacy in a youth education setting, Ireland**

In a research partnership project between NALA and the Newbridge Youth Training and Development Centre (NYTDC), Elizabeth McSkeane worked with the management, staff and learners in the FAS-funded centre to carry out a case study research project on integrating literacy (McSkeane 2009). The project arose from the centre's achievement of the 2007 NALA-EBS Adult Continuing Education (ACE) Award. The centre achieved the award for its exemplary work in integrating literacy support and development in all aspects of its work with young learners who were working towards FETAC qualifications mainly at Level 3.

Research methods included individual and group interviews with the centre manager and staff, observation, and a quantitative analysis of the range of literacy skills embedded in the FETAC descriptors for the Level 3 modules offered in the centre. The research report (McSkeane 2009) describes the policies and procedures enabling the effective integration of literacy and other learning in the context studied. These have a good 'fit' with NALA's generic whole-centre guidelines on integrating literacy, which the particular centre had used as an aid to integrated literacy planning in the preceding years (McSkeane 2009:9; Ni Chinneide 2002). They also fit well with the guidelines that emerged from the FE research described in 4.6 above (Hegarty and Feeley: 2009). Enabling centre policies included:

- All activities are underpinned by a learner-centred ethos.
- All staff (teaching and administrative and management) engage in professional development/further education and training on an ongoing basis.
- Each staff member has several different areas of expertise, enabling a high degree of flexibility and learner-responsiveness in programme design.
- The centre manager plays a key role in leading and supporting the whole-organisation approach – operating as 'integrating literacy facilitator' as well as manager (and having achieved professional qualifications in literacy development methodologies).
- Teamwork is actively encouraged and supported in flexible and practical ways.

- The timetable is organised to enable flexibility and facilitate a learner-centred approach.
- The physical space is maintained as a pleasant and nurturing learning environment.

(McSkeane 2009:5-6)

The study identifies the impact on staff, learners and the organisation itself, of the ‘integrating literacy’ strategy they have developed. Funded by FAS, many of the staff had completed the NALA-NUIM Integrating Literacy Course (Short: 2008). The benefits from the course were evident in the range of practical strategies staff used to integrate literacy with other learning (McSkeane 2009: 9). Staff described the benefits to learners (of the integrated approaches) in terms of progress in literacy skills and also in terms of ‘confidence and willingness to use their skills’ (McSkeane 2009: 9). The organisation benefited in practical ways – for example, the policies and procedures for integrating literacy are helpful to general good practice and could be used as evidence to meet quality assurance requirements (McSkeane 2009:10).

#### ***4.7.1 Initial assessment for learning and for reporting requirements***

The second stage of the study built on the integrated approaches to initial assessment and induction that the centre was already using. Resources were developed to help staff and learners integrate initial assessment of language, literacy and numeracy with the teaching and learning of induction topics. The study analysed the FETAC module descriptors for the 14 modules offered in the centre, to identify their embedded literacy demands. The descriptors for the Reading and Writing modules Levels 1 and 2 and for Communications at Level 3 were used as a set of definitions of literacy levels, which formed a ‘literacy reference tool’ with which to analyse the content of the vocational modules. A key finding reported from the module analysis was that the modules at Level 3 had very few embedded reading and writing demands. The analysis indicated that

many of the literacy obstacles which some students encounter when they are working towards FETAC accreditation arise from the reading demands of the teaching methods and resources used (rather than from FETAC requirements).

(McSkeane 2009:15)

This finding was noted by Hegarty and Feeley (2009:68) as potentially ‘liberating’ in that it indicated ‘scope for adapting practice so that it is less award-led and actually reflects locally situated language and literacy practices’. McSkeane’s study recommended professional development that would equip practitioners to

... use a wide range of learning methods and resources so that learners do not have to rely exclusively on the written word and so that methods and materials accommodate a range of intelligences and learning styles. They should also be equipped to make extensive and conscious use of opportunities to promote literacy in context.  
(McSkeane 2009:15)

The integrated materials and methods supported assessment for learning in a way that also helped the centre to meet (then) new requirements related to reporting and accountability: the Literacy Reference Tool assisted the mapping of learners’ performance in the integrated literacy tasks onto the NFQ levels 1-3. The final report recommended a national literacy audit of all FETAC module descriptors the results of which should be ‘published in a format that will be accessible for use by programme developers and tutors’ (McSkeane 2009:15).

The FETAC module descriptors that were in operation at the time of the *Living Literacy* study have now been ‘deactivated’ with the transition to the new Common Awards System (CAS). Under CAS, new FETAC Award Specifications and new processes for developing accredited programmes have been put in place. For each Award, a provider designs a programme descriptor and its component module descriptors, along with its plan for summative assessment. It is the provider’s FETAC-validated descriptor, rather than the FETAC award specification itself, that is now the reference point for teachers and learners working towards FETAC certification. This could potentially narrow the scope that had been hoped for from CAS for local flexibility in teaching, learning and assessment practices, including in appropriately determining the reading and writing demands of assessments (Stewart 2011). The recommendation for a national audit of the award specifications still applies, however, and could usefully be among recommendations to the newly-established Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI).



## **4.8 Integrating literacy from the perspective of the vocational educator**

Many of the studies outlined above document approaches to integrating literacy and vocational learning, identifying key features of effective programmes, including teamwork between literacy-aware vocational teachers and vocationally-aware literacy teachers, and organisational features that enable that partnership. All agree that vocational teachers who work on the basis of key understandings about literacy and learning, and have the skills to build language and literacy development into the content and processes of teaching and learning on their courses, are key to the approach working well for learners.

This study focuses on the perspectives of vocational educators who set out to (further) develop these understandings and competencies. For six of the eight interviewees, this involved participating in an accredited staff development programme, the NALA-NUIM Certificate Course in Integrating Literacy. The study however is not an evaluation either of that course's impact on teachers' practice or of that practice on learners' experience or achievements. It is an exploratory study on the perspectives of individual practitioners who have been working to integrate literacy support and development with their subject teaching and learning. While including a focus on the practice and benefits of integrating literacy and vocational learning, the study is particularly concerned to identify any obstacles practitioners perceive in implementing the approach, in order to inform future work to support teachers in that regard.

## CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### 5.1 Introduction

The project set out to explore the perceptions of vocational teachers who have been working to integrate literacy support and development with vocational learning on accredited vocational education and training courses. Semi-structured interviews were held with seven teachers and one centre manager. This chapter presents the findings in relation to teachers' accounts of **practices** in integrating literacy into their vocational programmes, the **benefits** they perceive from the approach, and the perceived **obstacles** to implementing the approach. The chapter considers these in the light of the relevant literature.

### 5.2 Practices

In interviewees' accounts, it was clear that changes to practice were underpinned by changed understandings of literacy, learning and teaching, and that the practices for integrating literacy with other learning included affective as well as constructivist pedagogical strategies, mirroring many of the findings reported in the literature reviewed for this study.

#### 5.2.1 Key understandings

Six of the eight interviewees had completed the NALA-NUIM Certificate Course in Integrating Literacy at different times between 2001 and 2011. All six referred to having developed different understandings of relevant key concepts during and since their participation on the course, on the basis of which they had developed practical approaches for integrating literacy. Interviewees described how their changed understandings of literacy, learning and teaching had underpinned changed practice. For example:

When I went up to do the course [I thought literacy] was all about 'writing', 'spelling', 'punctuation'. But it's a lot more. So I try to make it as creative as possible to incorporate all that as best I can...

I would have used the 'teacher' approach a lot. I would have been very much the chalk and talk approach...For me this has opened up a new world of being more creative and also allowing the *learners* to be more creative; and not feeling that it's

a waste of time, or that it's all about the *answers* in the module either: it's how you get there and how you get the answers and what they've learned on the way.  
[R2]

Another teacher discussed the importance of teachers' exploring and 'making their own' of underpinning concepts, in this case having been facilitated in this by a very short, in-house reflective practitioner programme.

So these were teachers who didn't necessarily go through any literacy training and yet they're very much coming up with this idea that language and literacy is something that happens differently in different places, so if we're to develop it in the centre we should develop it in the places where the learners are: so the art department would mind it in their way, and another department would mind it in their way, and for departments with more academic requirements you have your academic literacy conventions coming in there...  
[R8]

The teachers interviewed were integrating literacy with other learning because they understood its rationale and relevance to their learners and their programmes, they had 'tried it' in particular ways and had seen its benefits for themselves and particularly for their learners; they had a professional commitment to actively and reflectively developing the approach in their particular situation, rather than seeing it as something they were being required to do.

### **5.2.2 A learner-centred focus**

The comments of all interviewees reflected a strong learner-centred ethos and a culture of care for learners.

We have to focus on the learner and the development of the learner as best we can... And all the staff would... encourage that the learner must come first, you know: that in making decisions for the centre, if it has an adverse effect on the learner - well then, re-think it.  
[R1 centre manager]

I've had learners come in who struggle with literacy and numeracy, struggle with self-confidence, struggle with their peer group, and find it difficult to actually find a niche where they can operate in, you know?  
[R3]

Teachers' accounts were replete with stories that illustrated attention to building **positive learning relationships** with and among learners at a sensitive and appropriate pace. Speaking about working in the context of a continuous intake

policy applied, this teacher's account illustrated a professional and practical empathy with learners' needs at the point of joining a new learning group:

If you've one singular person, coming in, sitting there, looking round...she's much more worried about who's in the *room*, who *I* am, what I'm *like*, what time's the tea break, 'when do I get out of here?' –all of that. Now, she will have done induction ...but she's still feeling like that when she comes into the room. So I would give her a little bit of time, just to observe - not a *lot* of time, because I don't want her to feel on her own. Then I would know if she knew anybody else, and if I find she knows somebody else then I'll pair her with them. And that'll ease her in a little bit. Allow them to have their chat and talk and all that type of thing. Let her ease in gently that way. And *then* move over towards her. And start explaining to her then about her folder.

[R2]

Vignettes such as these peppered teachers' accounts of how they put 'integrating literacy' into practice, in ways that echoed insights documented in much of the literature reviewed for this project: that teachers' attitudes and commitment are key, that integrating literacy involves moving away from a 'transmission' model of education, working as reflective practitioners informed by key understandings of learning and literacy, impelled by moral as well as practical imperatives and crafting cultures of care and positive learning relationships (TEC:2009a; Hegarty and Feeley 2009; McSkeane 2009; Cooper and Baynham 2005).

Appropriate use of **groupwork** and **peer support** were among the practical strategies used to address the affective dimensions of learning and literacy (Derbyshire et al 2009) were also key to the teaching and learning strategies used to address the cognitive and skills dimensions. As Hegarty and Feeley pointed out (2009) there is a natural overlap between the 'affective' and 'pedagogic' strategies for integrated teaching and learning.

### ***5.2.3 Literacy-friendly teaching and learning strategies***

The interviewees described how they help learners engage with the content and concepts of their course in ways that help overcome literacy barriers and that scaffold development of language, reading, writing, numeracy and ICT. The main strategy that vocational teachers described – particularly those in 'hands-on' practical skills areas - was to **start from the vocational context and practical task**, using the **authentic materials** that learners were working on as the main focus, providing teacher **support** and/or peer support with the relevant language, literacy and

numeracy **at the same time** as carrying out the practical task, **and soon after** do more focused work on **developing the language, literacy or numeracy** skills that learners had experienced as relevant to the task or that were required for successful completion of their assessments for certification in the vocational area.

The interviewees saw the context and practical tasks of the vocational area as a motivator and context for literacy and numeracy development:

And they have to **read** how they do it...Now, with support of course. It might be 'get a timber 2 by 1 or 3 by 1 or 3 by 2' or whatever, and you have to plane it down to such and such a size... So all these things are relevant...But, whereas youngsters wouldn't be interested in reading for reading's sake, they are because of the goal of finishing the article. That's what gives them the real incentive if you like.

[R1]

I figure now I want to integrate an awful lot of numeracy into what I'm doing. I could never (before) see the reason why. I'd say, 'Paint that half that colour and paint that half that colour'. That's all I would have done! But now in the work I'd say, 'What we need to do now is work out how much paint we need to do that. Now if you get a 2 ½ litre tin of paint...' So, I'm enjoying doing all that now...And I actually get a sense of achievement out of it, that **they're** learning from it, you know. I'm enjoying their learning from it, but the thing is they get more *enjoyment* out of what I'm doing – it's not just 'Here, paint it. Now that's done. What'll I do next?'

[R5]

In some cases, teachers described drawing on personal as well as vocational **contexts and purposes** for literacy development. For example:

I was focusing it on the whole idea of literacy so that they could present literacy to the small children in their care.... But in actual fact ...**they** were learning to be better at their spelling, and recognising and using words in the childcare work environment and all of that...They were really learning; I'd say 'This is great for the little ones now, this is really wonderful ... to be **reading** to them ...' But you know it was probably reinforcing things for themselves, if they weren't confident readers; ... It [the context] gave me that kind of an opportunity.

[R6]

That particular example is reminiscent of Sticht's proposition that integrating literacy with vocational programmes for adults can have significant inter-generational effects as well as benefiting the particular learners concerned.

Several teachers said they were routinely **planning** how they would integrate literacy into teaching and learning. Some had developed their own planning templates which they used alongside those provided by the institution.

I found this very different to what I expected and I did find it very beneficial. It was said that we **can't** integrate literacy with Communications and Maths! I kind of disagreed with that, and because of the [NALA-NUIM] course I found new ways of integrating literacy **into** Communications and Maths, because it made me **think** about it in a different way. It made me think about the way I was **delivering** it, and things I could do differently. One of the benefits I found was looking at my lesson planning, because I would never have taken into consideration very much **how** I would integrate the people that were struggling. You know, when I do my lesson plans now I always look at that.

[R7]

And most of [the provider's planning templates] never suited me. But I never saw the need to change them. And they *have* to be changed! Because [the learners] are all so individual. It does matter, you know: the visual learner, the auditory, the kinaesthetic – and you have to give different instructions to different individuals...because I cannot use the one method for everyone in the class. And it works that way it does.

[R5]

Interviewees described teaching and learning strategies that included: **groupwork and peer education**; using **learners' own language and literacies** as a resource, including vocational teacher' making use of the 'Language Experience Approach' (a feature of adult literacy teaching methodology), and also including the **digital literacies** that are part of many learners' everyday literacy practices.

I try to make it relevant to them, to reflect the real world. They would talk about their i-Pads, their mobiles, relevant to their **own** lives. The mobile phone- if somebody has the internet on it I'll encourage her to look it up, and to maybe say it to the girl beside her...and log that into their unit...I don't think there's any point in sitting around a table, giving handouts, having group discussions [only] - It's more than that now.

[R2]

Teachers spoke about having designed **differentiated course materials**, helping to enable 'mixed abilities' work and acting as resources for scaffolding literacy development.

I found that that I'd have clusters: I'd have two or three people at one level, I'd have two or three people beginning - you know what I mean, at different levels. So over time I ended up having a lot of notes to suit a lot of different learners. But I got enjoyment out of doing it because I could **see** that they actually did work, I could see that people benefited and that they actually enjoyed them, because they were designed to suit their capabilities.

[R4]

Teachers used a variety of scaffolding techniques to make course content accessible while also extending learners' literacy skills within learners' zone of proximal development:

I always have work for them that is just slightly challenging - it's not patronising, and it's not totally out of their reach. I don't believe in giving people the same thing over and over again that's...at the level they're at, because I don't think they're going to progress.  
[R7]

Other strategies described in the interviews included, using a **wide range of active learning methods**, using auditory, visual and kinaesthetic activities; helping learners identify their **prior experience, knowledge or ideas** about a topic and link new learning to that.

I would see where they're coming from. Do they know what I'm talking about before I start talking about it, you know? So to see where they're at, and then base the teaching on that.  
[R2]

Involving all learners in a range of differentiated, active, constructivist and cooperative activities helped to **normalise difference** in literacies, intelligences and learning styles. Teachers gave examples of drawing on learners' different strengths as resources for learning and peer teaching within the group. In some cases making **literacy development a normal part of learning for all** was **modelled** by the vocational teacher, sharing the challenges and solutions they faced or had faced in relation to aspects of 'standard' literacy and maths or in relation to digital literacies. Vocational teachers who are experts in their vocational area and in its '*real world*' language, literacy and numeracy practices, are well placed to de-stigmatise literacy development needs, modelling as a normal part of learning for all.

#### ***5.2.4 Teamwork with literacy tutor***

Several of the accounts included examples of **cooperation and teamwork** between vocational teachers and the literacy and numeracy tutors in their centres. Some had cooperated on cross--referencing FETAC Learning Outcomes from different modules; others on developing literacy-friendly learning materials related to the vocational modules; others on sharing information and plans related to learners' literacy and numeracy needs.

**Whole-centre** literacy initiatives mentioned in the interviews included the production of centre newsletters and the setting up of a central bank of literacy / numeracy resources which vocational teachers could use in their classes as appropriate to their learners. Interviewees highlighted **positive learner-centred attitudes and relationships** among staff as an important helping factor for integrating literacy.

### *5.2.5 Reflection on practice*

A common features in all the interviews was that practitioners' participation in professional development that had been based on socio-cultural perspectives on literacy and learning had helped them develop new understandings which they in various ways described as opening up new possibilities and satisfaction in their work with learners. It had also helped them develop and use collaborative, constructionist and inclusive teaching methods based on those understandings - a 'skillset I didn't have before' as one teacher put it. Putting that 'skillset' into practice was not a mechanistic or formulaic activity: the interview data indicated a reflective professional engagement, an 'in the moment' responsiveness to learners' needs.

All involved said that integrating literacy with their vocational teaching had had observable benefits for their learners.

## **5.3 Perceived benefits to learners**

### *5.3.1 Inclusion and participation*

One teacher explained her perception of the benefits of integrating literacy as follows:

We need to keep asking, what does a focus on language and literacy do? Why bother? Well, because it allows someone *participate* - clearly as that. And if we see learning as happening through participation, then it's key to somebody becoming a learner. It will allow them **also** get the certificates, but more importantly it will allow them to be part of a process: that their language is recognised, that their voice is – because you're not presenting them with material that's so difficult that they actually can't engage, you know, that they can't even start to participate. What I'm trying to say is, a project like this is not just about 'get teachers to do this...'

[R8]

Enabling participation was mentioned in various ways by all interviewees as a benefit to learners from their teachers' use of literacy-friendly methods. One teacher with



many years' experience gave this example of how his changed insights and practices had enabled someone to join the course:

I currently have one learner that's really struggling, and [in the past] you'd have had to say, 'it's just too high a level, sorry, I can't keep you', But since I've done that integrating literacy course I **enjoy** having him, because... I know that ..I can actually do something constructive with him and positive for him; where before I wouldn't have had a clue what to do with him.  
[R5]

As discussed in 4.2, teachers' practical strategies in the early days of the programme, paying attention to the affective dimensions of literacy and learning, helped learners to participate.

### ***5.3.2 Timely support for literacy development***

Interviewees said that one of the main benefits to themselves and to the learners was that the teacher could now see more quickly and accurately why a learner might be withdrawing or not participating, or why they might be stuck or unable to complete a particular vocational learning task or activity –that it *could* be a difficulty with aspects of the language, literacy or numeracy involved. The learner therefore can get more immediate assistance with the relevant literacy and numeracy *while they are applying it* to the tasks in hand. (McKenna and Fitzpatrick, 2005, in Leach 2009:27).

### ***5.3.3 Confidence, skills and enjoyment***

Teachers perceived the benefits in growth in learners' **confidence and self-belief** as well as in terms of skills development.

They could see 'I'm capable of doing this'. So then they could build on that, and it would come to the stage where they'd say 'No I don't need to look at that any more,' and they could actually start spelling words, and you could **see** that they were **gaining** in **confidence**, they were gaining in their **literacy** skills and their numeracy skills from using simple support techniques....  
[R3]

You see them grow... Social skills improve, everything: literacy, numeracy; **they** see themselves improving.  
[R4]

Learning is also more enjoyable and engaging:

They find the time goes quicker because they are engaged to a large extent, and they feel more a part of the group and integrated with their peers,  
[R7]

For years, I was doing my job, as I was meant to do it – but I wasn't doing what I *should* have been doing, and what I *could* have been doing all along, you know? And now, the more I come in, I prefer to work with people who are *below* the level, ..I like integrating literacy with them. I like to see them start to **enjoy** their education, in a way most of them never did before.  
[R5]

#### **5.3.4 Reflection on perceived benefits**

Interviewees perceived the benefits to their learners in terms of personal, emotional, social, cognitive and skills development, reflecting a holistic and socio-cultural understanding of what it means to integrate 'literacy' with vocational and other learning, and confirming from their perspective the findings in the literature that integrating literacy 'works' to help inclusion, participation and learning. The study did not set out to identify quantitative evidence for achievement of vocational qualifications as an outcome of integrated or embedded approaches, as had for example the UK studies carried out by the NRDC. However the practitioners interviewed for this study had significant 'length of service' allowing for their interpretations and perspectives to be informed by a 'before and after integrating literacy' perspective. Their accounts of the positive impact of integrating literacy on learners' participation and engagement, confidence and skills development, would suggest that the approach would enhance learners' chances of achieving their intended qualifications. Interviewees also identified factors that in their perception posed obstacles to teachers' efforts to integrate literacy and vocational learning.

### **5.4 Obstacles to integrating literacy**

Most of the interviewees, while overwhelmingly positive in their approach to integrating literacy, spoke about a number of obstacles or challenges they perceived. These are reported below under 'practitioner', 'centre' and 'institutional' levels, but these are of course inter-related categories. The most frequently-mentioned obstacle related to institutional requirements in terms of new FETAC awards and new statistical reporting procedures.

#### *5.4.1. Practitioner level factors*

The interviews were taking place at a time of change in the further education and training field – particular development of the new FETAC Common Awards System - that affected the practitioners on a personal and professional level. **Affective factors** were evident in teachers' accounts, mostly in terms of the care for and empathy with learners, and enthusiasm and motivation and personal commitment to providing positive learning experiences and outcomes, and in terms of the enjoyment and job satisfaction practitioners experience of their work generally and particularly evident when speaking about their experience of working with learners in creative ways that integrate literacy and other learning.

However practitioners explicitly named or in other ways evidenced affective factors that they perceived as posing obstacles to maintaining creative approaches to integrating literacy. These were mainly associated with the impact of factors at the 'system' or 'institutional' level. For example, some teachers who had been integrating literacy in their specialist vocational area had been timetabled to work instead on 'generic skills' modules, as a result of the centres' need to meet new institutional targets for accreditation related to the new Common Awards System. One teacher spoke about feeling '**not confident**' as to how she would integrate it in the new module, which lacked the kind of 'authentic context and materials' that the vocational module had. Others commented on the frustration felt at more 'school like' module descriptors and assessment procedures in their vocational areas. Others commented on the personal impact on teachers and managers of the **pressures** on **time** and **energy** that were associated with changed institutional requirements: 'if there's an obstacle, it's energy'. In all cases where such affective factors emerged as potential obstacles, they were linked with interviewees' sense that the learner-centred and learning-centred values and judgements that had underpinned their centres' practices were at odds with those underpinning new system and institutional requirements; 'I just feel sad for the learners'; 'de-professionalised'; 'demotivated'. It should be noted however that these feelings were expressed and understood in the interviews as just one element in this particular snapshot in time, and that the overwhelming picture in terms of affective factors related to integrating literacy was

positive as summarised above. Practitioners described what they were doing and intended to do to ‘pick themselves up’ and to ‘reignite’ their integrating literacy work, and also what they and their centres were doing to address some of the difficulties they were experiencing in what was a period of change and challenge.

Other practitioner level factors included teachers’ perceived need for practical **skills development** in terms of working with new digital technologies for teaching and learning. While expressed as an **obstacle** to integrating literacy, this identification of a skills development need indicated that it was one that the practitioners were actively addressing. There were challenges to practitioners and to centre managers in terms of the ‘skills mix’ required among the staff for the new types of modules coming on board. **Time** factors featured in most practitioners’ accounts as factors that had recently made it more difficult to integrate literacy. These overlap with and are discussed under ‘centre level factors’ below.

#### *5.4.2 Centre level factors*

**Time** factors featured in most of the interviews as a perceived obstacle to integrating literacy. **Timing of summative assessments** for certification featured in most cases – most of the interviewees felt that they had less flexibility to vary the content and processes on their programme because of the requirement to complete assessments and achieve awards within what they perceived was a very tight timeframe. In addition, institutional procedures for assessment – giving X number of days’ notice to the first provider before an ‘assessment event’ would take place – posed significant logistical problems for centres and teachers and learners, and entailed time-consuming and energy-consuming procedural work that interviewees would be better spent on ‘teaching and learning’. The time taken up by completing paperwork and statistical accounting for quality assurance and reporting purposes was another factor mentioned by many interviewees as restricting scope for creative and learner-responsive practice in their centres.

**Time for teamwork** and collaboration between vocational and literacy staff was a recurring theme in the interviews. As reported above in 4.1.4, this cooperation was

encouraged by centres' management but was not always formalised or built into the centre timetable. Interviewees – teachers and manager – said the ability to meet regularly as a cross-curricular, literacy-focused team would significantly enhance the service they could provide for learners. Cooperation, many of the interviewees said, would include systematic team work on analysing the literacy content of vocational modules and planning how to address these, as well as work on **cross-referencing** the Communications and Mathematics modules with the vocational modules. As reported in 4.1, this was already happening in an informal way with support and encouragement from management in all centres involved. Interviewees identified constraints or challenges that they perceived centres face in formalising the literacy-vocational staff meetings required to extend and strengthen the current informal cooperation. These included institutional policies such as paying tutors on the basis of 'contact hours' only, meaning there were budgetary implications to scheduling teachers for the joint planning, review and evaluation that would underpin a 'shared delivery' model (Black and Yasukawa 2011) and for collaboration on integrated resource development and integrated assessment.

An institutional focus on achievement of awards within a tight timeframe was also named as a factor restricting a centre's induction programme, constraining the ability to spend time on engagement, motivation, relationship building and personal and social skills development 'without the pressure of awards.'

#### *5.4.3 System-level and institution-level factors*

The perceived obstacles at centre level and practitioner level were expressed in terms that referenced factors beyond the centres' immediate control. These invariably related to institutional factors mentioned above – such as the 'contact hours' basis on which staff are paid – and especially to the new **FETAC systems** and related **institutional procedures** for summative assessment, quality assurance and reporting/accountability purposes.

The interviewees all work in centres that had until recently operated as 'first providers' of FETAC-validated programmes. As part of the transition to the new

FETAC Common Awards System (CAS), the centres now operate as ‘**second providers**’ of programmes designed by their institution (FAS or VEC) and validated by FETAC. The centres provide programmes leading to FETAC Major Awards. Those programmes are made up of component modules leading to Minor Awards. For each Major Award, FETAC specify some Minor Awards as mandatory and a range of others as optional. Having selected the Minor Awards they wish to specify for inclusion in the institution’s programme, the first provider / institution completes a Programme Descriptor that includes its component Module Descriptors and assessment plan, and submits these for validation by FETAC. The local centres are required to use the institution’s FETAC-validated Programme Descriptor, Module Descriptors, assessment specifications and quality assurance framework.

In the interviews with practitioners, all but one described new FETAC-related programmes and procedures as perceived obstacles to integrating literacy and to learner-centred provision generally. The exception was a teacher who believed that these did not pose an obstacle to integrating literacy in her case, although it might to teachers who were new to the approach:

Once you have the skills and once you keep on top of your skills that you’ve learnt over time and over the years... With all the training I’ve got, you’re always adding on, you’re always designing exercises...to help them to become more enabled themselves... And I’ve such a library of resources now, I’ve a lot to draw on.

[R4,]

This teacher recommended centre-level supports for teachers who did not yet have the same resources to draw on, in particular highlighting the role that a ‘literacy facilitator’ could play in supporting colleagues in implementing the approach.

For one of the teachers interviewed, a perceived obstacle was the institution’s **policy on minimum award level**, which did not permit centres to offer FETAC Awards below Level 3. He pointed out that while Level 3 ‘suited the majority’ of learners in his group, there would always be one or two who would benefit from having a lower level of certification available.

The range of component modules from which centres could choose when offering local programmes leading to Major Awards was delineated by the institution. This, in

the view of several interviewees, affected a centre's ability to construct programmes that would be appropriate to their learners and localities:

We were formerly a First Provider to FETAC... We were working off (FETAC) modules and.. we were able to bring in modules to suit the ability of the learner. Now ...we have to choose from a bank of modules. And we're restricted to that bank. And if the stuff is not suitable for the learner within that bank of modules, we still have to do the modules...Yet there's great encouragement given [by the institution] to individual learning plans; and unfortunately it's curtailed now. It's a contradiction, in reality; you're being told to develop things one way, but the system doesn't allow you to...We're told that the modules we do should have relevance to the local employment needs of the area; but... we can't control that. We would love that, but we can't control; we can only deliver the modules that are handed down.

[R1]

The **mix of modules** in the Programme Descriptors, and overly '**academic**' or '**theoretical**' nature of the new component modules, were perceived by many presenting obstacles to engaging learners and working in ways that helped them build confidence and literacy:

When we get a young person entering the centre here, the big difficulty with a lot of them is they're lacking in confidence, and you know ... they have probably failed the formal educational system...I think you need the right *blend* of modules. You need to have a *practical* skills module where *they* can experience success. And I think *part* of experiencing that success also must mean that they can experience literacy success as well...' And if you can give them that little bit of confidence at a *practical* skills setting, I think they *carry it on* then.

[R3]

The range of modules is very restrictive. The type of learner we have, we've a lot of interaction; it can't be just chalk and talk. They've rejected the educational system because perhaps there was too much chalk and talk. So a few years ago, we developed a range of modules that would be 'theory-practical-theory-practical' ...But the new modules now they're developing at level 4 are *all* theory, you know.

[R1]

In 'delivering the modules that are handed down', some teachers referred to aspects of the [FAS] **Module Descriptors** as a barrier to integrating literacy. Some expressed the view that the module content hampered the teacher's ability to choose teaching and learning activities that would suit learners' interests and preferences while also meeting the FETAC standards:

The new [FAS] FETAC modules, they're very restrictive. Before, you know, I was able to get the module, dissect it, and come up with, you know, essays and reading material that they [the learners] would enjoy. But now it's given to you, what I have to read to them and what they have to answer. So it's very prescribed.

[R7]

Several of the interviewees referred to **the language and layout** of the module materials as presenting unnecessary obstacles to learners, making it more difficult too for teachers:

The modules are written to a too high standard at the moment. I find that I have to explain everything: every single question, everything has to be explained **all** the time. That would be a little bit of a barrier, you know. ..Another thing would be, I would find that in the modules it's all writing, it's all theory..

[R2]

The language first of all they're using in describing the module... I mean it could take about two hours for the instructor to explain what it means first of all let alone anything else. They use words that are not very conducive to learners; and we nearly have to reword everything on it to ensure the learners can understand it.

[R1, manager]

This was echoed in another teacher's comment reported above under 4.1, concerning what 'learning' is and why 'language and literacy' matters, an excerpt from which bears repeating here in the light of others' comments on language and layout of module and assessment materials:

What does language and literacy do? Why bother? Well, because it allows someone *participate* - clearly as that... it will allow them to be part of a process: that *their* language is recognised, that *their* voice is; because you're not presenting them with material so difficult that they actually can't engage, you know - that they can't even *start* to participate. [R8]

[R3]

A teacher summed up the impact of changes in **module content and assessment** on practitioners and learners, indicating inter-related practical and affective dimensions to the perceived obstacles. (Where words are in bold it reflects the emphasis given by the interviewee in the audio-recorded spoken account).

The new system is a bit more **prescriptive**...an enormous amount of work in relation to integrating literacy ...The level of **language** in the new modules is away above a lot of the learners' heads. And the **time** factor in developing worksheets for that is a big, big concern...And the amount of **change** that's happening ... is unprecedented - it's actually **swamped** the place, the amount of change. We've gone... to a whole new



system where [the institution] design the modules; and... and we have the problem of trying to **deliver** them and **translate** them into language the learners can understand. And trying to develop worksheets that will enable them to overcome the actual **tests** – there's **tests** now that they have to do; they didn't have to do that before.

[R3]

Several interviewees named the institution's prescribed **assessment instruments** as an obstacle to integrating literacy, because of language and format issues indicated above, and because of a perceived **loss of local freedom** in summative assessment.

The whole idea of the centre is to give young people an opportunity, a second chance in education... But of recent times [the First Provider] have developed some new modules, and they also have come up with *their* required assessment. And this is proving huge difficulties for us, because we're no longer as free to choose what we teach, or how we assess. Or at least, *this* assessment has to be done, it has to be done in *this* way, with these *exact* outcomes. And we're finding that a bit challenging now.

[R6]

This teacher considered that under the soon to be 'old' FETAC system, she had appropriate professional freedom to assess within the standards laid down by FETAC. Her account quoted below encapsulates points made by most of the interviewees in this study:

You had to set your exam. I mean obviously it was run by FETAC, who had to be satisfied that it was a proper exam, that your questions were legitimate and proper - but once they gave the go-ahead, it was great, you know. As long as you could stand over it; obviously as long as you weren't using them in a wrong way. But you were free to use the language that suited the learner. And you were also free to accept an answer in the way that a learner was happy to put it, or able or capable of putting it. Now...the answers come with the exams... even when they have to do a portfolio or a skills demonstration, the answers must be exactly as they have directed.

So, we're teaching people answers by rote learning. I think what they need is something with that bit of flexibility in how we assess it; a slightly different approach, or to be able to... use language that you feel suits that group...

Because I think, if school had suited them, if uniformity had suited them, they'd still be up there at school and wouldn't be here, you know. I think that's probably what happens: that they disengage from all of that. So they don't really have a difficulty in learning to read and write, but they probably have missed out on some of those building blocks along the way. Once they get the opportunity...they find that, 'well actually I'm not so bad'

[R6]

Three of the interviewees said that the **success criteria** in their Level 3 module was set at too high a standard, as illustrated in this quote:

...the way the FETAC is at the moment...they've made the level 3 so difficult; it's almost more difficult than the level 4. Because to achieve level 3 you have to get *everything* right. At least with level 4 you might get a 50% pass mark. And I think that for some it's just not achievable [the100%].

[R7]

One interviewee said that the requirement to give the institution and the learners 10 days' notice of an '**assessment event**' was 'unworkable' in the local situation and for the particular assessment.

Another category of perceived obstacles on the institutional level was that relating to the **FETAC-related paperwork** required of centres and practitioners. This created pressures of time and energy referred to earlier in this report.

Now, we calculate that for an individual to go through the modules, that it would require 147 forms that would have to be filled in – *interim* forms, then at the end and then the final submission portfolio forms. And there's a lot of time being taken up filling in forms that could have been spent in development of the learner.

[R1]

A teacher explained that this involved completing 'about 7 forms for each learner in each module'. The teacher was working with two groups, a total of 28 learners, doing 2 modules each at Level 3, therefore processing FETAC assessments for her groups involved dealing with 'about' 392 forms. This, as many of the other perceived obstacles, had practical and affective dimensions and were perceived holistically in terms of the effect on learners and learning:

It's very difficult. *That's* a barrier (to integrating literacy). What it does is it interrupts the flow, as far as I'm concerned. It interrupts the flow: there's a lot of work, a lot of form filling. You have to keep a lot of records; you have to remember exactly when to send your forms in, follow it up, you know. There's a lot of that administration work. And it *does* take away from time spent with the learners. Because you're very conscious that they have to get that done by Friday. 'You work away on that, I have to go over here and do this', you know. It's a pity now.

...And you're rushed a bit. Or you could get a wee bit irritable: 'Ah, we have that to do' or whatever. So, you're better nearly leaving them and doing it, that's what I find.

[R2]

Two teachers described the FETAC-related paperwork as 'horrendous', another as 'monstrous'. All but one interviewee named it as an obstacle to integrating literacy.

One interviewee raised the question of **professional trust**, or perceived lack thereof, as an obstacle, in the context of some of the procedures she and her colleagues were expected to apply for FETAC assessment verification and quality assurance purposes:

Just in terms of we can *do* this job, we can get them there. I mean, they're looking for evidence [that teachers give feedback to students on their assignments]. And you know, people are exasperated, they're saying: '...We give feedback all of the time'. And there's a sense where you're saying, Why should I have to: I'm trained, is there no trust? This is part of my being a teacher, we **do** feedback, that's what we **do**.'

I can fully understand when people come in from the Department [of Education] they take up learners' copies, they want to see your engagement with their texts – that's absolutely fine. But to have to slip a sheet in your [evidence] box, you know? ...a sheet that you get students to sign, 'I received feedback on this'...?

We want a discussion on feedback. But not on how to provide evidence: about what do we **mean** by feedback, why is it useful, why is this helping, how are students receiving it. So let's hear what works for **them** [the learners] ...So, FETAC is pushing our discussions in a certain direction we don't want to go. Can I say, they mightn't intentionally *mean* this, you know.

[R8]

FETAC Award-focused procedures for **evaluating and accounting for programme effectiveness** were also highlighted by this teacher and by another interviewee as obstacles to good practice generally. This was described as reflecting an 'acquisition' model of learning and literacy: 'How many modules did they get?' 'How many students were left?' 'How many got a full Award?' 'How many got more than three components?'

Fine. That is a measure, there's no doubt about that. But that's *all* that's measured. There's nothing about, you know – the journey that people went on, their level of participation, their level of engaging, maybe how their identity is different now in terms of learning, you know, and how they feel in terms of learning....at the end of the year when you evaluate with students, they don't talk about 'I've got my 5 Distinctions' - they actually talk about their experience of participating and learning... [R8]

Another interviewee referred to the felt pressure to 'perform' according to the evaluation measures used in monthly statistical returns sent to the institution, which did not facilitate the kind of learner-centred practices the centre valued:

There wasn't as much pressure [before]... And...probably that statistical information is measuring how we're **performing** as a centre. So we have to perform, and yet we still have to deliver – it's a kind of chicken and egg situation.

Ideally what I would love: if a learner coming in for the first time was here for 6 months doing developmental work, without the pressure of having to do any award at all, and then when they get them sorted out and they're into the place, you have them

in the habit of coming in, you get them adjusted and everything else, **then** you start delivering the awards. And, I actually think it would be much better.

[R1]

All interviewees who raised concerns about institutional demands also expressed a degree of understanding for the good intentions behind those demands or for the pressures that the institutions themselves were under from broader system developments and socio-economic-cultural contexts:

I know because there's pressures [on the institution and its officials] Everything now is '*turnover*' and '*throughput*' too is another measure: 'How many '*throughput*?' It's contradictory, and I can see it from both ends: there's people there in an office working on statistical information and so on. But, are you helping the learner or are you helping to present a good figure on the books for a department or a government or the EU or whatever it is? What are you doing? And this is what you have to ask yourself, now. And sometimes you have to get the balance in between: to present the *place* as a whole in good stead [in the required statistics] but to do your best for the learners. You're kind of caught in a Catch 22 situation.

[R1]

Interviewees' perceptions of the effects of **awards-focused assessment procedures** reflect the questions raised in the literature about the 'washback' effect of summative assessment on teaching and learning (Ivanic 2009; Derrick and Ecclestone 2006). Interviewees' accounts appear to indicate their concern at a risk that learning itself – which requires dynamic processes of assessment-for-learning or formative assessment – could be reduced to 'assessment as learning': a series of mini- summative assessments in preparation for or completion of the test.

Concerns about the perceived overly-theoretical focus within individual component vocational modules, and the shift in the balance of modules within the overall programme from 'practical-theoretical' to mainly 'theoretical', reflect questions raised in the literature concerning an academic drift in vocational education and training (Edwards and Miller 2008). This is particularly pertinent at a time when the Irish 'education' and 'training' systems are coming together under a new further education and training authority, and is a factor to bear in mind in strategically developing an inclusive, fair, equality-based and literacy-friendly education and training system.

Interviewees' accounts of the impact of awards-referenced quality assurance and programme evaluation procedures also chime with the literature from research on similar effects in the broader education field and in the 'delivery' of public services generally – where an audit culture and associated set of procedures that may be appropriate to financial and business processes are used to construct the value and quality of human interaction processes, including in this case those of learning, language and literacy. Interviewees' accounts point to a need to collectively construct more appropriate models of evaluation and reporting that start from what learners value from the learning journey, that respect and actively engage teachers' situated knowledge and professional judgements, while appropriately meeting the legitimate needs of funders and other players in the development and provision of education and training programmes (Merrifield 1999; Derbyshire et al 2009).

#### ***5.4.4 Reflection on obstacles to integrating literacy***

Interviewees' perceptions of practitioner-level and centre-level obstacles were very much bound up with the impact of the institutional factors. In the round, the accounts indicated the working out in practice of the NLS proposition that literacy artefacts created at a distance for global/system purposes – in this case a cascading series of frameworks, descriptors, guidelines and forms – are powerful actors in local, situated literacy events (completing forms, using assessment materials, appropriating and modifying global forms for local purposes); these are part of broader practices (planning courses and lessons, assessing learning, recording progress, evaluating, reporting) and reflect broader social and economic purposes and values (literacies for accountability and regulation in the service of neo-liberal policies and strategies). The artefacts of governing literacies, when imported so systematically into local situations, can act to side-line local meanings, purposes and identities and displace situated teacher expertise and knowledge – constructing teachers as technical implementers of guidelines, and learners as raw material to be processed within a fixed timescale and to externally-defined specifications. As we develop guidelines and frameworks of our own to support practice in 'integrating literacy', we are challenged to do so in ways that on the one hand will encourage policymakers and providing institutions to fund and promote the integration of literacy across further

education and training provision, but that take critical account of the almost inevitable incorporation of 'integrating literacy' itself into the frameworks that monitor and regulate teachers and learners.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This small scale study involved interviews with eight vocational educators from four different sites, who have been working to integrate literacy support and development into their work with learners on full time, accredited further education and training programmes. It set out to explore the benefits of and obstacles to integrating literacy support and development into the teaching and learning of other subjects, from the perspective of these vocational teachers / practitioners who had been working to do so. In this study, I wanted to find out how experienced vocational educators, who had set out on an ‘integrating literacy’ path some years ago, were continuing to sustain the approach. What benefits did they see in the approach, for themselves and particularly for learners? What if any obstacles did they experience or perceive in integrating literacy and vocational learning in ways that work well for themselves and their learners? The study was informed by a review of research on embedding or integrating literacy with vocational learning, and by a literature review focusing on perspectives on literacy and literacy learning as elaborated by Paulo Freire, by writers in the New Literacy Studies (NLS) and in Sticht’s model of Functional Context Education (FCE).

In this section I will summarise the main points from the findings in the light of the literature reviewed and will indicate the outcomes from the study and recommendations arising.

### **6.2 Practice**

Practitioners’ accounts included examples of creative, learner-centred practices in supporting learners on vocational programmes to develop knowledge, confidence and skill in literacy and in their various subject areas as interwoven elements of a single process. The examples given indicate the important role played by the vocational teacher/practitioner in relation to literacy development as identified in the

international research and the Irish studies reviewed in this thesis. The desire expressed by most of the interviewees for more systematic cooperation and communication with their centre's literacy and numeracy specialist/s and the examples given by them of productive cooperation between the vocational and literacy staff, confirmed the recommendations consistently made in the literature for a working partnership between vocationally-aware literacy specialists and literacy-aware vocational specialists. Overlapping features of all three theoretical perspectives on literacy described in the literature review were evident in the examples of practice given, such as enabling learners to bring *their* 'voice'/ cultural and linguistic codes (Freire and Macedo), and *their* preferred literacy practices and discourse (NLS) to the content and context of the learning situation (FCE). This and other practices indicated, in my view, an application of aspects of the social practice view of literacy - engaging learners' vernacular / everyday literacy practices, including facilitating learners' uses of digital literacies and social media as resources for learning, using the authentic materials and processes within the vocational area, paying attention to literacy and learning as a process of identity development, 'becoming' and becoming recognised as a member of a the relevant Discourse community (Gee), paying attention to the affective dimension of literacy, and to the informal processes of apprenticeship and socialisation involved in learning in the vocational and literacy areas. Approaches indicating a 'critical literacy' perspective were less evident in the accounts – for example, there were few examples of explicitly facilitating learners to develop meta-cognition of literacy and literacy learning in the sense elaborated by Freire and the NLS.

### **6.3 Benefits**

Interviewees perceived the benefits to their learners in terms of personal, emotional, social, cognitive and skills development, reflecting a holistic and socio-cultural understanding of what it means to integrate 'literacy' with vocational and other learning, and confirming from their perspective the findings in the literature that integrating literacy 'works' to help inclusion, participation and learning. The study did not set out to identify quantitative evidence for achievement of vocational qualifications as an outcome of integrated or embedded approaches. However the



practitioners interviewed for this study had significant ‘length of service’ allowing for their interpretations and perspectives to be informed by a ‘before and after integrating literacy’ perspective. Their perception of the positive impact on learners of integrating literacy in the holistic manner they described, would suggest such an integrated approach would enhance learners’ achievement of their intended qualifications.

## **6.4 Obstacles**

Interviewees’ perceptions of practitioner-level and centre- level obstacles were very much bound up with the impact of the institutional factors. For example, the accounts indicated the working out in practice of the NLS proposition that institutionally-designed literacy artefacts created at a distance from local practice and largely for global/system purposes are powerful actors in local, situated literacy events, in this case in the teaching, learning and assessment events in the formal educational workplace. The descriptions given by the practitioners interviewed evoke, for me, the factors Freire had described as ‘frightening’ (Freire 1998) in the managerialist ‘top-down’ processes of evaluation and assessment, which in his view constricted the work of teachers and learners and the scope for a democratic, creative pedagogy. Practitioners’ accounts indicated a sense of displacement of local knowledges, meanings, purposes and identities by top-down processes that tended to reduce teachers to technical implementers of prescribed curricula. As we develop guidelines and proposals of our own to support good practice in ‘integrating literacy’, we are challenged to do so in ways that as far as possible, avoid the incorporation of ‘integrating literacy’ itself into the powerful frameworks that monitor and regulate the work of teachers and learners.

## **6.5 Outcomes and Recommendations**

The findings and analysis from this study have informed the content of the revised edition of NALA’s Guidelines on Integrating Literacy, and will influence the design of its professional development programmes on this approach. This study focused on the perspectives of vocational educators on integrating literacy with vocational and other learning further education and training. It is recommended that future research

focus on exploring the perspectives and experience of learners who have been working with teachers/practitioners using the integrated approach.



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