

## Assessment of Functional Literacy amongst Non-profit Organisation Coordinators in Sibasa, Limpopo

L. M. P. Mulaudzi<sup>1\*</sup>, E. K. Klu<sup>1#</sup> and N.J. Ramakuela<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of English, School of Human and Social Sciences, University of Venda, South Africa*

*E-mail: \*<Lindiwe.Mulaudzi@univen.ac.za>, #<Ernest.Klu@univen.ac.za>*

<sup>3</sup>*Department of Advanced Nursing Science, School of Health Sciences, South Africa*  
*E-mail: Nditsheni.Ramakuela@univen.ac.za*

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**ABSTRACT** South Africa is one of the countries which participated in the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000. The Forum led to the establishment of six goals aimed at meeting the learning needs of all citizens; youth and adult by the year 2015. South Africa is further obliged by the constitution to provide Further Education and Training and to increase access to learning. Despite her commitment to improve literacy levels, the levels of functional literacy remain unattended. The purpose of this study was to investigate and establish self-perceived functional literacy levels of the coordinators of the non-profit organisation working with victims of abuse in the community. The study adopted a case study design employing quantitative, descriptive contextual approach. Data were collected by means of a self-administered, structured questionnaire. Ethical considerations as well as trustworthiness were ensured. Descriptive statistics was used to analyse data. Study findings revealed that there is a close relationship between the participants' self-perceived levels of competence and the level of importance they attach to functional literacy items. However, they concede that there are other items that they regard as important but they are not competent in. Self-perceived levels of literacy were ascertained and recommendations aligned to the Dakar and Sub-Saharan Regional Framework for Action.

### INTRODUCTION

Literacy and functional literacy have been the focus of the human race for centuries. The term 'functional literacy' came into common use in the 1960's when the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) began addressing the lack of literacy skills among a large percentage of the population of adults and out of school children in the developing countries. In 1990, The World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand came to a consensus to universalize primary education and to reduce illiteracy. The World Education Forum met in Dakar in 2000 and agreed on the Dakar Framework for Action which established goals which aimed at meeting the learning needs of all citizens-youth and adults by 2015 so as to combat illiteracy (UNESCO 2013).

Discussions on literacy are often approached from two levels: basic and functional. A person who has acquired basic literacy is able to read with understanding and write basic simple statements on his/her everyday life. This person has completed 4-5 years of schooling. On the other hand, a functionally literate person can engage in these activities for his her own development

as well as the community's development. S/he has 8-9 years of formal education.

In 1978 UNESCO's General conference adopted a definition of functional literacy as: *a functionally literate person can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also enable him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and community development* (UNESCO 2006). Rather than an end in itself, functional literacy should be regarded as a way of preparing a person for social, civil and economic role that goes far beyond the limits of rudimentary literacy training consisting merely of the reading, writing and calculating. The very process of learning to read and write should be made an opportunity for acquiring information that can immediately be used to improve living standards.

According to UNESCO, functional illiteracy is regarded as measured by assessing reading, writing and mathematical skills in the various domains of social life which influence identity and insertion into society. From this perspective, literacy involves not only reading and writing but also the acquisition of the skills necessary for effective and productive performance.

Walter (2010) contends that “the debate over the meaning of functional literacy both outside and within UNESCO has not been settled to this day and probably never will be for the simple reason that no dictionary type international definition can fit all cultures and all times.”

Levels of functional literacy of individuals and societies are often regarded as indicators of the wellbeing of the country. Antoni and Heineck (2012) draw relations between low levels of literacy and low productivity, high unemployment, low earnings and high rate of welfare dependency all of which are common measures of the socio-economic well-being of the society. Levels of literacy and functional literacy are therefore linked to human capital.

In South Africa, literature paints a bleak picture of functional literacy. However, there is no general consensus on the percentages presented and even the narrative given. Statistics South Africa in its 2011 survey indicated that the number of adults regarded as functionally illiterate has decreased from 27.9 percent in 2002 to 18.1 percent in 2011. On the other hand, Paul Hoffman, director in the Centre For Constitutional Rights for the FW de Klerk Foundation, points out that according to Hough and Horne’s research survey (Hoffman 2008), out of 1.5million six year olds who entered the first grade of our public school system 12 years ago, only two-thirds reached grade 10 and a third made it to matric and of these 360 000 passed and on being tested, it was found that only 15 percent of the 278000 Black matriculates are functionally literate (that is 1 in 29 of those who enter the South African educational system). Expressed in terms of provinces, each province managed to produce 4600 functionally literate Black matriculates in 2007.

In 2013, Cosmo City Junior Primary School in Johannesburg advertised to unemployed matriculates for tutors for the Gauteng Department of Education’s homework programme. The school received a huge number of applications and to reduce them all applicants were asked to write a grade 3 level literacy and numeracy test. Everyone failed the numeracy test and a huge number also failed the literacy test (Social Innovations 2013).

A similar observation has also been made by Lulaway, a recruitment-cum-filtering business which services mass market employers like su-

permarkets, fast food companies or security firms. Errol Freeman, MD of Lulaway explains that as part of their filtering system, they also conduct basic literacy and numeracy tests but the pass rate they get is extremely low; about 80percent of all people interviewed fail the test (de Waal 2013). These narratives suggest that South Africa does not have the desired functional literacy levels.

In the light of these contrasting narratives, it became intriguing to establish the self-perceived functional literacy levels in relation to selected aspects as well as ability/competency in the very same aspects of the coordinators (Victim Advocates) working at the Thohoyandou Victim Empowerment Project (TEVP) trauma centres in and around Sibasa. (In a province placed 6<sup>th</sup> in terms of South African functional literacy census of 2001). Most of these ‘victim advocates’ who participated in the study had no profession and their highest education levels ranged from grade 10-12 and yet they play such a crucial role in the lives of the victims post the traumatic experience. This then prompted the question: what are the aspects of literacy valued by these ‘victim advocates’? What are their self-perceived levels of functional literacy? The study was then conducted to answer these questions.

## METHODOLOGY

There are various ways of establishing functional literacy awareness and competency such as the following:

### Formal Testing

These have been in use for a long time. Kirsch (2005: 5) is of the opinion that although these tests gave an indication of a person’s skill level, they tend to gloss over ‘the multifaceted nature of literacy’. Recently researchers have developed testing procedure to find out how well can people use literacy and numeracy skills to function in their communities. Tests can be administered to large samples at a time.

### Individual Self-assessment

Individuals are asked about their levels of functional literacy and numeracy or ask them to rate their literacy and numeracy against a scale.

### Interview/Discussion

Oral questions of the extent of literacy on the basis of a questionnaire.

**Observation:** consciously observing behaviour with a view to describing and estimating literacy skills.

### Research Design

From the different forms of studying Functional Literacy, the study opted for Individual self-assessment as a method of enquiry. The study adopted a case study design using quantitative, descriptive contextual approach in that it focused on the quantity of responses on the Likert scale.

### Population and Sampling

The population of the study are all Victim Advocates (VAs) attached to the non-profit organisation working with victims of abuse. These VAs are based in many villages in and around Sibasa. Purposive sampling was used since focus was on victim advocates attached to the Sibasa centre. There are twelve VAs attached to the centre however, only six respondents participated in the study.

### Data Collection Methods

After permission was granted to conduct the study, the researchers met the VAs at the centre where they signed consent forms and the questionnaires were distributed. The VAs requested for permission to take them along, complete them and submit at an agreed upon date. On the said date only six out of twelve questionnaires had been returned. Participants had to answer two separate self-administered five point Likert-type questionnaires; one for the importance with which they view aspects of functional literacy and the second one, their self-perceived levels of competence in each of the aspects listed. The questionnaire was adapted from the one used by Telfer et al. for their study entitled *Functional Literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (1990). The number of items was not altered but the wording of some questions was revised so as to make them context relevant. Functional literacy is most usually thought of as a domain of literacy although it has to do with different domains; for example,

in the Adult Performance Level (APL) study, functional literacy was measured in the knowledge domains of consumer economics and occupational knowledge. The questionnaire focused on four domains namely reading (1-4, 8, 9, 13); writing (7, 11, 12, 16, 19); interaction (5, 6, 10, 15, 17, 20) and knowledge (21-25). Each item had a scale of 1-5 where 1 meant very unimportant and 5 very important.

### Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics was used to analyse data from Likert-type questionnaires. Frequencies were used to indicate positions where items tended to huddle. Data was presented in graphs and in text.

### Ethical Considerations

Before the study was conducted permission was sought from the management at the TEVP centre and all ethical concerns were addressed. Participants were requested to sign a form of consent which also explained the purpose of the study as well as the fact that their participation was voluntary and that their responses will remain anonymous. Anonymity was achieved by not asking for the participants' identity.

## RESULTS

### Level of Importance

#### Reading

Most of the respondents regarded all aspects of reading as important and very important. Four of six respondents (67%) deemed *the ability to read out loud* and *the ability to critically analyse what is read* as very important. Half of the respondents (50%) regarded *the ability to understand directions; read information in a variety of formats as well as the ability to read information in a variety of formats* as very important. Four of the respondents (67%) regarded *the ability to read a technical report* as important while two (33%) thought it to be very important.

#### Writing

Of the items under writing, five respondents (83%) considered *the ability to use a computer*

as a very important aspect of functional literacy. Four respondents (67%) viewed *the ability to critique or edit the written work of another as well as the ability to spell correctly* as very important. Half of the respondents (50%) reckoned that the *ability to write a description of a work process* is very important.

### **Interaction**

In relation to the interaction domain, two items received equal scores for important and very important and these items were *the ability to discuss what is read with co-workers* and *the ability to explain what is read to colleagues*. Three respondents (50%) regarded these items as important and very important. The ability to be culturally sensitive was viewed as important by half of the respondents and very important by two respondents (33%).

### **Knowledge**

The scores for the knowledge domain were equally distributed. For items 21-25, scores ranged from moderately important to very important in equal values, that is all items had one for moderately important, three for important and two for very important. All the items in this domain were deemed to be important by 50 percent of the respondents and very important by only 33 percent while 17 percent thought them to be moderately important.

### **Self-perceived Levels of Competence/Ability**

#### **Reading**

Most of the respondents regarded themselves as moderately able in most of the items. Only 50 percent of the respondents regarded themselves as being able *to critically analyse what is read*. Of six respondents, four (67%) regarded themselves as being *able to react appropriately to written communication*. Most of the respondents (83%) considered themselves moderately able to use a variety of reference to search information.

#### **Writing**

Self-perceived abilities in the writing domain were distributed between moderately able and

able. Only a few respondents (2) regarded themselves as being very able in some of the items. All the respondents reported that they were *able to use a computer* and none regarded themselves as being moderately able. Four (67%) of the respondents perceived themselves as being moderately able *to write a clear set of directions* while the same percentage regarded themselves as being moderately able *to critique or edit the written work of another*. All respondents declared that they were *able to fill out forms*. Only half of the respondents thought they were *able to spell correctly*. None of the respondents perceived themselves as being very capable of *writing descriptions of a work process or writing a technical report*.

### **Interaction**

Scores for items on interaction were almost equally distributed among moderately able, able and very able. Two (33%) of the respondents regarded themselves as being moderately able *to discuss what is read with co-workers, explain what is read to colleagues and describe a work process orally*. Half of the respondents viewed themselves as *able to help someone improve his/ her writing* and *to be culturally sensitive*.

### **Knowledge**

None of the respondents scored themselves a five in this domain; scores ranged from 2-4. Two respondents (33%) thought they did not have much *knowledge of the world history, South African history, interrelationship between events in South Africa and events in the rest of the world and knowledge of world geography*. The same percentage regarded themselves as moderately knowledgeable on three items (21-23) *knowledge of the world history, South African history, interrelationship between events in South Africa and events in the rest of the world* while 67 percent thought they had moderate knowledge of the world geography and 83 percent regarded themselves as moderately knowledgeable on South African history.

## **DISCUSSION**

Regarding reading, there is a close relationship between what the respondents regard as

important and their perceived abilities. This is justifiable in literature as Horning (2013) states that the ability to read is the overarching skill of literacy, although writing, numbering and document processing are important elements of functional literacy, each of these skills is highly dependent upon reading. Even scholars who support the idea of multiple literacies acknowledge that multiple literacies is actually 'reading the world in specific context' (Lankshear and Knobel 2013). All respondents thought the ability to use a computer was an important aspect and they are all able to use it. It is no longer possible to speak of functional literacy in developing countries without including computer literacy. It is referred to as one of the six categories of "the family of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century survival literacies" (Horton 2013). They did not perceive the ability to fill out forms as an important aspect but they all declared that they were able to fill out forms. Perhaps the fact they constantly fill out forms in their day-to-day responsibilities has led to them devalue the ability and the importance attached to the exercise. They also regarded the ability to spell correctly as very important and only 50 percent thought they could spell correctly. This indicates that the respondents are aware of the importance and the power of written words. The ability to present information appropriately in a written form is crucial since writing is viewed as a means for people to develop individually and to be creative (Frances 2014). In relation to interaction, 50 percent regarded cultural sensitivity as important and 33 percent as very important and only 50 percent thought themselves as being culturally sensitive. Cultural literacy is also considered an important aspect of functional literacy. The findings seemed interesting in that the researchers expected the respondents, as people dealing with victims of different forms of abuse to be culturally sensitive so as not to offend victims by asking or uttering statements that could lead to the victim shutting down or feeling unfairly treated.

The scores on the knowledge domain regarding their self-perceived knowledge did not resemble a close relationship with the respondents' regard of the items. Only 50 percent regarded the items as important and 33 percent as very important. None of the respondents regarded themselves as being very knowledgeable in relation to the items; they regarded themselves as

moderately knowledgeable. This could suggest that participants know and value being knowledgeable but they do not consider themselves as being knowledgeable and maybe they also do not regard it as an important variable for discharging their daily responsibilities. It is unfortunate that respondents do not consider themselves knowledgeable because the fact that they can read and write should enable them to access information about what is happening in other parts of the country and the world and this leads to people becoming enlightened. This could be another indication of the need for functional literacy training. Functional literacy (FL) should prepare individuals to participate in civic, economic and social roles. It should also enable people to share new information and ideas (Cunnings 2012).

## CONCLUSION

The participants value reading, writing and interaction as important aspects of FL. They concede that knowledge is an important aspect but they also confirm that they are not so knowledgeable; they also regard themselves as moderately functionally literate. The study emphasized that functional literacy is about adults functioning in the real world. FL is context-specific and its levels are closely related to what practitioner's value. It therefore implies that people should be afforded opportunities in different contexts to improve their functional literacy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ♦ The victim advocates (VAs) should be supported and trained within their context. It is important to provide functional literacy classes for the VAs who are already employed and ensure that the newly employed are also exposed to functional literacy.
- ♦ Follow-up studies which also employ the use of an interview need to be conducted.
- ♦ Out of school youth should be afforded the opportunity to develop FL by being exposed to various contexts. South Africa can learn from other countries (such as Indonesia and the UK) where the teaching of FL is already institutionalized and could have it taught in established centres such as in community or multipurpose centres.



- ♦ Functional literacy tests should be conducted so as to inform the Department of Education and Training of the need for functional literacy training

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