

## Competent Illiterates or Competent Literates: A Comparative Study of South Australian and South African Basic Education in Literacy and Numeracy Proficiency (Competent Literates)

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**ABSTRACT** An education system has three main components, namely, the education system policy, education system administration, and structure of teaching and support services. In this paper, the focus is on the third component, which is teaching structure or structure of teaching. Curriculum and differentiation lies in teaching structure or structure of teaching. Is the South African curriculum producing the desired material of citizenry for the development of this country? Since the introduction of the Outcomes Based Curriculum and its revision more than twice, learners are perceived to be unable to read, write and calculate. It becomes imperative for the Department of Basic Education to revisit three main basic aspects, which every learner should know and able to do, which are writing, reading (literacy) and numeracy. Basic education should not serve as a conveyor belt to the next level of education phase where learners can talk a lot without the ability to read and write. This paper is a comparative study of South Australia and South Africa's involvement of stakeholders in teaching their children literacy and numeracy as the basis of communication.

### INTRODUCTION

The South African education system has come a long way since the dispensation in 1994. It is a long struggle of transforming education in such a way that all citizens would benefit. The education system of South Africa's third component, which is the education system structure, needs to be reviewed. This means that curriculum and differentiation, at basic education levels, should be reviewed in order to close a gap between basic and higher education. According to Meier (2011), the South African education system has failed to produce competent learners.

The education crisis, particularly underachievement in reading and Mathematics in primary schools, has become a major theme in government planning (Fleisch and Schoer 2014). Basic education and nation development go hand in hand. All countries, throughout the world, developed because of the standard of their education. Education has many advantages in terms of developing individuals who then develop the whole society and a country at large. This paper compares the provision and stakeholders' involvement on numeracy and literacy of South Australia and South Africa to the young ones. The comparison would improve the way in which basic education is offered in South Africa.

### WORLD DECLARATION ON EDUCATION FOR ALL (1990)

UNESCO, in 1990, emphasized that Education for All is based on the acknowledgement that literacy entails ignorance, that enlightened people are not those who receive formal education. Even those who come from poor backgrounds and are not educated can also be knowledgeable, wise and informed. Education frequently deprives people from traditional and folk forms of learning and diminishes the capacity of the so-called uneducated to learn (World Education Forum 1990).

The World Education Forum (1990), in its declaration Article 1, states that every person—child, youth and adult—are to benefit from educational opportunities, which are designed to meet their basic educational needs. These educational needs include essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem-solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values and attitudes). Such needs are required by human beings for them to survive, to develop to their full capacities and capabilities, to live and work in self-respect, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue with their lifelong learning. The area of basic learning

needs and how they should be met varies with individual countries and cultures, and inevitably changes as time goes by.

### **BASIC EDUCATION FOR DEVELOPMENT**

Ahmed et al. (1991) define basic education and nation development. Basic education begins with the premise of human rights and it contributes to social and economic development of the country and also adds value to the quality of life of the people. The question asked frequently is how education contributes to national development and not how development policies and programs affect educational progress.

The World Conference on Education for All, as stated by Ahmed et al. (1991), defines basic learning needs and basic education in two different forms as follows: *basic learning needs* is referred to as knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, which are necessary for people to survive, to improve the quality of their lives as well as lifelong learning. *Basic education* is referred to education, which is intended to meet the basic needs. Basic education includes instruction at the basic or foundational level, on which consequent learning can be based. Basic education also encompasses early childhood and primary (foundation) education for children and illiterate adults, as well as education literacy, general knowledge, and life skills for youth and adults and may extend into secondary education.

Ahmed et al. (1991) further describe education development interaction aspects as follows: one cannot separate the relationship between education and aspects of national development. They are better explained and understood as non-linear and interactive processes, as education cannot be separated from society and its development. The question which usually arises is how much is the necessity of basic education, and how can it be maximized to its beneficial consequences, especially literacy and numeracy. The inner workings and interaction of basic education should be looked at simultaneously. The areas to look at are its content and quality, and the overall development parameters policies, objectives and priorities in development, which also affect educational programs. The cooperation between basic education and national development naturally falls into place when human development becomes central to

national development, as education is priority. When basic education components are combined with economic measures, poverty is alleviated. Primary education, which is basic education, helps make mass communications educationally more potent, and primary education-plus and literacy-plus should be the core of basic education.

Educators should be included in development of basic education and nation development as they play an important role thereafter. The performance of educators is critical as they form a crucial part in improving cost-effectiveness of basic education. Major goals of basic education are learning achievement, organization of educational programs and performance of the system, which requires addressing the performance, behavior, motivation and skills of educators and how they are utilized by the system. Educators and how they perform appear as the central arena of action of both cost effectiveness of educational programs and achieving the overall goals of the system. It is important to improve educator effectiveness of resources and devotion to education, since educators account for over ninety percent of the cost of basic education programs. The primary educators' roles and functions have to be differentiated in order to introduce possibilities of professional growth and a career ladder and changing the present situation of a dead-end occupation, and increasing understanding of lifelong learning (Ahmed et al. 1991).

Opportunities for further learning are built on basic education. The indispensable knowledge and skills for survival and a life with human pride, which are expected to be distributed through basic education, constitute another category of basic education objectives. Equipping learners with basic learning tools and skills constitutes one category of objectives for basic education. There is general unanimity amongst researchers that literacy and numeracy are the basic tools for further learning, and they occupy a central spot in primary education (Ahmed et al. 1991).

### **LITERACY AND NUMERACY IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

According to the DoE (2013), in South Australia, the proof of evidence in the improvement of numeracy and literacy is highlighted in three key areas for improvement, that is, to ensure that

all children have a great start in their literacy and numeracy learning, that more children attain stronger foundational skills, and that all children and young ones have the opportunity to engage powerfully in their learning. These three key areas will enable children and young ones to become skillful problem-solvers with the ability to make use of their numeracy and literacy capabilities.

### **Literacy and Numeracy**

The DoE (2013) states that numeracy is not the same as mathematics. Learning mathematics contributes to the numeracy development of children and students, learning and knowing numeracy is the ability to use mathematical information to solve problems and respond successfully to every day challenges that makes a young person competent. Many people think that literacy involves reading, writing and understanding the conventions of language. Reading, writing and understanding conventions are very important, but these do not cover the entire field called literacy.

The South Australian government, in DoE (2013), indicates that the ability to cover numeracy and literacy skills are critical to every child's development as an individual in order to live a satisfying and fulfilling life and to actively participate in society. In recent times, children and young ones are educated when there is an increase in awareness about the importance of learning and education from birth throughout a person's life. At the same time, people are experiencing exponential changes that technology brings in the manner in which people communicate, learn and work together, locally and globally.

In South Australia, parents want the best education possible for their children wherever they go to learn. Parents are in need for their children to graduate from schools, which have curricula differentiation, where they have choices and the confidence to pursue their choices. Commitment in learning and the contribution this makes to a child's well-being is a high priority for every early childhood and school community. Research has shown that highly developed numeracy and literacy capabilities strongly contribute to the social, economic and physical well-being of individuals. This is true as children who are able to apply mathematical understanding and communicate effectively in a range of contexts (economic, technical, scientific and social)

are most likely to succeed in education and in life, as they live on (DoE 2013).

The DoE (2013) continues to state that a highly numerate and literate population is also important for the health and prosperity of the state and towards economic productivity and workforce involvement. The state's economic growth depends on how the population is educated. The way in which education is structured contributes towards state development or deterioration. Young people who are unable to communicate successfully because they cannot read or write well, or who struggle with numeracy skills, often leave school early and are more likely to be unemployed or in low-skilled jobs. If young ones do not have numeracy and literacy skills, they would not be able to contribute towards economic development of their country, as their employment probability would be very low. For the South Australian state to thrive in a rapidly changing global economic climate, it needs citizens who possess the foundations of numeracy and literacy, and who have the ability to apply numeracy and literacy powerfully, with the self-assurance and capability to continue learning.

### **Parents, Caregivers and Families, Teachers and Leaders**

The DoE (2013) states that there are three groups of people who contribute towards success learning numeracy and literacy, and they are, parents and families, teachers and leaders who need to work together. It is believed that people who work together make a difference. Parents and families, teachers and leaders as partners with children and young people, all with common high expectations, can make a positive difference in numeracy and literacy achievement for every learner. In the second half of 2012, the Department of Education in South Australia undertook a review of local, national and international research and evidence to add to the practical experience and knowledge in their pre-schools and schools. A discussion paper, Numeracy and Literacy, was released for discussion within the South Australian community, including parents and families, teachers and leaders.

Common themes and issues emerged from the consultation and these were, parents and families (as some of them are not teachers). They were asked for more information about how to support their children in numeracy and literacy development. Parents and families indicated that

they would like to understand more of their expectations regarding the level of numeracy and literacy achievement for their children, and parents and families would like to be more closely connected and involved with early childhood settings and schools to better understand how their children learn. On the other hand, educators would like greater clarity regarding effective programs, practices and approaches in numeracy and literacy, educators would value greater consistency in assessment practices and data analysis to help them design tailored and targeted learning, educators would value more consistent diagnostic assessment processes to better track and report on each child's and student's progress and achievement, educators would value coherent, high quality professional learning to enhance their practice in order to improve student learning outcomes, and children and young people want a say in how they learn. This is very interesting as all stakeholders, parents and families, teachers and children are involved in the consultation. The consultation also helped identify three key factors or drivers that will help make a significant difference to numeracy and literacy achievements across the state. These are stimulating teachers and educators while challenging children and students to achieve their best in numeracy and literacy, active parents and families who collaborate in learning partnerships with early childhood settings and schools, and successful 21<sup>st</sup> century leaders who lead the learning.

These drivers are connected by common high expectations of numeracy and literacy achievement standards. Each of these drivers focuses on meeting three key challenges in both numeracy and literacy, namely, great start, strong foundations, and powerful learners. For example, Driver 1, in aiming to have a great start for all, is to focus on providing more equitable outcomes for early learners. It looks at ensuring good foundations and also focuses on enabling all young learners to develop powerful learning capabilities and dispositions from birth onwards (DoE 2013).

#### **Great Start: This Ascertains that More Children have a Great Start in Learning Numeracy and Literacy**

In the DoE (2013), it is stated that young children thrive and learn more when their parents and caregivers speak with them, read to them and with them, sing together, play together

and encourage them. Children learn more when they explore the world with their parents and ask them more questions. It is a known fact that the messages, which parents and other adults give about the importance of mathematics and numeracy, have a lasting effect. Consequently, when parents and caregivers provide support to their children, children tend to notice the world around them, the shapes, the numbers and the ways in which people communicate and use mathematics, enhance children's early numeracy and literacy development.

Children and young people's learning and their ability to continue to learn are further developed when adults who are parents and caregivers encourage them to play with others, develop their curiosity, engage in conversations, and question what they see around them. These simple things are amongst the most important contributions that parents and caregivers can make to their child's numeracy and literacy development.

The DoE (2013) further states that in South Australia at present, with the simple things mentioned above, most children have a great start to learning in numeracy and literacy. It is interesting to find how the way families, teachers, care workers and other professionals connecting and working together is enabling children to have a range of quality experiences that build their vocabulary, develop their communication skills, help them make sense of words, symbols, shapes and numbers, and enable them to notice and ask questions about the world around them.

The DoE (2013) states that the influence that family experiences have on the children's development is very deep. A baby's first attachments with family members and the trusting relationships they build with others from outside provide them with a secure base for exploration and learning. Children's ability to self-regulate and to make connections outside the family is shaped by early experiences in their own families. In order to support a healthy development and well-being of babies and young children, the Numeracy and Literacy Strategy promotes the monitoring of every child's development through the use of the 'Blue Book' as a common source of information for families and health and education professionals, as well as establishing ways of monitoring children's early numeracy and literacy development, it promotes family participation in child health checks, particularly the 18-24 month health check, and includes advice about numeracy and literacy development, and

lastly, provides information and support to service providers to ensure they are able to assist families with advice on children’s numeracy and literacy development. This is a very pleasing strategy, which encourages parents and caregivers to be involved in the development and growth of children. The strategy arouses interest in children to learn numeracy and literacy at an early stage.

To further support parents, caregivers and families in the provision of strong support for their children’s learning, the Numeracy and Literacy Strategy ensures provision of targeted referral processes that link families to community support and builds their capacity to support the numeracy and literacy development of their children. Furthermore, the Numeracy and Literacy Strategy increases the number of supported playgroups in pre-schools and schools so that families have access to regular, play-based early learning activities, which include a focus on numeracy and literacy development, develops online and other resources for parents on numeracy and literacy, and develops courses and workshops for parents to support their children’s numeracy and literacy development (DoE 2013). This strategy makes sure that parents and caregivers are involved in their children’s education from an early age of their development, and parents and caregivers are not left behind like in other countries. They are involved from the onset, and this helps children develop an interest in numeracy and literacy, as children know that they have the support of their parents and caregivers.

**LITERACY AND NUMERACY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

In the following paragraphs, researchers discuss how South Africa’s National Integrated Literacy and Numeracy Strategy is meant to assist in improving numeracy and literature in primary schools and how the National Education Evaluation Development Unit is involved.

**National Integrated Literacy and Numeracy Strategy**

In most cases, teachers who teach at the foundation phase in South Africa are either unqualified or underqualified to teach literacy and numeracy to children and the young ones. The Department of Basic Education decided to formulate the National Integrated Literacy and Numeracy Strategy after the recommendations of

the National Education Evaluation Development Unit (NEEDU). The strategy was established in order to improve teacher content and conceptual knowledge, to strengthen teaching methodology, to strengthen the implementation of the curriculum with increased accountability and accessibility to quality Learner Teacher Support Material (LTSM). In order to realize goals of the National Integrated Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, the following has been included, access by teachers and children to reading materials and numeracy resources, improving the quality of and access to Grade R by all children, there is supposed to be evidence-based planning and monitoring, as well as reliable and regulated reporting processes by those who are in authority of championing the strategy. Provincial targets show how performance in Literacy and Numeracy is supposed to be strengthened in sustainable and systemic ways across all districts and schools in South Africa. This was based on the 2013 audit of provincial strategies for reading, Maths, Science and Technology (DoBE 2013).

Table 1 reveals that understanding scores are not inspiring, and are averaging just over three (3) out of five (5) for the six (6) learners who were tested. Equally so, the school’s Annual National Assessment (ANA) scores for Grade 3 learners lie just on the provincial mean for Mathematics, which is thirty-five percent and below average for Home Language (HL), which is forty percent. It is disturbing to find out that both the quantity and quality of writing in Foundation Phase (FP) learners’ books is inadequate in both Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) and Mathematics (DoBE 2013).

**Table 1: Reading fluency and comprehension of six best learners in school X**

<i>Class</i>	<i>Learner</i>	<i>Reading fluency: Correct no. words read in simple text p/min</i>	<i>Comprehension: No. Correct Answers (Max 5)</i>
<i>C 1</i>	L 1	80	3
	L 2	121	4
	L 3	99	3
	Mean	100.0	3.3
	L 5	91	3
<i>C2</i>	L 5	54	4
	L 6	80	2
	Mean	75.0	3.0

Source: NEEDU 2013

After this observation, the questions to be asked are, which obstacles are on the way for the school from taking its best learners to reading levels beyond the average level? Why are the best six readers in the school not all reading at the 'top' benchmark, and scoring full marks on a very easy comprehension exercise? Is the school doing more to rekindle the attainment of more comprehensive literacy competence and more sophisticated concept development?

For foundation learners to learn to read write (literacy) and numeracy, the first step is to use the alphabet and natural numbers. It is a process that continues throughout one's life. When the learner reads fluently and his understanding powers develop, the learner is then drawn to read books, which will provide him with increasing vocabulary, an increasing and complex collection of grammatical structures and a wider range of genres such as stories, biographies, non-fiction and poetry (NEEDU 2013).

Taylor in Jansen (2013) states that a learner who is studying in Grade 2 should have the ability to read at least 58 words a minute by the end of the second term (after six months). At the end of the fourth term the learner should be able to read 71 words. At the moment, learners read at least between 20 and 29 words a minute, which is inadequate, and this is very disappointing.

NEEDU (2013) further indicates that the power of writing comes from its ability to leave an enduring trace. This allows the writer to reflect upon what has been written in order to generate and refine ideas in the process.

Regarding the role of teachers, according to Taylor in Jansen (2013), reading is supposed to be a national priority. Teachers are not supposed to shut down their heads of departments out of the classrooms. In addition, the idea that school principals should not visit classrooms should be set aside. The state of children who cannot read and write needs remedy. In order for teachers to teach effectively, there is a need for professional teacher development. Teachers should emphasize independent reading, which is the ultimate goal of the department. It is understood that at the moment children are just singing in unison when reading.

## DISCUSSION

South Australia applies strategies in teaching numeracy and literacy both, at school and at

home. Parents and children caregivers are also responsible for teaching their children the value of learning numeracy and literacy. The scorecards, which parents and teachers use to measure the ability of reading, writing and numeracy of their children, cause parents to be on their toes too. As a result, teachers play their role in schools, and parents play their role at homes.

Numeracy and literature is ensuring that all children are having a great start in their literacy and numeracy learning. Children attain strong foundation skills of education through numeracy and literacy. What is more interesting is if it can be applied in South African context, it will be great in the future to realize that children who are able to apply mathematical understanding and communicate effectively in a range of contexts (economic, technical, scientific and social) are going to succeed in education and will contribute towards economic development of their country. In order to have a healthy and productive workforce, the country should have a population, which is highly numerate and literate.

Competent illiterates are young people who are unable to communicate successfully because they cannot read or write. The term also refers to those young ones who struggle with numeracy and literacy skills, and those who left school early and are more likely not to be employed or may be in low-skilled jobs. At the moment, South Africa is at this stage, where the young ones do not have literacy and numeracy skills. If learners are unable to read the required words in a certain time, this means the Basic Education Department must work on the challenge in order to minimize illiteracy.

The success of numeracy and literacy strategies and the ability to meet challenges depends on parents and families, teachers and leaders while working together. These are people who make a difference. When parents and teachers partner with children, they should have common and high expectations. They can make a positive difference in numeracy and literacy achievement for every learner. Parents in South Australia, it is reported, want the best education possible for their children. Wherever they are, they are supposed to receive that kind of education. This should be the same in South Africa. Parents' involvement in education of their children is alleged to be contributory in children's access to, learning and retention in school (Grant and Motala 2004).

### CONCLUSION

In this paper, researchers compared the South Australian strategy and the South African national integrated literacy and numeracy strategy. The comparison is done in order to improve the quality of numeracy and literacy at the basic level of education in South Africa. This is in order to eradicate competent illiteracy (learners who can speak but are unable to write what they are speaking about). The NEEDU reports its findings in terms of the number of words that learners, at a certain grade, should read in a minute as a concern. This is really a serious concern, which needs to be addressed immediately. South Africa lags behind in teaching numeracy and literacy. The strategy, which is used in South Australia, might be of assistance if it can be applied in South Africa's basic education.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

As it has been mentioned before, involvement of parents in education is perceived to be instrumental in improving the children's access, attendance, learning and retention in school. But it also has the potential to improve the parents' sense of empowerment, and support the greater achievement of valued educational outcomes. Most unfortunately in South Africa, as expected, poverty, unemployment and poorly educated and fractured families are the norm. Efforts to improve parental involvement in South African education are confronted by daunting poverty, illiteracy, low parental self-perceptions and poor channels of communication. The Department of

Basic Education should consider lessons learnt from South Australia in order to improve numeracy and literacy skills amongst learners who are studying in primary schools.

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