



Family Digest 64

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International Literacy Day 8th September

Since 1967, the annual celebrations of International Literacy Day (ILD) have taken place on 8th September around the world to remind policy-makers, practitioners, and the public of the critical importance of literacy in creating more literate, just, peaceful, and sustainable societies.¹ This year, ILD is being celebrated under the theme of 'Promoting multilingual education: Literacy for mutual understanding and peace'. Literacy is a fundamental human right. It opens the door to the enjoyment of other human rights, greater freedoms, and global citizenship.

The literacy rate measures the percentage of people aged 15 and above who can read and write. There is no common definition for what counts as being literate; individual countries use individual assessments and standards to define it. Despite this, the literacy rate is an important indicator of the standard of education and thus the standard of living in a country.²

According to the Department of Higher Education and Training, "literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. It measures adults' proficiency in key information-processing skills such as literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments".³ In 2020, the SA adult illiteracy rate was 10%. While this was an improvement on previous measurements, it remains concerning that 3.7 million adults in South Africa are still illiterate, 26 years after democracy.⁴

According to the World Literacy Foundation, illiteracy is costing the country's economy R119.03 billion. "Illiteracy is ruining lives and is linked with an array of poor life outcomes, such as poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, crime and long-term illness. Literacy can change everything in the life of a young person and provide a pathway to reach their full potential."⁵

Research published in 2022 showed quite clearly that there had been widespread learning losses from the COVID-19 pandemic, with school closures and rotational timetables. Moreover, the results of the 2023 'Background Report for the 2030 Reading Panel'⁶ showed a country going backwards in the fundamental unit of education: literacy. Using the Western Cape's learning losses as a proxy, the research suggests that the percentage of Grade 4s who cannot read for meaning rose from 78 (in 2016) to 82 (in 2021) as a result of the pandemic, with only an estimated 18 percent Grade 4 learners able to read for meaning in any language. Despite this, there is currently no plan and no budget for catching up from COVID-19.⁷ The report concluded, "nothing short of a sustained countrywide overhaul of the education system would be likely to yield this result".⁸

Furthermore, the research emphasized that children need more books and reading activities at home and in school to improve their literacy. Nearly three quarters of public schools still do not have libraries, in spite of a 2013 promise by the then Minister of Education, Angie Motshekga.⁹

Last year, Minister Motshekga gave details of the revised National Reading Plan to address the gaps in the department's approach, saying that "our plan will ensure further provision of minimum learning and teaching support material especially designed to support reading... The plan will expand the implementation of more direct and targeted training and support. The primary focus will be on home language literacy as children need to learn to read in a language that they understand."¹⁰

This links up with the theme for this year's International Literacy Day. The Director-General of UNESCO, Audrey Azoulay, explains that "the benefits of multilingual education are well documented and evidenced by research. When children are offered education in their household language, more of them attend school, girls from rural areas stay in education longer, and all children acquire better thinking skills. Multilingual education also supports intercultural dialogue, social cohesion and peace. For language is a passport to communication with others: it connects us across cultures; it opens us to new ways of perceiving and interpreting the world; it strengthens understanding within and between peoples."¹¹

The links below provide further information and reports on this issue.

https://gaml.uis.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/12/4.6.1_07_4.6-defining-literacy.pdf

https://www.unesco.org/en/days/literacy?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=maverick_citizen&mle=MEdjczVNYUpZeFB

https://groundup.org.za/media/uploads/documents/embargoed_2023_reading_panel_background_report_7_feb_2023.pdf

<https://mg.co.za/education/2023-04-04-illiteracy-costs-south-africas-economy-r119-billion-report-says/>

<https://groundup.org.za/article/in-2013-the-education-minister-promised-libraries-in-every-school-by-29-november-but-theres-no-chance-that-deadline-will-be-met/#:~:text=An%20Educati>

<https://groundup.org.za/article/sas-children-have-lost-a-decade-of-reading-progress-study-shows/>

Lois Law

Project Co-ordinator

lois@cpl.org.za

¹ https://www.unesco.org/en/days/literacy?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=maverick_citizen&mle=MEdjczVNYUpZeFB

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/572836/literacy-rate-in-south-africa/>

³ https://www.dhet.gov.za/Planning%20Monitoring%20and%20Evaluation%20Coordination/Fact%20Sheet%20-%20Adult%20illiteracy%20in%20South%20Africa_March%202022.pdf

⁴ https://www.dhet.gov.za/Planning%20Monitoring%20and%20Evaluation%20Coordination/Fact%20Sheet%20-%20Adult%20illiteracy%20in%20South%20Africa_March%202022.pdf

⁵ <https://mg.co.za/education/2023-04-04-illiteracy-costs-south-africas-economy-r119-billion-report-says/>

⁶ The 2030 Reading Panel is a group of leaders and researchers convened by former Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka to ensure that all children in South Africa aged ten or older can read for meaning by 2030

⁷ https://groundup.org.za/media/uploads/documents/embargoed_2023_reading_panel_background_report_7_feb_2023.pdf

⁸ https://groundup.org.za/media/uploads/documents/embargoed_2023_reading_panel_background_report_7_feb_2023.pdf

⁹ <https://groundup.org.za/article/in-2013-the-education-minister-promised-libraries-in-every-school-by-29-november-but-theres-no-chance-that-deadline-will-be-met/#:~:text=An%20Educati>

¹⁰ <https://groundup.org.za/article/sas-children-have-lost-a-decade-of-reading-progress-study-shows/>

¹¹ <https://tinyurl.com/yc2kduj6>