

Assessing the proficiency of adult learners in reading literacy in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper focuses on one of the South African national options for the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), namely the assessment of adult literacy in private and public training centres in South Africa. As a developing country, South Africa has limited access to skilled workers and the tendency is for the majority of learners to drop out of formal education for various reasons. In order to alleviate poverty and to improve the social and economic development of the country, it is essential for policy makers to determine that learning acquired through formal schooling and adult basic education is comparable. In terms of achieving education for all in South Africa (a concept introduced at the Jomtien World Conference on Education for All in 1990), frameworks such as the NQF provide a sound basis for ensuring that learning outcomes are achieved through both sectors of education.

The ABET study would aim to determine the performance of ABET learners on reading literacy as well as establishing the extent to which performance in reading literacy among ABET learners are equivalent to that of Grade 4 learners. This paper presents an overview of the study's main design issues as well as some preliminary findings from the pre-pilot study.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyze the extent to which assessment instruments designed and implemented at the grade 4 level in primary schools may be implemented for adult learners

at the equivalent ABET level (Level 2) in order to monitor and evaluate adults reading literacy.

The importance of literacy has become evident in the 50 years since the United Nations declared it to be a basic human right along with the right to adequate food, health care, and housing. Literacy education has indeed become a tool to help address what might be perceived to be more pressing needs for food, health care and housing.

The United Nations Literacy Decade was declared for 2003 to 2012. According to UNESCO statistics, about 861 million people (or about 20% of the world's adults) cannot read or write or participate fully or optimally in the organization and activities of their societies. Of these illiterate adults, 70% live in Sub-Saharan Africa, Southern and Western Asia, Arab countries and North Africa, while two thirds are estimated to be women .

For both industrialized and developing countries literacy education is near the top of the policy agenda. UNESCO estimated that by the year 2000 approximately 1 billion illiterates remain worldwide, while the prospects of a radical improvement within the foreseeable future seems to be unlikely. The concern is that as certain parts of the world have very high illiteracy rates, these are often the same countries neither without the means to implement wide-scale and effective literacy programmes nor to evaluate such programmes. However as literacy is of central importance to development , it is these countries for whom it is critical that solutions to the problem of illiteracy be found as increasingly, it is correlated with higher levels of income and job productivity.

Why assess adult learner progress?

In his foreword for the Education For All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report 2005, the Director General of UNESCO, Koichiro Matsuura mentioned that “the quest to achieve Education For All (EFA) is fundamentally about assuring that children, youth and adults gain the knowledge and skills they need to better their lives and to play a role in building more peaceful and equitable societies” (Matsuura, 2004: Foreword).

Following the Jomtien *World Conference on Education For All* in 1990, member states resolved to provide Education For All their citizens irrespective of age. Six goals and targets were set with intentions for them to be met by the year 2000. For adult basic education the first goal was to reduce the adult illiteracy rate (the appropriate age group to be determined in each country) by one-half its 1990 level by the year 2000, with sufficient emphasis on female literacy to significantly reduce the current disparity between male and female illiteracy rates. The second goal on adult basic education was to expand provision of basic education and training in other essential skills required by youth and adults, with programme effectiveness assessed in terms of behavioral change and impact on health, employment and productivity (Global Synthesis, Education For All 2000 Assessment, Unesco, p.13). Although these targets were set to be achieved by the year 2000, when the time came in 2000 at the Dakar conference they were reset with a deadline for 2015. The Dakar targets for adult basic education were to ensure that learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes; and achieving 50%

improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2002: 13).

In South Africa, assessment projects such as the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (now Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) TIMSS, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) have been implemented to evaluate the quality of education provision as well as progress made in attaining specific educational goals. On the one hand they serve to benchmark the standard of education in this country with international standards. On the other hand they assist to develop education indicators in order to measure the extent to which policy goals are being met in practice to ensure accountability.

According to Crouch (a.n) education indicators are a recent phenomenon in South Africa. He argues that previously, education indicators were not used for the following reasons: firstly South Africa did not have a public vocation to accountability; secondly education was previously seen as a service rendered based on trust rather than as a co-investment to be co-monitored and co-managed via partnerships; thirdly the purposes of education were too implicit, opaque, differentiated, and contested to warrant a unitary system of monitoring and evaluation; fourthly the focus of the previous education system indicators was not on delivering value-for-money; and finally there was a lack of ability to produce raw data to elaborate on the indicators of the previous education system (a.n:2 -3).

In a democratic South Africa the need for education indicators has been emphasized. According to Crouch this is because there is an idea that in a democracy there must be control mechanisms in order to self-regulate and adapt; there is also a need for political accountability and there is a need to include bureaucratic control mechanisms in a democracy. Therefore the education indicators serve as part of a feedback loop that leads to correction. They aid in detection; they also assist in establishing a social control system that is based on a measure of accountability (Crouch a.n.: 4).

While Crouch goes on to indicate the types of education indicators that have been used in education policy documents and legislation, his focus remains largely on domestic aspects that drive or represent the need for education indicators such as matric results. The reality is that even a country like South Africa has exposed itself to further control mechanisms that emanate from outside as a move to 'benchmark' itself internationally and to attract foreign aid and investment. Globalization has enabled policy borrowing between the South African government and other countries. According to Knight and de Wit (1997 in Woodhouse 2001:1) globalization refers to the increasing flow of technology, finance, trade, knowledge, people, values and ideas across borders. In education this is evident in the adoption of transnational policies such as the EFA.

The purpose of extending the PIRLS 2006 study to incorporate adult learners as well would be to determine the level of reading literacy amongst those adults attending Adult Basic Education and Training in public adult centers.

Through the National Qualifications Framework (the NQF), South Africa has an education framework that intends to compare and equate learning that was acquired through formal and non-formal schooling. As a developing country, South Africa has limited access to skilled workers and the tendency is for the majority of learners to drop out of formal education for various reasons. In order to alleviate poverty and to improve the social and economic development of the country, it is essential for policy makers to determine that learning acquired through formal schooling and adult basic education is comparable. In terms of achieving education for all (a concept introduced at the Jomtien World Conference on Education for All in 1990) in South Africa, frameworks such as the NQF provide a sound basis for ensuring that learning outcomes are achieved through both sectors of education – this implies the same quality of education, thereby maximizing access to education for all.

The progress in international reading literacy (PIRLS) in South Africa

PIRLS is an international comparative evaluation of reading literacy of Grade 4 (9 year-old) learners involving more than 40 countries. It is run under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (the IEA). As an organization, the IEA undertakes international studies that benchmark performance of school-going children in mathematics, science, civic education, information, communication, technology and reading to name a few.

PIRLS 2006 is the second, after PIRLS 2001, in a five-year cycle of assessment that measures trends in children's reading literacy achievement and policy and practices related to literacy. PIRLS aims to provide trends and international comparisons on:

- The reading achievement of Grade 4 learners.
- Learners' competencies in relation to goals and standards for reading education.
- The impact of the home environment and how parents foster reading literacy.
- The organization, time and reading materials for learning to read in schools.
- Curriculum and classroom approaches to reading instruction.

Currently, 46 countries are involved in this collaborative analysis of children's reading literacy and the factors that influence reading acquisition. Whilst there are 30 European countries participating, only three African countries namely Egypt, Morocco and South Africa are involved. Several developing or newly emerging countries are also participating such as Indonesia and in the Middle East and Western Asia Israel, Kuwait, Qatar and Iran. The Americas are not well represented with only the USA, two provinces in Canada and Nicaragua taking part. Asian participants include China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Chinese Taipei. New Zealand is the sole participant from Australasia.

PIRLS focuses on three aspects of reading literacy (Campbell, Kelly, Mullis, Martin and Sainsbury, 2001), namely:

- Processes of comprehension.
- Purposes for reading.

- Reading behaviours and attitudes.

Processes of comprehension refer to ways in which readers construct meaning from text. According to the PIRLS Assessment Framework and specifications for the 2006 study, readers construct meaning in different ways when faced with the task of reading. They focus on and retrieve specific ideas, they make inferences, interpret and integrate information and ideas as well as evaluate and examine text features.

Four types of comprehension processes are used in the PIRLS assessment to develop the comprehension questions derived from reading passages that are presented to learners. A range of questions, each dealing with a particular process, enables learners to demonstrate their abilities and skills in constructing meaning from written text. PIRLS distinguishes between the following comprehension processes:

- Focusing on and retrieving explicitly stated information, where retrieving appropriate text from a reading passage not only means that the learners needs to understand what is stated explicitly in the text, but to also ascertain how that information is related to the information sought.
- Making straightforward inference, where the construction of meaning from text requires of readers to make inferences about ideas or information not stated explicitly in the text.
- Interpreting ideas and information, an interpretive process, where learners attempt to construct a more specific or complete understanding of the text by integrating personal knowledge and experience with meaning found in the text.
- Examining and evaluating content, language and textual elements, which allows for reflecting on textual elements, such as structure and language, in order for the learner to examine how meaning is presented.

The PIRLS assessment focuses on two purposes of reading, namely:

- Reading for literary experience
- Reading to acquire and use information

These two purposes for reading account for most of the reading done by young learners in and out of school. In literary reading, the reader engages with the text to become involved in imagined events, settings, actions, consequences, characters, atmosphere, feelings and ideas. The main form of literary texts when reading for literary experience in PIRLS assessments is narrative fiction. When reading to acquire and use information, the learner does not engage in imagined worlds, but with aspects of the real world by means of informational texts. By means of informational texts, the learner can understand how the world is and has been and why things work the way they do. These passages are not only aimed at the acquisition of knowledge and information, but also to assess the learner's ability to use reasoning.

Although the PIRLS assessment distinguishes between these two purposes for reading, the underlying processes and strategies readers use for both are very similar. Each of these purposes for reading is often associated with certain types of texts. For example, reading for literary experience is often associated with fictional material, while reading to acquire and use information is more likely to be associated with informative articles and instructional texts.

Although the PIRLS assessment takes the form of fictional passages when reading for the purposes of literary experience and articles for the purposes of reading to acquire and use information, the purposes for reading do not align strictly with these types of texts. Because tastes and preferences vary so widely, almost any text could meet either purpose.

Reading behaviours and attitudes refer to those behaviours and attitudes that would promote lifelong reading habits. The PIRLS assessment makes use of contextual questionnaires that are given to learners, Grade 4 teachers, principals and parents to gauge these attitudes and behaviours.

Following the field test that was done in March 2005, data collection for the main study took place during October and November 2005 when data was collected using a representative sample at approximately 400 schools throughout South Africa. Data was collected not only in terms of assessing learner performance on a number of reading literacy passages, but also collecting data by means of contextual questionnaires that were given to learners, teachers, school principals and parents.

The IEA encourages countries to expand their national study with so-called national options in which countries may administer a number of instruments or expand the international instruments with a number of questions addressing a number of issues or research questions that are important for the country.

In South Africa several additional components have been included in the South African PIRLS project to enhance the relevance of the project and address a number of aspects that are unique to our educational environment. These do not form part of the international part of the study.

A decision was made to include three such national options, namely:

1. Assessing learners for English Second Language proficiency.

Learners in South Africa begin their schooling through the medium of their mother tongue (one of the official 11 languages) and the medium only changes to either English or Afrikaans at the beginning of grade 4. The transition in the language of learning is seen as the root cause for many learners struggling to access information within the classroom. For the majority of learners (more than 70%), this additional language (usually English) is experienced as a foreign language as they seldom speak or hear the language outside the classroom. This is especially true in rural areas.

Therefore, learners were not only tested in their home language, but were also tested by means of an English Second Language test. This instrument was developed in collaboration with Grade 4 teachers and aims to assess learners' proficiency in reading English as an additional language.

2. Including Grade 5 learners for assessment.

The rationale for including grade 5 learners is to study the progression in reading ability from grade 4 to grade 5, given the transition of learners in the languages of learning in grade 4. The South African team tested grade 4 and 5 learners in all 11 official languages.

3. Assessing ABET learners using the PIRLS instruments.

The purpose of extending the PIRLS 2006 study to incorporate adult learners would be to determine the level of reading literacy amongst those adults attending Adult Basic Education and Training in public learning adult centers. The remainder of this paper will focus on an overview of the study's intended use of the PIRLS instruments to assess adult learners as well as some preliminary findings from the pre-pilot study.

Using PIRLS 2006 instruments to assess adult learners

The first phase of the ABET project aimed to evaluate the extent to which the assessment instruments administered to Grade 4 learners could be used to evaluate the performance of adult learners at the equivalent level. This research used selected reading passages, as used in the PIRLS 2006 study on Grade 4 learners to assess ABET learners' performance in reading literacy.

Essentially, the ABET study aimed to determine the following:

1. What is the performance of ABET learners on reading literacy?
2. What is the role of the educator in facilitating the acquisition of reading literacy in ABET learners?
3. To what extent is ABET learner performance on reading literacy attributable to eco-systemic factors?
4. To what extent is performance in reading literacy among ABET learners equivalent to that of Grade 4 learners?

With regard to the fourth question, in South Africa it has been assumed that the general education and ABET programmes are comparable and that a qualification obtained under ABET is equivalent to the general education band. Empirical research has not verified this. While the PIRLS 2006 project is mainly focused on comparing our Grade 4 reading literacy to those of Grade 4 learners in other countries, it has not yet been determined that the curriculum and learning outcomes for Grade 4 are purported to be equivalent to those of ABET Level 2 and are in fact comparable.

The objectives for the study can be outlined as follows:

- To conduct a baseline survey, assessing adult learners in order to determine levels of reading literacy. Apart from ascertaining levels of reading performance, contextual data will also be collected in the form of administering questionnaires to learners, lecturers and heads of ABET centers.
- To analyze collected data, aimed at, amongst others, making comparisons between adult learner performance and Grade 4 learner performance.
- To write a comprehensive report outlining the findings and identifying possibilities for further research.

As stated in earlier sections, reading for literary experience involves the use of fictional passages, each with a number of questions. For the purposes of the ABET assessment, two passages aimed at reading for literary experience were deemed to be more appropriate for use with adult learners. Both passages tell fictional stories, but with a moral underpinning

and the content of the stories is such that it would appeal to a more mature audience, not only to children. Following each passage, a number of multiple-choice and constructed response questions are asked. Questions each deal with a particular comprehension process as described and explained in section 3.

Section 3 also describes how, by means of the informational passages, the learner does not engage in imagined worlds, but with aspects of the real world through informational texts. By means of informational texts, the learner can understand aspects of the world by means of factual texts. These passages are not only aimed at the acquisition of knowledge and information, but also at assessing the learner's ability to use reasoning. Two appropriate informational passages were selected for the purposes of assessing adult learners.

Experts in the field of adult education evaluated the selected passages in order to assure the appropriateness of their use on adult learners. Amongst others, the passages were evaluated as follows: In terms of the length of the passages, they were found to be more than double in the length of the reading passages that are in some Level 2 English Modules and twice as long as most of the reading passages in the IEB English Level 2 examinations.

The proposed passages were evaluated favourably and could be used for ABET learners. Although they are not directly related to their lives, the situations discussed in the informational passages might not be totally outside the experience of South African ABET learners. Learners should be able to use their existing knowledge to make sense of the passages—many South African adults will know something about sharks and shark attacks on swimmers. Likewise, the hiking passage could be of interest to some ABET learners, many of whom would be able to relate to the discussion on physical fitness.

The literary reading passages were evaluated as texts that could be understood as stories, but that also act as an allegory for human behaviour and a means of teaching children social and moral skills. The first selected passage was appropriately evaluated as an African folk tale that could appeal to adults, while the second passage could be problematic, since it is a children's story told from the perspective of the animals that can talk. The reference to wolves in the story might also not be a familiar animal to which learners in South Africa would be able to relate.

While simple sentences are used in all the passages, there are also many complex and fairly lengthy sentences occurring in the passages. For adult Level 2 readers, long complex sentences that contain too many ideas should be avoided.

Evaluators identified many words and phrases that would be unfamiliar to ABET Level 2 learners e.g. *pandemonium*, *perplexed*. ABET learners would not use them in their daily lives nor would they be likely to come across them when reading, listening to the radio or watching television. It was suggested (similar examples are found in IEB exams papers) that a glossary of unusual or difficult words and phrases is provided as this helps ABET learners to make sense of the text. Without such a learning aid, ABET learners often waste valuable time unsuccessfully trying to make sense of a particular word or phrase and thus may become very frustrated and demotivated. Level 2 learners and above do not always read through the

whole passage and try to infer the meaning of unknown words and phrases from the rest of the text.

Based on the evaluation of these passages, an outline and detailed description of the types of comprehension processes referred to in the PIRLS assessment. This was used as a basis for devising a breakdown of ABET Unit Standards, Specific Outcomes, Assessment Criteria and specific levels at which these occur for each of the items in each of these passages. The assessment framework therefore not only makes reference to the PIRLS framework, but also links each item to the ABET Unit Standards and Assessment Criteria for the purposes of this study.

Results of pre-pilot of adult learners using PIRLS assessment

In light of predictions from various experts in the field and the above mentioned criticism on the appropriateness of the use of PIRLS instruments in the assessment of ABET learners, a pre pilot study was conducted early in March 2006. The rationale behind the pre pilot was not to gather data from a scientifically selected, representative sample, nor was it to use the results from gathered data to make generalizations. Instead, the pre pilot was merely conducted to gauge how a small sample of adult learners would react to and perform on the PIRLS instruments. This would provide preliminary 'evidence' that would either support or refute the predictions made by experts in the field.

The following section will aim to describe the procedures followed during the pre pilot, as well as some preliminary results.

Sample of learners assessed

Early in March, 2006 a sample of 30 ABET learners from a public Adult Education Centre situated in Katlehong on the East Rand of Gauteng were assessed in English using the selected PIRLS passages described previously. The centre serves a wide area of learners, both school going and from the ABET sector. The principal of the centre agreed to allow the assessment of the learners therefore the selection of this centre is based purely on convenience and not on scientific selection.

The adults participating in the assessment ranged in ages from as young as 14 to as old as 60 years of age. In total, 30 learners were assessed, 11 of who were male with the remaining 16 being female. Of these 30 learners, 12 are in the process of completing ABET Level 3 education—the other 18 learners are all on ABET Level 4. This sample of learners does not match the intention of assessing adult learners at ABET Level 2. Due to unforeseen circumstances, Level 2 learners were not available for testing on the evening of the visit to the adult learning centre. When Level 4 learners availed themselves for testing, a decision was made to test these learners instead of returning from the field empty handed. All these learners have employment as blue collar workers and their motivation behind attending ABET classes ranged from purely self-improvement reasons to being better able to procure more suitable employment.

Procedures followed during the assessment

The same procedures as prescribed by the IEA for data collection during the PIRLS assessment of Grade 4 learners were followed during the assessment of the adult learners.

Each learner was given a test booklet, containing two reading passages with questions to complete. It was ensured that learners sitting next to each other received different test booklets—in this way, any possibility of learners copying from one another are eliminated.

Directions (as provided of the first page of each test booklet) were explained to learners orally. Particular attention was paid to example questions to ensure that learners understood the type of questions they would be expected to answer during the assessment. Strict time-keeping procedures followed the moment learners were ready to begin the assessment. In order to complete the first passage, 40 minutes was allowed. Learners were not allowed to continue with the second passage should they complete the questions to the first passage within the allocated time. After the first 40 minutes elapsed, learners were allowed a 10-minute break—although learners were allowed this break, nobody made use of the opportunity and testing continued for the second passage. Again, 40 minutes was allowed for the completion of the second reading passage. After the elapse of this second session, the assessment was concluded.

For the duration of the assessment, learners were allowed to ask questions should anything be unclear. Very little assistance however was allowed, especially where learners requested assistance with their answers. In most cases, learners could only be told to write down what they think would be right or appropriate.

Results from implementation of PIRLS instruments

The title of this paper may lead the reader to believe that this paper will provide a comprehensive account of adult learner performance. Rather, the emphasis is on the quality and appropriateness of the intended use of PIRLS instruments on adult learners and not adult performance as yet.

In light of the small sample size, results of adult performance on the selected reading passages will be restricted to a discussion of item difficulties. These difficulties should provide an indication of the proportion of adult learners who were able to provide correct answers to the questions they were asked on each of the passages.

Of the 30 learners who were assessed, not many were able to complete the questions given the allocated time in which to do so, therefore booklets were returned with a very high non-response rate. For the purposes of this pre-pilot it was decided to keep to the prescribed times as set by the PIRLS assessment (40 minutes for each passage). In addition, time was constrained since learners were only available from 18:00 to 20:00 in the evening.

Non-responses imply that learners simply ran out of time and couldn't respond to the questions, or learners simply did not make any attempt to answer the questions, even if they had enough time to do so. For this reason, difficulty values will be reported on in two ways—firstly, those values derived from all learners (responses and non-responses) and secondly those difficulty values as derived from only those learners who attempted to provide answers (non-responses therefore excluded from the calculation). Items with a significant improvement in difficulty value (for example in cases where the item changes

from a difficult to an easy item) when calculated in these two ways are highlighted in the tables below.

Results for Booklet 1 containing 'Reading for literary experience' passages
 A total of 15 learners answered questions contained in booklet 1. These learners ranged in age from 18 to 53 and included 5 males and 7 females. The first reading passage consisted of 7 multiple-choice items and 5 constructed response items. The second passage also consisted of 7 multiple-choice items, but 6 constructed response items.

Table 1: Results for Literary Passage 1

Item Number:	Type of Item:	N	Difficulty Value (including non-responses):	N	Difficulty Value (non-responses left out):
1	MCQ	15	0.33	5	0.90
2	MCQ	15	0.20	5	0.60
3	MCQ	15	0.06	5	0.80
4	MCQ	15	0.13	6	0.33
5	CR	15	0.10	4	0.37
6	MCQ	15	0.06	5	0.20
7	CR	15	0	3	0
8	MCQ	15	0.06	6	0.16
9	CR	15	0	3	0
10	CR	15	0.13	3	0.66
11	MCQ	15	0.06	4	0.25
12	CR	15	0.06	2	0.50

- MCQ – Multiple Choice Question
- CR – Constructed Response

Table 2: Results for Literary Passage 2

Item Number:	Type of Item:	N	Difficulty Value (including non-responses):	N	Difficulty Value (non-responses left out):
1	MCQ	15	0.13	12	0.16
2	MCQ	15	0.20	12	0.25
3	CR	15	0	11	0
4	MCQ	15	0.20	10	0.30
5	MCQ	15	0.13	11	0.18
6	MCQ	15	0.40	11	0.54
7	MCQ	15	0.26	11	0.36
8	MCQ	15	0	11	0
9	CR	15	0.16	8	0.31
10	CR	15	0.06	10	0.10
11	MCQ	15	0.13	9	0.22
12	CR	15	0	11	0
13	CR	15	0.11	7	0.35
14	CR	15	0.10	9	0.16

- MCQ – Multiple Choice Question
- CR – Constructed Response

Ideally, item difficulty values should include items from a range of easy, medium to difficult items. Easy items would typically be those that more than 70% of learners are able to answer, while medium items would include those items where between 40 and 60% of learners are able to provide correct answers. Difficult items fall in the category of 30% and lower and would therefore include those items that only a few learners are able to answer correctly.

Tables 1 and 2 indicate difficulty values that would suggest very high difficulty values for each of the items found in the two reading passages contained in booklet 1. This means that a very low proportion of learners were able to answer any of the given items correctly. Values range from 0 (where none of the learners were able to provide the correct answer to a specific item) to only as high as 0.40 (implying that only 40% of learners were able to answer an item correctly). A slight improvement in difficulty values occurs when those learners who failed to respond are taken out of the equation. An increase in difficulty value in these cases, however, should be interpreted with caution. Learners who actually responded to items were very few. When calculating difficulty values when only making use of those learners who responded, a difficulty value is derived from literally only 3 or 4 responses. Therefore, the marked increase in performance on some items should not be interpreted in isolation from this fact.

Results for Booklet 2 containing 'Reading to acquire and use information' passages

As was the case with booklet 1, a total of 15 adult learners were assessed using booklet 2, which contained two informational passages. Learners' ages ranged from 14 to 60 years of age, 6 of who were male and 9 of whom were female. Also consisting of a number of constructed response items and multiple-choice questions, results for these two passages are as follows:

Table 3: Results for Informational Passage1

Item Number:	Type of Item:	N	Difficulty Value (including non-responses):	N	Difficulty Value (non-responses left out):
1	MCQ	15	0.13	10	0.20
2	CR	15	0.46	13	0.53
3	CR	15	0.26	13	0.30
4	MCQ	15	0.60	13	0.69
5	MCQ	15	0.46	13	0.53
6	MCQ	15	0.26	13	0.30
7	MCQ	15	0.20	13	0.23
8	CR	15	0.40	11	0.54
9	MCQ	15	0.33	10	0.50
10	MCQ	15	0.33	10	0.50
11	CR	15	0.36	9	0.61

12	CR	15	0.16	8	0.31
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- MCQ – Multiple Choice Question
- CR – Constructed Response

Table 4: Results for Informational Passage 2

Item Number:	Type of Item:	N	Difficulty Value (including non-responses):	N	Difficulty Value (non-responses left out):
1	CR	15	0.40	7	0.85
2	CR	15	0.20	6	0.50
3	MCQ	15	0.06	6	0.16
4	MCQ	15	0.13	5	0.40
5	CR	15	0.26	4	0.90
6	MCQ	15	0.20	5	0.60
7	CR	15	0.16	4	0.62
8	MCQ	15	0.06	5	0.20
9	MCQ	15	0.06	5	0.20
10	CR	15	0.02	3	0.11
11	MCQ	15	0.06	4	0.25
12	CR	15	0.06	4	0.25

- MCQ – Multiple Choice Question
- CR – Constructed Response

Similar to the passages in booklet 1, the performance on items in passages in booklet 2 was very poor. With the exception of item 4 of informational passage 1 (where 60% of learners provided the right answer), item difficulties again are well below 40% in most cases, meaning that very few learners were able to provide correct answers to any of the given items. With the removal of non-responses, item difficulties seem to improve, thereby implying that learners who provided responses to the questions were able to either answer the multiple choice questions correctly, or were able to obtain full or partial credit for the constructed response items. As mentioned earlier, this improvement should be interpreted with caution given the low number of responses the difficulty value is derived from.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to analyze the extent to which assessment instruments designed and implemented at the grade 4 level in primary schools may be implemented for adult learners at the equivalent ABET level (Level 2) in order to monitor and evaluate adults reading literacy.

As mentioned in earlier sections, this pre pilot study was merely conducted to gauge how a small sample of adult learners would react to and perform on the PIRLS instruments. Given

the small sample of adult learners that were tested, the above mentioned results of their performance on the selected reading passages were restricted to a discussion of item difficulties. Although basic in nature, these item difficulties provide a preliminary indication of how adults might perform on the PIRLS instruments.

When looking at the information provided in table 1 to 4, it becomes clear that the adults in this small sample found the items to the passages very difficult. Very few learners were able to provide correct answers on any of the given items, regardless of whether items were multiple choice type questions or constructed response items. A high non-response rate also applies to this sample, where many booklets returned without the learners having even attempted to answer the questions. In fact, of the 30 learners, only 2 learners managed to complete the questions to both reading passages.

Some observations were made during and after the assessment that deserve mention here. Firstly, adult learners seemed to ask the same type of questions than those asked by the grade 4 learners. For example, during data collection for the main study, grade 4 learners often put up their hands and asked assistance in answering the multiple choice questions. So too did they often inquire as to whether they were supposed to answer the questions after reading the passage. Another frequent occurrence was found where learners wrote 'answers' in the spaces provided in the example questions – even when emphasizing that those only served as examples, some learners still completed these questions. These are but few examples of what frequently occurred among the grade 4 learners. These types of questions however also occurred in exactly the same fashion among the adult learners in this sample. Of note was also the fact that adult learners (to a greater extent than the grade 4 learners) didn't seem to understand that the questions asked after each passage pertained to that reading passage. Purely based on observations made during the assessment it became clear that the adult learners did not seem to be familiar with comprehension tests, despite assurance given by their teacher that these learners have in fact been exposed to it. It also seemed that adult learners were less comfortable to work on their own and less familiar with completing a task independently of others.

Upon completion of the assessment, learners were asked about their experiences of the test. Interestingly, the majority of learners indicated that they found the test rather easy and enjoyable and most of them expected to do well. There seems to be somewhat of a gap in terms of how learners perceive their own performance to what it actually is. Learners were also asked whether they would have preferred the test to be in their mother tongue (in this case some Zulu and Tsonga learners were present). Unanimously, learners indicated their preference for English, saying that it is the language of business, which they should get to know.

In light of the results that seem to indicate that adult learners find the PIRLS passages very difficult to complete, the way forward for this project lies in designing an assessment instrument where aspects of basic and functional literacy are included as well. In assessing basic and functional aspects of literacy, one might be able to gain more insights in terms of gauging where adult learners are and how well they can read. The results of such an

instrument might prove to be more meaningful instead of exposing adult learners only to the PIRLS passages, which they do not seem able to do.

For the remainder of the year, a pilot project using a larger sample of adult learners is planned, using an instrument that would incorporate both items to measure functional and basic literacy as well as selected PIRLS passages. A pilot study would allow for the refinement of the instrument, upon which a full scale, main study could be conducted within 2007.