

# **Understanding the Concept of Functional Literacy by Selected Residents of Lusaka District of Zambia**

by

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## **Abstract**

*This study sought to establish the conceptual understanding of functional literacy by selected residents of Lusaka and how they thought it was applied in the society. The study was guided by four research questions (a) what was the understanding of functional literacy by residents of Lusaka? (b) what role did functional literacy play in a society and how did it improve people's lives? (c) how was functional literacy applied according to residents of Lusaka? and (d) what were the challenges faced by functionally illiterate people according to respondents? This was a qualitative mode of inquiry under post positivism research paradigm. The specific research design used was phenomenological with the constructivist theory. Data was collected through face to face interviews with residents of Lusaka that were randomly selected. Data was analyzed thematically by grouping related information under certain themes. The study revealed that functional literacy is the application of reading and writing skills in people's daily lives such as reading cell phone messages, social media chats, receipts, writing plans, notes, budgets, books, messages on social media and others. Other respondents indicated that it was the ability to translate theory or skills into practice. It was further noted that, functional literacy helped people to be self-sustaining, in return, contributing to social, political and economic development of the country. It was further reported that people that were functionally illiterate had limited access to written information and were prone to certain risks such as eating expired foods. The study recommended that the government and non-governmental organisations should sensitise the people of Lusaka on the concept of functional literacy.*

**Key Words:** functional literacy, reading and writing, literacy, illiteracy, functional illiteracy.

## 1. Introduction

Traditionally, literacy is defined as “the ability to read and write” (UNESCO, 2000:1). However, Sichula and Genis (2019) indicated that there has been a shift from seeing literacy as merely the ability to read and write to uses of literacy in everyday life. This is a 21st century shift which has been inspired by data coming out of research on literacy in communities among people that are labeled as illiterate (Sichula, 2018). It is now clear that there is not one literacy but multiple literacies found in different domains of people’s daily lives (Sichula, 2018). For this reason literacy is used in a much wider and broader sense to refer to multiple literacies with multiple skills and competencies. Among the literacies include ‘information literacy’, ‘financial literacy’, ‘computer literacy’, ‘visual literacy’, ‘media literacy’ and ‘scientific literacy’, among others. The Education Development Centre (2012) adds that, ‘the power of literacy lies not only in the ability to read and write, but rather in an individual’s capacity to put those skills to work in shaping the course of his or her own life’. This statement shows that being literate goes beyond being able to read and write but the application of these skills in order to better one’s life. The application of reading and writing skills in people’s daily lives to operate and function effectively is called functional literacy. Mkandawire (2018: 46) observed that:

*...in a society, literacy can be applied in several ways such as reading a newspaper, medical prescription, bible, receipts from a shopping mall and others. All these are examples on the applications of functional literacy in the society. Writing or reading anything such as sign post, letter, poem and others are also applications of functional literacy.*

This quotation above suggests that the extended application of reading and writing skills in people’s lives is the thrust of functional literacy. Various definitions of function literacy normally impinge on this parameter. For example, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (1997) defines functional literacy as

the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities at home, at work, and in the community to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential. The daily activities that constitute the application of functional literacy include tasks such as reading street signs, reading maps, writing a grocery budget, reading newspapers, reading labels on medicine bottles, reading the bible verses, writing letters, filling in forms, applying for jobs, practicing the language skills verbally and in written form, reading for pleasure and purposive writing.

Sichula (2018) contended that functional literacy is a concept that was introduced by UNESCO in the 1960s. The idea was to make literacy useful as opposed to merely teaching learners how to read and write for the sake of doing so. Similarly, Kasonde and Changala (2019) stated that, functional literacy is when a person has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable them to engage in the activities that will improve their well-being. While there are several definitions of functional literacy by various scholars, this paper perceives functional literacy and its related terms in a manner described in the next paragraph.

Functional literacy is the application of reading and writing skills to manage daily life styles and improve the socioeconomic well-being of an individual. Functional illiteracy refers to reading and writing skills possessed by individuals that are inadequate to manage daily life styles and employment tasks that require literacy skills beyond normative level. Literacy refers to reading and writing abilities in a particular language(s). In light of these related definitions, the paper primarily sought to establish the understanding of functional literacy by selected residents of Lusaka.

### *1.1 Statement of the Problem*

There are various literacy programs introduced in most parts of Zambia with the goal of promoting members of different communities become functionally literate. This is so because in today's society, functional literacy plays a significant role in community development. For instance, Gree, Kay and Steward (2012) noted that functional

literacy is applied in peoples' daily lives in various ways including opening bank accounts. Despite the importance associated with functional literacy, it was not known how the residents of Lusaka understood the concept of functional literacy and the role it plays in their daily lives.

Functional literacy aims at empowering communities with different socioeconomic skills and competencies including reading and writing (UNESCO, 2012). Therefore, being functionally illiterate perpetuates poverty by limiting choices for income generation and also the capacity for individuals and communities to take action and preventive measures against poverty.

### *1.2 Purpose of the study*

The purpose of this study was to establish how the concept of functional literacy was understood by selected residents of Lusaka and how they thought it was useful in terms of its application.

### *1.3 Theoretical Framework*

This paper was guided by the social constructivist theory which support the idea that knowledge is socially constructed by individuals in a society based on their inherent experiences. According to Nkhata et al (2019:106), "the constructivist theory states that humans construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences". Furthermore, people's construction of reality or meaning is influenced by their backgrounds, beliefs, experiences and cognition (Mwanza, 2016). The theory was applied in this study to help in understanding how the residents of Lusaka reconstruct and negotiate the meaning of functional literacy.

### *1.4 Research Questions*

This study sought to address the following research questions;

- (i) What was the understanding of functional literacy by residents of Lusaka?
- (ii) What role did functional literacy play in a society and how did

it improve people's lives?

- (iii) How was functional literacy applied according to residents of Lusaka?
- (iv) What were the challenges faced by functionally illiterate people according to the respondents?

## **2. Literature Review**

The review of literature in this section is arranged in regions starting with Zambian literature, African and the globe.

### *2.1 Zambian Literature on Functional Literacy*

Nawa (2015) conducted a study tagged 'An Evaluation of the Literacy Program at Lusaka Central Prison in Zambia', where she sought to establish whether or not the intended objectives of the programme were being met. The researcher employed qualitative method of data collection with the Context, Input, Process and Product (CIPP) model being a theoretical framework. In her study, Nawa reported that functional literacy was also taught and applicable in prisons because the larger populations in prisons are adults who needed functional literacy skills in order to improve their lives after serving their sentences. Nawa's evaluation method including the theoretical lens was adopted from an earlier evaluation study on the Neganega literacy programme by Mkandawire. In principal, Mkandawire (2012) results resonated well with Nawa's findings. The earlier study reported that reading and writing skills were taught to adults of Neganega so that they can apply the skills in their lives. In other words, the study reported that functional literacy helped adults of Neganega literacy programme in Southern Province of Zambia to sustain themselves. This study culminated into a published book on '*evaluating literacy programmes*' which explains how adult literacy programmes can positively change the lives of members of a society (Mkandawire, 2019a). It is important to note that Nawa's study focused on Lusaka Central Prison, however, the study on which this paper was based was not an evaluation case but focused on how residents of Lusaka understood the concept of functional literacy.

Functional literacy is important and applicable to every individual in society regardless of their status, and not just inmates as Nawa's study reported.

A multiple qualitative case study by Sichula (2018) on the functional adult literacy classes in Mkushi, Kabwe and Kapiri-Mposhi Districts of Central Zambia, explored the attainment of sustainable rural community development through the contributions of functional adult literacy learning. The study established that the functional adult literacy classes were organized and conducted in a formal school-based format. Functional adult literacy practices related to: how the classes were organized, the choice of learning content and pedagogy which was applied to teach in classes. The findings were that all these practices were decontextualized from the learning environment. Although some facilitators attempted to use local examples, this was inadequate evidence to merit support for situated practices. They were simply absent from all the classes in the research sites. In addition, there was a dominant feeling of dissatisfaction among the adult learners with regard to the relevance of what they were learning in class. Therefore, some of the adult learners challenged and doubted the perceived benefits of literacy such as literacy leads to 'improved well-being' and 'good health' of the people. They contended that they had not witnessed these benefits despite attending literacy classes for some years. The study also found a disjuncture between what was happening in adult literacy classes and the possibility of attaining sustainable rural community development in the selected research sites. While Sichula's study was conducted in three districts which are Mkushi, Kabwe and Kapiri Mposhi, the current study was based on Lusaka district, and a different population from Sichula's study. Sichula (2018) exposed that the learners of the functional adult literacy classes were dissatisfied with what they were learning, implying that they did not feel that, being functionally literate benefited them in any way. In contrast, the current study did not just get views from the residents of Lusaka on their understanding of functional literacy, but also on how being functionally literate benefits them.

A study by Kasonde and Changala (2019) reported that functional literacy programmes available in Lusaka district included skills development, educational literacy, financial literacy and survival skills. The study further revealed that the participation of women in functional literacy related programmes was generally low due to lack of awareness. The research objectives of the study were to identify functional literacy programmes for women entrepreneurs available in Lusaka district; determine how women entrepreneurs participated in functional literacy programmes; establish functional literacy - related challenges faced by women entrepreneurs; propose strategies aimed at addressing functional literacy - related challenges faced by women entrepreneurs. The study was guided by the conscientisation theoretical framework by Paulo Freire. The study recommended that the government, through the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services, should incorporate functional literacy in their plans and set up more literacy classes in communities. While Kasonde and Changala's study was carried out in the same catchment area as the substantive study, the focus of the two studies was different. The current study on which this article is centered sought to establish the understanding of functional literacy by residents of Lusaka district.

It is important to note that most adult or functional adult literacy programmes in Zambia have been diversified in terms of syllabus coverage. Most of them teach conventional reading and writing skills in addition to social life skills or entrepreneurship skills. All these adult skills are centered on survival and the participants can take care of themselves in the absence of formal employment.

## *2.2 Literature in Africa on Functional Literacy*

A study by Olaniyi (2015) on 'Basic and Functional Literacy and the Attainment of Vision 2020 in Nigeria', describes functional literacy as the capability of an individual in reading and writing at a level proficient enough to conduct one's daily affairs. The argument in this statement is that one is only considered to be functionally literate if they have passed the level of basic literacy in terms of

reading and writing. Meaning that, after acquiring the skills of reading and writing, being functionally literate involves the use of these skills to live and work in society. However, this study did not just focus on people's views of functional literacy in terms of an individual's ability to possess the reading and writing skills that are adequate to manage daily living and employment tasks, but rather, it encompassed other skills one possesses which qualifies one to be literate and the proficient use of those skills. For instance, farming, businesses, trade skills, such as carpentry and others. These were supported Mkandawire and Tambulukani (2017) who stated that adult literacy programmes should just be centered on reading and writing but focus on other life skills for the survival of adult participants.

According to another study by Kashindo (1994) on 'The Functional Literacy Program in Malawi: Educating Adults for Improved Standards of Living', the author indicated that the functional literacy programs in Malawi was for adults who were not able to acquire literacy and numeracy skills in the formal school system and were now given the opportunity to do so in a system of non-formal education. Kashindo (1994) further added that as those adults acquired reading, writing and numerical skills, they also acquired information that was usable in their efforts to improve their standard of living. To begin with, this study was done in Malawi, which is a different setting from Zambia, and this study focused on those adults who had no opportunity to acquire formal education in order to be functionally literate in society. In contrast, this study, did not only get views from those who had no formal education and acquired functional literacy through some adult literacy program, but rather it also included those who are functionally literate as a result of the formal education they acquired when they were young.

Another study by Nuwagaba (2006) which focused on 'Adult Learners' Perceptions of Functional Adult Literacy Provision in Six Centers in Kampala City of Uganda' indicated in its findings that the adult functional programs are relevant as it improves learners' standards of living in urban areas and can help enable learners to live



as useful citizens in their communities. Findings of this study also suggested that learners of these adult functional literacy programs felt that programs were addressing their needs and the reason given by many was that the literacy skills and general knowledge acquired helped them operate in the urban environment. This study analyzed adult learners' perceptions of functional adult literacy provision in six centers in Kampala city of Uganda. Specifically, what was analyzed was adult learners' perceptions of what motivates adults to enroll; their views on the appropriateness of the providers' strategies, approaches, methods and materials used; the venues, facilities, equipment, quantity and quality of facilitators; the extent to which the programs addressed the adult learners' needs and the use of the knowledge and skills by those who completed the functional adult literacy programs. Unlike this study by Nuwagaba, what the current study analyzed were the views of residents of Lusaka on their understanding on functional literacy and not on adult functional literacy programs. In addition, the catchment area of this study is Uganda, particularly Kampala city while the current study was conducted in Zambia, particularly in Lusaka. Also, while this study used Interviews, observation and focus group discussions to collect primary data, in the current study, only interviews were used, hence the results could not be equal.

While fundamental education is concerned with the teaching of only reading, writing (Mwansa, 2017), and arithmetic, functional literacy goes beyond. Functional literacy which has become topical in several parts of the world is derived from the word "function" which has several meanings in both social and scientific usage. Addo-Adeku (1992) has defined functional literacy as a built-in mechanism which uses the participating techniques in dealing with identifiable groups. Such groups would need the skills of reading, writing and reckoning to enable them to perform effectively in their general life style. By this definition a functionally literate person should be able to take part in all social and cultural activities, making use of his/her literacy.

The MOE Ghana (1992) recognized the contribution of

functional literacy as having to do with learning to read and write about the activities we everyday engage in our lives, problems and needs. Functional literacy is therefore based on the learner's problems, needs, interests and aspirations with the hope of finding solutions to them. Functional literacy enables learners to share information and new ideas. It also helps in the planning of activities within the learners' localities.

### *2.3 Global Literature on Functional Literacy*

A study on 'Functional Literacy: North-South Perspectives' by Ouane (1992:68) reported that "the notions of functional literacy and illiteracy stem from the analysis of the meaning of literacy use and its effects on individuals in their inter-actions in the physical and social milieu". The author further observes that, functional literacy is discussed in thresholds to refer to the levels at which they can be interpreted. Ouane had this to say:

*... the threshold and limit of functional literacy and illiteracy can depend on the level of development of the country concerned, on the complexity of its economy, social and civil environment, of its technical infrastructure, and its administrative machinery on the daily living conditions, (Ouane, 1992:73).*

While the author above labored much on the definition and contextual perspectives of functional literacy, this article focused on the local people's understanding and interpretation of the concept of functional literacy in Lusaka district of Zambia.

Hagar (1992) has stressed that functional literacy aims to promote a holistic approach to development with man being at the center. Freire (1992) also noted that functional literacy should create the awareness of the living conditions of learners and, therefore, should lead to solving common problems facing learners.

The United States Government (as cited in UNESCO, 1983)

defined functional literacy as possession of the essential knowledge and skills that enables an individual to function in his/her environment at home, in the community and in the work place. Functional literacy is therefore the difference between an individual's current level of literacy and the level demanded by his environment. Functional literacy can, therefore, be said to be centered on the needs of the learner and the skills that the learner may need in the running of his/her daily life routine.

A study carried out by Maud (2013) discovered several benefits that people who understood functional literacy or who were functionally literate attained. To begin with Functional Literacy helps participants to improve their health conditions as new health knowledge acquired through functional literacy programs becomes applicable which could have a higher impact on people's access to health related knowledge. Participants gain new knowledge about the causes of diseases, how to prevent them and how to treat them. This encourages functional literacy participants to change their health and hygiene behaviors, showing that they apply their new knowledge and understanding of health issues. As a result, most of the functional literacy participants and their household members report less sickness caused by malaria and diarrhea in comparison to before enrolling in functional literacy courses.

Additionally, a few participants showed that functional literacy can also enhance the effects of health talks and oral advice given in health centers and sometimes on the radio, as people start to take them more seriously. Indeed, functional literacy can increase people's access to health knowledge by reading books, articles or posters in health centers such as hospitals. With a little sensitization on health matters (Chileshe, 2018), citizens can be aware of the role functional literacy plays in their lives. It could also help people to know their rights concerning their health and encourage them to demand these rights.

A study carried out by Bakirdjian (2013) discovered that after introducing functional literacy classes in a specific community in Liberia members of the community became more aware of their

environment, this study was conducted in eight communities in the countries of Montserrat, Margibi and Bong, among which four are remote communities, the study aimed at discovering what impact functional adult literacy (FAL) classes had on the livelihoods of these participants.

### **3. Method**

This section explains the details of the research design, sampling, data collection and analysis method applied in this research study.

#### *3.1 Research design*

This study used a qualitative mode of inquiry of post positivism (Cresswell, 1994). The specific research design used was phenomenological. Groenewald (2004) stated that the phenomenology research design acknowledges the presupposition of respondents and researchers in the process of knowledge generation. Mouton and Marais (1990 :12) stated that individual researchers “hold explicit beliefs” about their research that partly influences the design of the study. Furthermore, Hycner (1999: 156) stated that “the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including the type of participants.” The phenomenon being studied in this paper was functional literacy and the study aimed at collecting information regarding the perspectives of research participants about the phenomenon in the target area.

#### *3.2 Population and Sampling*

The population of the study was all residents of Lusaka District aged 16 years and above. The year 16 was picked because it was a legal age for mature persons in Zambia who would be expected to know something about literacy or functional literacy. Lusaka was the catchment area because it is the capital city with a huge number of literate people. The sample size was 46 respondents picked using simple random sampling. Hayes (2019) noted that a simple random

sample is a subset of a statistical population in which each member of the subset has an equal probability of being chosen. Adults were randomly selected from public places and residential areas. Public places such as malls, markets and some were picked from their homes.

### *3.3 Data collection method and Analysis*

Data was collected through face to face interviews with respondents and it was analyzed thematically with the help of the social constructivist theory. The themes generated resonated with the research questions and these have been discussed in the findings and discussion section of this article.

### *3.4 Ethical Consideration*

Research participants were politely requested to take part in the study through face to face interviews and they were informed that taking part was voluntary. Some respondents refused to take part while others accepted. Those that accepted were informed that they were free to withdraw or stop the interview at any time for any reason. Respondents were informed that their names or identities would not be revealed to anyone and that real names of participants would be replaced by fake or pseudo names for anonymity purposes in public dissemination of the research. They were also informed about possible risks and benefits for taking part in the study.

## **4. The findings and Discussion**

The findings in this section are presented under the themes associated with the research questions and these included the respondents understanding of functional literacy, the role of functional literacy, and pitfalls of being functionally illiterate.

### *4.1 Understanding of functional literacy*

Respondents were asked to state or explain what functional literacy was or what it meant, and there were several responses obtained. Most

responses in this section, have been associated with respondent's pseudo names for anonymity purposes as stated in the ethical section of this article.

One of the respondents called Nyuma reported that “*functional literacy has to do with those people like the president, or those educated big people that make a lot of money...*”. Nyuma's understanding of function literacy was construed using the perspective of riches and people associated with it. She did not think that poor people can be functionally literate because of their low status. Although her response was bias and misinformed, she reconstructed the meaning of a phenomena that she did not understand and this practice is at the center of the social constructivist theory used in this study (Nkhata et al, 2019). Other respondents such as Chela, Zulu, and Chama responded in a slight different way. Their reconstruction and interpretation of functional literacy reflects their personal philosophies on the phenomena. For instance, the following responses were recoded:

**Chela:** *Functional literacy is when you are functioning well when working so that you don't make mistakes and loss a job.*

**Zulu:** *... it is when people want to start a business and they ask their relative and their friends to borrow them that money. And sometimes these people are very selfish people and you know, .... They want us to die with hunger.*

**Chama:** *We learnt about functional literacy, is it where you read on medicine writings before drinking or food before you eat it”? uuuuh yah ... it is when you read something, i think.*

The understanding of functional literacy by Chela and Zulu are reconstructed social identities from their experiences. Chela thought that functioning well at a work place so that one does not lose employment is functional literacy. While Chela is not explicit with definitive associations of the phenomena, he has a point. Functional literacy improves work performance according to (Ouane 1992) and it provide the ability to translate theory into practice. Zulu's response

is not definitive either. Mere request for money or resources is not the lexical meaning or interpretation of the phenomena. Chama's response was supported by Hoggart (1998), and Mkandawire (2018) who propagated that the use of reading and writing skills in any manner is a definitive application of functional literacy. Other participants pseudo named Chembe, Nathan, Phiri, and Pezo reported that functional literacy was associated with the knowledge imparted in someone and that knowledge bears fruits in that person which is identified through behavioral change.

**Mutinta** stated that "*functional literacy was the ability to read and write as in one being able to read and write text messages on a phone*". This implies that being functionally literate means being able to follow instructions on any material for example prescribed medicine by the doctor. Mutinta's response was in agreement with Chama's earlier statement and further supported by **Rhoda** who indicated that;

*functional literacy is an idea that brings future or progressive thoughts together. It refers to the knowledge that students acquire in reading text books or materials and when this is applied appropriately, it becomes functional in their lives.*

**Mateyo** reported that "*functional literacy refers to one being effective in the area of specialization*". This entails that someone who is an expert or has authority in a certain field is functionally literate. These findings are in agreement with Mkandawire and Tambulukani (2017), and Olaniyi (2015) whose findings indicated that functional literacy is the capability of an individual in reading and writing at a level proficient enough to conduct one's daily affairs. This response is similar to **Daliso**'s response who indicated that "*functional literacy is the knowledge one acquires for the sake of communication*". This means that it is a skill required by individuals to operate in the society (Mkandawire, 2019a). It was also noted that functional literacy was more like knowing how to operate computers because if one knows then it means skills are

being applied accordingly, and some of these findings are supported by Smith (1977). Additionally in the world of business, functionally literate persons can communicate easily with their clients, also if their clients were functionally literate communication is much easier because the clients would not take long to understand a concept presented to them.

It was also observed that some individuals could not understand the meaning of functional literacy, as some had clearly stated that they had little or no knowledge about the said notion. For instance, Joseph, Betina, Kenny, Musonda, Mbewe and others stated that they had never heard of such a term and therefore, they did not know what it meant. Some of the residents had misconceptions of the term literacy and functional literacy in general and only 8 out of the target population sample attempted to define and explain what functional literacy was in right way. This implies that the concept of functional literacy is poorly understood by several residents of Lusaka and this might be due to lack of education or sensitization on this concept. This also denotes that programmes meant to sensitize people on the meaning of functional literacy must be advocated or introduced. As Manchishi and Mwanza (2018) and Kombe and Mwanza (2019) put it, it is not possible for people to be knowledgeable if they have not been trained.

Some respondents stated that functional literacy goes beyond reading and writing skills. They noted that it include other skills such as social life skills in addition to reading and writing application. These reflections were supported by Mkandawire, Simooya, and Monde (2019) who defined literacy in two aspects, the first one being conventional literacy that has to do with reading and writing skills while the second one being a body of knowledge and skills in a field. This was further echoed by UNESCO (2008) who stated that functional literacy is a facility that facilitate learning, or the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, beliefs and habits or being learned. Because of this, it was concluded that respondents thought that someone literate is the same as someone who has been to school the required or standard time but contrary to their conceptions it is



quite possible for someone who has not been to school to be literate, especially if literacy is considered in its unconventional aspect (Barton, 2007).

When asked what they understood by functional literacy, some respondents said; *“I have never heard of such a term in my entire life but i head about literacy itself, not the other one”*. Despite their ignorance about this concept, they attempted to answer the question. For instance, the definitions of functional literacy by Chela and Zulu, came out of ignorance of the phenomena. As mentioned earlier, this was because they lacked exposure through education to have the correct conceptualization of functional literacy. The implication arising from this misunderstanding is that even if the people were functionally literate, they would not recognize their own literacies. This is similar to findings by Mwanza (2017) where some people who stated that they did not know the meaning of eclecticism were actually eclectic in their teaching (see also Mwanza, 2016 and Mwanza, 2017). Thus, it is possible to be functionally literate from a practical point of view while lacking the declarative knowledge of the practice.

#### *4.2 The role of functional literacy and how it improves people’s lives in a society*

The respondents had different views on the role that functional literacy plays in a society. For example, some residents such as **Nadia** indicated that;

*the broader meaning of functional literacy which include other life skills and entrepreneurship skills or practices helped people to be self-sustaining in the sense that, it helped them to feed and fend for themselves than depending on others or government.*

Nadia’s response suggests the extended interpretation of functional literacy helped people to be more active with survival and business skills learnt from literacy programmes such as reading and writing, tailoring, food production, peanut butter making, and other skills. In return, they would be self-sustaining citizens and these observations

were in line with Nuwagaba (2006), Kashindo (1994), and Olaniyi (2015). These findings were further supported by Kasonde and Changala (2019) who observed that functional literacy programmes available in Lusaka district included skills development, educational literacy, financial literacy and survival skills. Therefore, the extended meaning of functional literacy as exhibited in adult literacy programmes in Lusaka plays a critical role in helping people's livelihoods on a daily basis.

The findings further revealed that the conventional functional literacy plays an important role in enabling people with good health as a result of the things they decide to do with their reading and writing skills. For instance, Mutinta noted that "I think it is important because people can read medicine labels, shopping mall receipts, make budgets, plan in future, and read much written information about various issues in the society. All these benefits are absent in illiterate people". Functional literacy can also help people take care of themselves well as they can read more about health matters. A healthy body is key to the productivity of the economy of the country. This also entails that functional literacy makes significant contributions to social, economic and political development of the individual and society at large, these findings are supported by Green (1977), Dorvlo (1992) and Okonjo (1986).

The data further reported that the role of functional literacy is to empower people to operate effectively in a society. For instance one respondent stated that functional literacy increases one's ability to record the names of debtors and creditors, the ability to use the calculator to calculate profit and loss of trading activities, and transact business at the bank quickly. For instance some research review reported that functional literacy has helped people to improve their arithmetic, through knowing simple calculations so as to calculate change and not be cheated, knowing how to calculate profit, and to a lesser extent, increasing people's attractiveness of their business and enabling people to make their business more cost-effective.

The data presented, also observed that functional literacy plays a role in changing people's perception because when they

read certain information, they will be able to disseminate that information, understand it, and then put it into practice, this also involves reading instructions on posters and road signs. It was also noted that functional literacy plays the role of transforming someone from being illiterate into being literate or, this would further mean functional literacy helps literate societies communicate in different ways. One has to be literate enough to find information from the internet and apply it in places of work, school and other research organizations. These findings also reported and reinforced by Arko and Addison (2009), and Nawa (2015).

In reference to the findings presented previously, it was also reported that functional literacy plays a role of uniting the world as a global village. This suggests that for the world to be well organized the way it is, having continents and countries with people from different cultures understanding each other, means our literacy is functional because in every land there are rules and regulations to be followed by reading them such as those on human rights, cultural universals, myths and taboos about life styles (Mkandawire, Simooya, and Monde, 2019). If one's literacy is functional one avoids acts that violate the rights of others. Furthermore, another respondents said that being functionally illiterate or even illiterate in general could lead to massive violation of human rights and people can easily be taken advantage of for ignorance. Although human rights are applicable to all citizens, many of them cannot assert their rights due to ignorance or illiteracy, it is for this reason that policemen can intrude a person's home and search it without a search warrant or have people incarcerated without proof or solid evidence.

Functional literacy helps in maintaining peace and harmony by creating a system with expectations that every individual should know with their roles, duties and even their limits towards each other. Tedy reported that "functional literacy benefit members of the community by educating and raising sensitizations about various problems or business opportunities in a society". This imply that when a business entity is established, a lot of members of society benefit from resources generated within themselves. Functional

literacy enables one to have self-confidence thereby contributing to society positively. These findings are in agreement with Edwards and Potts (2008), and Lankshear (1993).

The study also revealed that functional literacy helps one to be an analytical person, meaning that functional literacy helps an individual to express his or her opinions on paper and read about other people's information. One of the respondents had the following to say;

*... its obvious. You see, one application of functional literacy is seen on members of a whatsapp group who write and read other people's posts several times. These members engage in serious dialogue that make them read, reflect, decide and act again and again for social pleasure, edutainment, information sharing, giving updates on each other and other issues.*

The data above suggests that functional literacy increases one's critical consciousness as well as ensuring or making an individual to be an analytical reader and thinker. It also helps one to be knowledgeable as he or she can gain knowledge from reading other materials, actually these findings seem to agree with Freire's pedagogy in the notion of critical literacy which asserts that functional literacy involves interpreting, reflecting, interrogating, theorizing, probing and questioning (Freire, 1970). These findings are supplemented by the United Nations Educational Scientific and cultural Organization reports of (2017), and Freire and Macedo (1987).

While some residents interviewed exhibited awareness about functional literacy, it is also evident that some sections of society are either functionally illiterate or do not know anything about the said concept. As it was observed that other few respondents had clearly stated that the notion of functional literacy was alien to them, which implied that most residents of Lusaka have little knowledge about functional literacy.

The respondents added that functional literacy helped them comply with basic rules, adding that, them being able to read understand and interpret these rules helped them do things quicker and with much precision. They also added that it helped them adhere

to warning signs and posts, that if there was a warning telling them not to do something or go somewhere then they will adhere to it because they used their functional literacy. Two other respondents added that functional literacy helps them procure the right equipment for their client because their field of work required one to be functionally literate adding that clients would sometimes just write a quotation of what they'd like or a brief description and that it was up to the respondents to read and interpret what that meant.

The respondents were asked if they thought functional literacy was important and why they thought it was important. It became apparent that after the respondents understood the concept of functional literacy and the realization that functional literacy was not a strange entity but a familiar one. They added that functional literacy was important because it helped them function appropriately and in the confinements of their community.

One respondent added that it helped him refrain from buying products that contained harmful products for his customers, he continued saying that if he was not functionally literate he would continue to buy those products and not only put his customer's health at risk but also lose his loyal customers due to the fact that he was not complying with health hazard warnings. Another respondent added that functional literacy was important to her because it helped her make her budgets for her business and that it helped her go through stock taking and book keeping and going through her monthly records adding that if there were any mistakes or errors she would know and address them.

Another respondent added that in as much as prior knowledge was of high importance in any specific field, there was a need for people to go above and beyond in research, she added that if a farmer for example had prior knowledge about farming and used those skills all their life but due to the fact that they are not functionally literate, there would be certain information that would be helpful to their farming that they would be missing out. That way, the farmer is limiting their ability to succeed beyond the average; this is in line with the findings of Coombs (1985) who emphasized that functional

literacy liberates the poor and educated people everywhere from ignorance, diseases and hunger. And moreover, the spread of functional literacy not only improves the lot of the needy, but works wonders for each nation's overall social and economic development.

The respondents in this study were all hinting towards what social and economic success that functional literacy brings to the table. They emphasized on the fact that they were successful in the community because of the use of functional literacy, that as compared to a person who is not functionally literate they have an upper hand.

#### *4.3 Application of Functional Literacy in a Society*

When asked how functional literacy was applied in a society, Mutinta noted that “whenever someone think of writing or reading anything, they are applying functional literacy”. Furthermore, Chama indicated that:

In a modern world, we apply functional literacy on a daily basis because, when we wake up in the morning, we check our phones for time, messages, date, missed calls and who called. We read on content of food products and labells before eating, and then, we pick newspapers, magazines, flyers to read. We plan for what to do a day, check buss information, fill in forms and sometimes end our days by reading and writing down what has not been achieved today and add it to tomorrows work. All these are applications of functional literacy.

**Chota** stated that “*functional literacy is used when people communicate on social media and in printed materials*”. The application of literacy, as the ability to communicate in print, is a very important aspect of learning worldwide (Mpofu, 1995). On the same issue, Bhola (1984) observed that literacy is the acquisition of the knowledge and skills in reading and writing that enables a person to engage himself effectively in any activity. Reading and writing of letters, signing of cheques, observing danger warnings in the street and at work places and reading of books are some of the activities identified under functional literacy (Bhola, 1984).

Davidson (1990), added that, functional literacy in terms of

its contribution to society is necessary for the individual to enable him to be very effective in economic, socio-political, educational, cultural and environmental issues. Looking at literacy differently, since anyone who has not been given the opportunity to learn to read and write cannot lead a full individual and social life. Much of the legal and binding information is written and to understand it, one needs functional literacy.

While the use of functional literacy involve extension or use of reading abilities, the Ministry of Education (1992) perceived functional literacy in terms of community development applications. The Ministry stated that, a person is literate when he acquires knowledge and skills, which enable him to engage in all those activities for which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community and those attainments in reading writing and arithmetic, which make it possible for him to continue to use these skills towards his active participation in the life of his community.

#### *4.4 Challenges faced by functionally illiterate people in a Society*

When respondents were asked about the challenges faced by functionally illiterate people, two of them indicated that

*Illiterate people have limitations in accessing information in print or written form because they cannot read them. In addition, such people may be at high risk in taking certain medicines and food products without reading what is written on them.*

One respondent stated that functional illiteracy can cause major employment hurdles. For instance, someone may be up for promotion or might even seek employment but because they are not functionally literate it draws their careers back, adding that some people cannot even write an application letter. Another added that there is a lot of discrimination from people who are literate to people who are not literate, adding that in hospitals

patients who are unable to read and write are not given attention and not communicated to adequately, therefore disadvantaging patients because they may not always understand what is written for them such as diagnoses and prescriptions or review slips.

According to the Irish times (2002) a patient suffered from an adverse reaction due to a combination of paracetamol drug and another medicine due to their inability to read the warning that advised them not to combine the two drugs. While this might have been a case of aliteracy, but failure or being lazy to read on medicines or foods being consumed can be risky. An even greater danger comes from the embarrassment which can prevent an illiterate person from seeking the treatment they need, people who cannot read and write learn to conceal the fact that they cannot do so and unfortunately concealing this fact can put them off or stop them from going to the hospital or asking for help.

One of the respondents added that being functionally illiterate can impact ones social life negatively. She added that people who are illiterate find it hard to blend in social groups where the majority are literate and are able to use those literacy skills to go through their day to day activities. In other words, illiterate people are excluded from social media or any written or print communications because they functionally illiterate. Gunn (2018) reported that people struggling with literacy skills are more likely to be poor, lack education, and miss out on opportunities to participate fully in society and the workforce. They normally possess several attitudes that hinder them to get familiarity with basic necessities to literacy (Matafwali, and Bus, 2013).

Illiteracy often passes from generation to generation, regardless of whether or not children attend school. Several children around the world attend school but do not learn to read, write, or calculate. When they become adults, they may experience frustrations on literacy related matters. When they have children of their own, they tend to communicate orally with negative feelings towards conventional literacy and schooling for



their children, and this perpetuate an intergenerational cycle of illiteracy.

The connection between parental education and the literacy of their children has been examined in numerous studies. Research by the U.S. Department of Education found that children who can be read to at least three times a week by a family member are almost twice as likely to score in the top 25% in reading compared to children who are read to less than three times a week.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The conclusion and recommendations of this study are with respect to the research questions as presented in section 1.4 above in this paper. The specific details of the conclusion and recommendations have been presented in parts below.

### *5.1 Conclusion*

The residents of Lusaka perceived functional literacy and its use in the society differently. The responses obtained on the first research question indicated that, some residents understood the concept of functional literacy and how it was applied in the society while others had misconceptions about it. Some provided the conventional meaning of the concept that included application of reading and writing skills in their lives while others had their own constructed meanings of functional literacy as discussed in the constructivist theory which was used as a theoretical lens for the study. On the second and third research questions, it was reported that functional literacy was used on a daily basis to improve people's lives. Functional literacy is applied in people's daily lives to manage themselves and cope up with the society in areas such as reading receipts, messages, letters, farm seeds and produce labels, reading books, newspaper, magazines, social media messages, and anything written both electronic and in print. Functional literacy is also applied whenever people write something such as text messages, social media post, notes, articles,

books, news items, labels in a bar or wherever the writings are found. This means that functional literacy plays an important role in the society. In response to the last research question, it was noted that functional illiteracy affected some people negatively on a daily basis as such people have limited access to written information, cannot communicate effectively in writing and were prone to certain risks such as consuming expired drugs, foods, and heading to dangerous places with warnings in written modes. The article further reported that functional literacy helps people in adhering to the rules that govern their communities. Functional literacy played a role of changing people's perception because when they read certain information, they understand and know how to behave in a society.

The study further reported in the fourth research question that, being functionally illiterate may endanger one's wellbeing, their families, as well as the communities where they live. The nature of endangerments are associated with their civic responsibilities, social, economic and political in nature. Respondents reported that not being able to read or write or apply simple arithmetic in social economic and political environments would mean more theft, political exploitation, human rights infringement and even death where health issues are concerned.

### *5.2 Recommendations*

The study made the following recommendations:

- a). The same or similar study can be replicated in other districts of Zambia by researchers to establish if they would get similar or the same results.
- d). Researchers in literacy related fields can scale up this study to a country as a whole to establish how people understand functional literacy.

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