

Zaheera Soomar, May 2021

Anglo American

[Numeracy: The key to unlocking a healthy, productive life \(bizcommunity.com\)](https://bizcommunity.com)

Numeracy: The key to unlocking a healthy, productive life

“Good numeracy is the best protection against unemployment, low wages and poor health.”

Andreas Schleicher, the director for Education and Skills at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris, said this back in 2013. Eight years later, as we prepare to mark National Numeracy Day, his words are truer than ever - but here in South Africa, the numeracy imperative is even greater.

Fact is, numeracy and literacy aren't just necessary to get a job or earn a salary. They're critical for the ability of our young people to participate in the world around us. Numeracy is a key factor in being able to participate in the economy and our broader society. Without numeracy, people are generally excluded from the very activities which would allow them to forge a meaningful future.

South Africa's low quality of early learning and education means millions of our youth enter the world with low levels of literacy and numeracy that their education and economic participation is negatively affected for the rest of their lives.

Research suggests that for every additional level of education, a learner gains a 5% increase in numeracy skills. In other words, there's a direct correlation between the level of schooling and the level of numeracy. There are also clear links between numeracy and social issues like employment and poverty levels: the better your numeracy, the more likely you are to get a job.

Adults with poor numeracy are more likely to live in disadvantaged housing or even experience homelessness. Poor numeracy is also bad for your physical health: low adult numeracy in both men and women is associated with worsening health limiting conditions. In older adults, across a broad set of health indicators, low basic skills were associated with poorer health outcomes. People with poor numeracy are more likely to be depressed than those with higher skills.

So what can we do about it? When addressing the issue, it's important to realise that numeracy skills aren't the same as maths skills. So often people tend to confuse the two. Numeracy is all about the usage and application of maths skills. Whether working out how much money you have left until the end of the month or simply going shopping. We use numeracy every day, in every area of our lives. Its also important to note that you don't need matric maths to have acceptable numeracy skills.

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Improving skills

One of the biggest factors in improving numeracy skills in schools is to focus on the role of teachers. The national education programme being run by my company, Anglo American, in partnership with the Department of Basic Education, spends a lot of time working with teachers to improve both their content knowledge of numeracy and their pedagogy – that is, the way they teach numeracy.

Problem is, numeracy and maths often get taught as a rote learning subject in schools. Learners are taught to say their multiplication tables and learn basic calculations by heart. This is often because teachers themselves lack the necessary application knowledge and teaching skills.

Our education plan focuses on providing basic numeracy support from ECD to Grades 1-3 and then more targeted maths support from Grades 4-7 and Grades 8-12. For Grade 1-3 teachers, it even means having the resources such as number charts, abacus and counting block that can be used to generate classroom activities and keep the children engaged. Giving teachers help with lesson plans can result in better learning – while factoring in the base knowledge of the educator.

The real key to the sustainability of the programme, though, is to ensure teacher development and improvement over time. By running ongoing teacher assessments throughout the lifetime of the programme, they are able to understand what their results mean, and how to use their own assessments to improve their teaching.

Right now, South Africa is in the midst of a numeracy and literacy crisis – and this comes with significant economic and social costs, especially for those least advantaged in our society. As we rebuild our workforce, and create the jobs our economy so desperately needs, addressing the issue of poor numeracy will play a key role in job creation and social upliftment. It's an issue we ignore at our peril.