

Functionally illiterate adults and their confidantes – results of the qualitative study

Wibke Riekmann

Abstract

Networks are part of our daily lives. We use networks for professional development, are active digitally in social networks and are part of friendship networks that provide us with information about subjects such as dealing with childhood illnesses, filing tax returns or further education. In addition to information, we also receive practical support from these networks. We generally consider very carefully which people we ask for different types of support and differentiate between professional and personal sources of support. People with poor reading and writing skills also have their own networks, which they turn to in order to manage everyday reading and writing tasks. The difference from the previous examples is that, reading and writing is a skill that every adult is expected to master. Any request for support also begs the question: how will the other person react? When talking about networks of people with poor reading and writing skills, issues such as dependency, shame and insecurity also play a role. Whether these issues are dominant and always present is open to research.

This article is based on the *Studie zum mitwissenden Umfeld funktionaler Analphabetinnen und Analphabeten* ‘Study of functionally illiterate adults and their confidantes’ (referred to as the study in the following)¹, whereby this article describes the evaluation of the results of the qualitative part of the study and is therefore connected to the article by Klaus Buddeberg in this publication.

1. Aims of the study

The study aims to find out more about the networks of functionally illiterate adults and the support structures provided by the people in them. Sensitive divides, such as the fine line between support and dependency are addressed.

As already announced in the title, the people who provide this network are referred to as confidantes. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a confidante as, “A person with whom one shares a secret or private matter, trusting them not to repeat it to others.” (Oxford 2015). The term points at secrecy and taboos, and feelings of shame at not being able to read and write. However the term used here, is not intended to imply any notion of “wrongfulness”. This is why the more neutral terms “support network” and “trusted person” are also used.

One aim of the study is to find out how to reach people with poor reading and writing skills. Reaching target groups is the most pressing problem facing educators. Research up to this point has primarily focused on participants in literacy courses, however this research represents a change in perspective and explores a completely new sample group.

The key empirical research questions are as follows:

- Who are the confidantes? What is their relationship with the person affected?²

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² The term “affected person” or “affected people” only applies to people with poor reading and writing skills in German. This term is not suitable for use in the field, as it has connotations of deficit orientation. However, this article refers explicitly to the group of people with poor reading and writing skills, therefore this group first has to be named in order to be able to describe it.

- Is it possible to characterize different types of confidantes and how could these different types of confidante be addressed?
- How do members of the support network act? What kind of support do they offer?
- Why does the support network take on this role?
- When do the requirements on the support network become too much? When does acting as a confidante become a burden?
- How can acting as a confidante succeed so that people affected can be supported in their learning process?

Responses to the research questions are not just provided by the results of the qualitative study described here, but by using the results of both the quantitative and the qualitative study.

2. Support network and legitimate language

A hypothesis underlying the study is that the support network of adults with poor reading and writing skills enables participation in society and prevents exclusion. Participation in society is enabled as the support network makes available the “legitimate language” (Bourdieu 2005) needed for visits to the authorities, gaining qualifications or writing letters. Exclusion is prevented not through participation in further education, but by the support network compensating for poor literacy and numeracy skills. This might even make participating in further education less likely as people affected have less reason to improve their skills.

The importance of legitimate language from a viewpoint of literacy as a social practice is theorised by the New Literacy Studies. Here, literacy is understood as the ability to read, the ability to write and the ability to produce and extract meaning. Literacy takes on different forms, which do have historical contexts, but is always linked to social and cultural practices (Street 1995; Barton/Hamilton 1998). These different literacy practices do not stand side by side as equals; they have a hierarchical order. The dominant form of literacy is that of academic circles; so-called legitimate language, which serves to represent the particular interests of the upper class.

“Legitimate language has neither the intrinsic power to ensure its own perpetuation nor the power to define how widespread it becomes. Only the process of continuous creation, which occurs through the unceasing struggles between the different authorities who compete within the field of specialized production for the monopolistic power to impose the legitimate mode of expression, can ensure the permanence of legitimate language and of its value. That is, of the recognition accorded to it”. (Bourdieu 1991, p. 58).

Research into multilingualism refers to a similar hierarchy of formal educational language (*Bildungssprache*) and everyday language (*Alltagssprache*). Formal educational language is “the specific function of the register for education, and at the same time, the specific function of education for acquiring the register”. (Gogolin/Lange 2011, p. 108). Consequently there are different uses of written language, which are legitimised differently. However, it cannot be assumed that the different practices are, or could ever be equal, as accepted legitimate language is a result of social inequality.

The support network is needed in order to be able to use the legitimate language. The finding that addressing the support network could be part of an educational strategy, leads to a theoretical research question, which is dealt with in this project: expanding the individual-centred competency discourse. Questions should be asked of its functional-pragmatic and cognitive concentrated form (Klieme/Hartig 2008). The discussion involves a concept of competence with two meanings: a person does not just have competence, they are also

assigned competence. This has consequences: reducing literacy to its functionality also implies that the individuals are assigned sole responsibility for acquiring the missing skills (Street 1995, p. 29). However, in order to meet the requirements posed by legitimate literacy, illiterate adults resort to supporters to compensate for the missing skills. Tasks are not faced alone, but together or someone else accomplishes them. Literacy – according to New Literacy Studies – is therefore not just the ability to read and write, but a construct that is worked on together. Literacy is a social practice that takes place within a community (see Zeuner/Pabst 2011; Barton and Hamilton 1998):

“It is important to shift from a conception of literacy located in individuals to examine ways in which people in groups utilise literacy”. (Barton/Hamilton 1998, p. 12)

If we follow this argument as seeing legitimate literacy as a given, then it follows that as many people as possible should be allowed to acquire this type of literacy. When looked at from this standpoint, it becomes a matter of understanding the competence concept from a critical perspective (see Riekmann/Grotlüschen 2011, p. 65) and involving the support network.

3. The importance of the support network in the literacy discourse

Germany has 7.5 million functionally illiterate adults, of whom some 20,000 to 30,000 attend adult education courses (Rosenblatt 2011). The question of how to reach target groups is a key problem for adult education research (Hippel/Tippelt 2009). Up until now, only the target groups or the education centres have been questioned about this core issue. Confidantes and the networks of people with poor reading and writing skills have been included in recent studies (Wagner/Stenzel 2011), but not addressed directly. The focus has always been on functionally illiterate adults themselves. References to the confidantes of functionally illiterate adults can be found in a number of – mainly biographical – studies. However, it should be pointed out that studies listed here are almost exclusively studies, whose empirical results are based on interviewing participants in literacy courses (with the exception of Nienkemper/Bonna 2010). It is therefore not possible to generalise their results for the whole group of functionally illiterate adults. Although they do provide indications that the support network for people affected plays an important role.

As early as 1982, Oswald and Müller described the “avoidance tactics” (Oswald/Müller 1982, p. 74), used by functionally illiterate adults. The loss of a confidante can leave people affected in a difficult situation, for example when they have to make important decisions. Examples include when people move into a care home, without being able to find out about their rights first (see the same source, p. 76).

In 1997, Egloff worked out the different strategies of functionally illiterate adults employ to hide their situation. Recognised strategies include delegating, avoiding and practising deception (see Egloff 1997). When it comes to delegating, confidantes enter the equation:

“Delegation does not always involve deceiving the person carrying out written tasks on behalf of the person affected. In many cases, a partner, spouse or other trusted person is aware of the difficulties and takes on the written tasks themselves. [...] For the person affected this means that they have to constantly rely on the willingness of the people around them to help, which is a major burden, even when the people delegated are happy to offer their help.” (Egloff 1997, p. 161)

Döbert and Hubertus detail “survival strategies” (Döbert/Hubertus 2000, p. 70), used by adults with low levels of literacy, which include informing someone else of their difficulties with reading and writing.

“Everyone, with no or insufficient literacy skills, has a person they trust, who is aware of the problem and takes over the role of the reader and/or writer. Often this person is their husband or wife, a friend or a relative”. (ibid.)

Similarly to Oswald and Müller, Döbert and Hubertus also mention that the end of support from a trusted person, for example due to separation or death, can become a critical event that causes people to face the problem with their reading and writing and find a course (see Döbert/Hubertus 2000, p. 75).

Wagner and Schneider also talk of the “main strategies: hiding and surviving” (Wagner/Schneider 2008, p. 56) used by functionally illiterate adults and also refer to the sub-category: “I have a confidante in my close personal network” (see the same source, p. 56). Nienkemper and Bonna also describe that the fear of being discovered leads to a subjective strategy³ on the part of illiterate adults, namely a strategy of partially revealing their shortcomings (Nienkemper/Bonna 2010, p. 217). This strategy is used when other strategies appear “subjectively not logical” (ibid.)

“People who have difficulties with reading and/or writing, do not reveal this information at a point in time in their life as a functionally illiterate adult to everyone in their social network. Instead they choose carefully, to whom and to what extent, they disclose this information. Selecting people, who are to know about it, may be a conscious or an unconscious act. In each case, there is a rational subjective reason for why their difficulties are either disclosed or concealed from a particular individual at a particular time”. (see the same source, p. 217f.).

As they reveal their shortcomings to a certain extent, some people in networks belong to people affected are aware of the situation, while others are not. Nienkemper and Bonna list the players who are privy to or unaware of this information: family, the children’s school, work, a former workplace, the job centre (*Agentur für Arbeit - ARGE*) and a partner’s family.

There is also qualitative empirical evidence of confidantes. In the third phase of the AlphaPanel survey⁴ interviewees were asked which people in their network they turned to for support (see **Fehler! Verweisquelle konnte nicht gefunden werden.**).

Table 1: Dealing with reading and writing problems in the social environment

My problems with reading or writing		
	A. Who knows about them (%)	B. Who I ask for help (%)
Parents	61	22
Other family members	56	22
Friends/acquaintances	56	24
Partner	46	35
Colleagues at work	40	15

³ See “Strategies in the case of functional illiteracy” (Nienkemper) in this collection.

⁴ During the “AlphaPanel” project a representative sample of participants in literacy courses at adult education centres where interviewed three times. The first survey (phase 1) was carried out from November 2009 to March 2010, the follow up survey (phase 2) took place from July to October 2010 and the third survey (phase 3) was carried out from January to February 2011).

Manager/ boss	40	14
Children	33	22
Carer	27	22
Neighbour	21	4
Other people/ strangers	6	2
Course leader	X	48
Other course participants	X	11
Nobody	2	4
Total (multiple answers possible)	215	177

Source: AlphaPanel - TNS Infratest, Humboldt University Berlin 2011, n = 332

“Parents or other family members or friends/acquaintances were mentioned most as being aware of the interviewees’ problems with reading and writing (approximately 55% to 60% in each case). Conversely, neighbours were rarely mentioned (21%) – in general, people do not talk about their problems with their neighbours.” (Bilger/Rosenblatt 2011, p. 23).

However, there is a further differentiation between which confidantes were actually asked for help to provide support with reading and writing and those who simply act as a confidante. Course leaders were mentioned here most frequently, followed by a partner or the children of the person affected – i.e. first course leaders, then close family.

There have been no studies yet regarding the burden placed on the network. These people have not yet become a focus of research. It may be appropriate to look at concepts of co-dependency. The relationship between the person affected and the confidante stabilises the problem in particular when it is a complementary relationship:

“An invalid behaves like an invalid, a sinner behaves like a sinner, a helpless person like a helpless person. Complementary to this, the healer is constantly involved with healing the invalid, the priest preaches very high morals, the helper has an unceasing desire to help”. (Schlippe/Schweitzer 1996, p. 106)

Flassbeck (2011) talks of three forms of co-dependency, whose transferability requires further examination, but which also seem relevant to this field of research. The *personal system* applies to all people with close and supportive contact to the person affected. The *therapeutic system* applies to people who have a professional relationship to the adult with literacy problems, whose professional distance protects them from entanglement. Simultaneously though, there is the risk that an overly close relationship might lead to co-dependency. The *institutional system* refers to institutions and their representatives, which can also become entangled in a co-dependent relationship. This could be families, circles of friends, associations and also companies. Flassbeck also points out that even a society or a culture can display “co-dependent interlinked tendencies” (Flassbeck 2011, p. 32). With functionally illiterate adults, these tendencies are probably only present in a weaker form, as these people are not at risk of health problems. Nevertheless, co-dependency theories can help to better understand particular modes of conduct within the support network.

4. Support network as social capital

Engaging with research on social capital is relevant to this study as it can help us to understand the support network's reaction to education. It explains why the support network helps adults with literacy problems, but does not always immediately prompt them to tackle their lack of reading and writing skills themselves (see also: Osipov et al. 2011).

Internationally, social capital is now viewed as a key analytical tool for understanding the meaning of interpersonal relationships and networks (see Adam/Roncevic 2005). According to Bourdieu, social capital is an individual resource that exists in interpersonal relationships. Social capital is

“all of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of basically institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition”. (Bourdieu 1983, p. 190).

However, Bourdieu only means relationships that are beneficial to those involved in them. In contrast, Robert D. Putnam, a political scientist who lectures at Harvard, differentiates between “bridging social capital” and “bonding social capital” (referred to in the rest of the article as bridging capital and bonding capital). He does not refer to Bourdieu, but to Hanifan, who coined the term as early as 1916 (see Putnam 2001, p. 16f.). Bridging capital tends to bring different people together while bonding capital builds identity and trust within a group, but not to outsiders. Social support is more likely to be drawn from bonding social capital. Simultaneously, networks with bonding capital may also entail the risk of negative effects (see Putnam 2001, p. 28f.; Kessl et al. (2005)). The importance of social capital in a relationship with a confidante probably depends on which type of capital the confidante is offering the person affected. If confidantes tend to build bridges, then they are likely to be important players in supporting the learning process of the person in question. If they tend to offer bonding social capital and no further resources can be accessed through them, then they will probably have a more counter-productive impact on the learning process of the person affected.

As far as education is concerned, the support network serves an important function as an interface to a new network. If individuals from the support network can establish a connection to authorities, schools, further education centres, companies or doctors, then this person is offering bridging capital and represents a connection to one or more new networks for the person affected. However, if they belong only to their own network and only offer bonding capital, then they will make few new resources available.

The following graphic depicts the study's perspective more clearly. It shows the interfaces to new networks that people can make available.

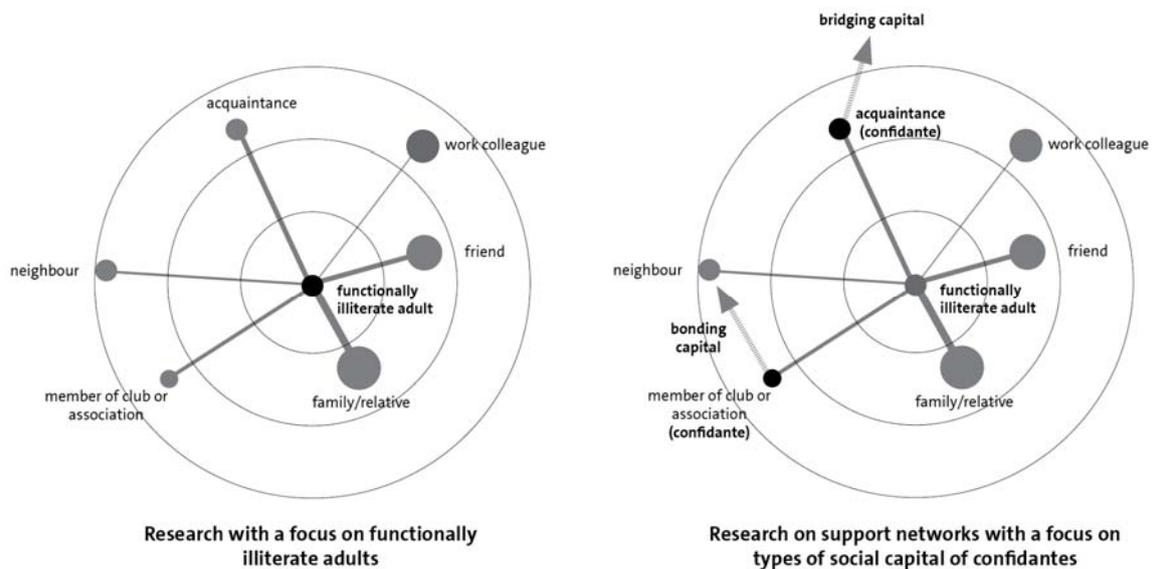


Figure 1: Changing perspective by focusing on the support network

5. Methodological discussion

The aim of the qualitative part of this study is to develop a typology for confidantes and to explore the function of the support network of people with poor reading and writing skills. Therefore, the decision was taken to conduct open interviews based on guidelines (see Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr 2009, p. 138ff.) that enable narration and allow orientation according to core topics.

As the goal was to enable people to talk about an issue which might be a taboo as far as both society and possibly also the confidante themselves are concerned, individual interviews were carried out. The survey and evaluation starts with a qualitative content analysis with priority given to inductive category building (see Mayring 2000), and borrows from grounded theory (Corbin/Strauss 2008) for sample building. The more recent discussion on methods with its scientific/theoretical and pragmatic relationship between theory and empirical evidence is followed.

5.1 Compiling the sample group

Preliminary work for the study represents the first foray into the field. This was carried out at employment organisations. The first interviews were conducted here. Further samples followed theoretical preconceptions. These were then modified during the research process based on the empirical evidence. The theoretical presuppositions were based on three factors.

- The first factor was the supposition that there are particular groups of confidantes, which can be roughly subdivided into personal or professional confidantes. The first group are parents, children, friends, colleagues, relatives and acquaintances of the person affected. The final group are professionals, such as social workers, course leaders, employment agency employees. Confidantes in the social sphere are addressed due to their profession; confidantes in the personal system due to their personal relationship with the person affected.
- A second factor is the extent to which the confidante is aware of the situation – from a vague suspicion via increased awareness to full knowledge.
- The magnitude of the support is the third factor. This ranges from occasional help to the person affected who expects to have constant support from the confidante.

These factors further crystallised during the research and it was possible to identify the factors that were important for putting the samples together. For example, after the first evaluations it became clear that both the type and frequency of support were important. Additionally, the groups of confidantes were divided not just into “private” and “professional”, but also into “family-based”, “friends and acquaintances”, “work (within a workplace or company)” and “professional” (in patient/customer or client relationships).

This approach is based on the methods of theoretical sampling from the grounded theory (Corbin/Strauss 2008). However, theoretical presuppositions are not abandoned, but monitored and modified during the research process instead. The concept of “theoretical saturation” was also based on the grounded theory. Theoretical sampling was continued until no more new insights could be gained from new data and the core categories specified by the researchers were saturated with information, even when it was not possible to achieve full theoretical saturation. During sampling, the practical question of where to find interviewees was also raised. It was not easy to find people who only suspected, but were not fully aware that someone they knew had poor reading and writing skills.

5.2 Evaluating the interviews and creating types

A total of 30 interviews were conducted, mainly face-to-face, and in certain cases over the phone. All interviews were fully transcribed. MaxQDA software was used for the evaluation. Not every interviewee was treated as a case. In fact, each case is a person who is discussed. For example, certain interviewees report about two or more cases who they have different relationships with. To create types, a total of 41 cases were referred to.

The evaluation was based on qualitative content analysis, empirically based type creation was made possible based on inductive category building (see Mayring 2000). At first, gradual category building was developed using the material. This step also involved revising and developing new categories (see Mayring 2003). To create types, the four rules introduced by Kluge for empirically based type creation were followed (see Kluge 2000):

1. **Working out relevant dimensions:** Differentiating between the characteristics of the confidantes using the categories developed.
2. **Putting the cases into groups and analysing empirical regularities:** Initial clustering of cases into possible groups.
3. **Analysing the contexts in terms of content and creating types:** Before types could be created, contexts in terms of meaning are examined, the aim of which is to distil the groups into fewer types.
4. **Characterising the empirical types:** Finally, the characteristics and contexts in terms of meaning were described.

In a very similar manner, abstraction, contextualisation and establishing coherency in creating types are also discussed (see Przyborski/Wohlrab-Sahr 2009). The aim of creating types is firstly to establish internal homogeneity at type level, so that elements within a type are as similar as possible. The second reason is to establish external heterogeneity at typology level, so that the types are as different from one another as possible (see Kluge 2000).

The result of the analysis consists of a typology of acting as a confidante on the basis of previously unknown groups of confidantes of people with low reading and writing skills.

6. Confidante types

The above-mentioned approach, using the cases mentioned as a basis for creating types and not the interviewees themselves, proved correct when it came to developing the types. The results show clearly the way someone acts as a confidante depends on circumstances. The results do not indicate that particular people are a particular type or that a particular form of

confidante always develops. As a result of this inductive category building, six core categories crystallised which are incorporated into the process of creating types. They are described as follows.

6.1. Backgrounds - why confidantes emerge

A confidante's background describes where the person affected and confidante know each other from. In theory, this could include all areas of life. In this case it is helpful to look at the quantitative study on environments, as it shows which areas the person affected and confidante know each other from (see Buddeberg 2015b in this publication). There are confidantes in all areas of life. The interviewees know the adults with literacy problems:

- 39 per cent from their circle of friends or acquaintances
- 23 per cent from work (as colleagues)
- 15 per cent from their family
- 9 per cent from the neighbourhood
- 5 per cent as patients/ clients/ or customers
- 9 per cent from other areas, such as associations, schools, education, voluntary work etc.

The interviews in the qualitative study on backgrounds were conducted with people from all areas. Only people who know the person affected from the neighbourhood could not be included in the sample. Areas in which the confidante act were subsequently categorised: work, professional or family network and friends or acquaintances.

6.2 Dealing with acting as a confidante

A nine-field model was developed on the basis of the empirical data to analyse the way acting as a confidante is dealt with. This produced a total of five different ways:

Table 2: Dealing with acting as a confidante from the perspective of the support network

C = Confidante	C knows, affected person knows that C knows	C suspects, person affected thinks that C knows nothing	C knows, person affected thinks that C knows nothing
Talking about situation	Openness	Cannot occur	Cannot occur
Only talking about situation indirectly	Insecurity or deliberate professional distance	Unsettling feeling	Unsettling feeling
Not talking about situation	Making something a taboo	Unsettling feeling	Avoidance

- *Openness*: An open approach to dealing with the situation is when the low reading and writing skills are acknowledged and discussed by both confidante and person affected. From the confidante's perspective the problem is open.
- *Creating taboos*: A taboo approach to dealing with the situation occurs when both parties are aware of the situation, but do not talk about it.
- *Avoidance*: Avoidance occurs when the confidante is aware of the weaknesses, but the person affected thinks that the confidante knows nothing and the problem is not

mentioned. From the confidante's perspective, talking openly about the situation is avoided.

- *Unsettled feelings*: In certain cases, the confidantes display unsettled feelings. This is because the problem is only talked about indirectly or confidantes only suspect that there may be poor reading and writing skills.
- *Professional distance*: The same constellation, as with feeling unsettled, can be a form of professional distance. This occurs when the person affected is a client, patient or customer. In order to protect the person affected or establish a relationship of trust, the problem is not directly talked about, even if poor literacy skills are obvious to both parties.

6.3 Type of support

The type of support that the person affected is offered by their support network is a further core category. Support may involve direct assistance or taking on tasks on behalf of the person affected. It can also involve providing encouragement to read and write. The code can be divided into three subgroups:

- little or no support,
- support by taking on tasks and
- support via learning and reading together, or offering to correct written work.

In terms of taking on tasks, the last of these subgroups differs because it involves the learning and educational aspect. If confidantes encourage the people affected to read and write or even set them small tasks, then they assume that the people affected are still capable of learning. However, if they only provide assistance and support the person affected in a practical manner to complete everyday activities, they are not helping them improve their skills.

Of course, the separation of these two types of support is of a theoretical-systematic nature. In practice, combinations of these options are often encountered. For example, when there is not much time and things have to be done in a hurry, there is no time to turn something into a learning opportunity. The group of confidantes that provides little or no support is also significant. In addition, it should also be considered whether the type of support was offered professionally, i.e. in a professional work situation or privately.

6.4 Contact with further education

The theoretical category that underlies this code is the type of capital which is made available by the support network (see above). When it comes to contact with further education, the question is whether bridging capital is made available, where the confidante acts as an interface between further education and the affected person. From this point of view, the following possibilities occur:

- *No bridging capital available*: The confidantes have no knowledge of possible further education for literacy or adult basic education.
- *Withheld bridging capital*: Bridging capital is not made available or only on certain conditions: Even where confidantes possess bridging capital, it might not be provided. This may be logical from a subjective perspective. For example, if the possibilities of further education are only talked about when the person affected brings it up themselves. Or because the confidante has a negative image of further education institutions, so that any recommendation would be out of the question. An unsettled feeling on the part of the confidante is often the reason why possible further education is not talked about. Institutional barriers can also develop an obstructive logic. For

example, if a school cannot point out that further education would be possible because this would mean admitting that it was unable to teach basic skills.

- *Educationally relevant bridging capital*: In this instance, bridging capital is made available by professional or non-professional confidantes. This may mean that further education and the possibility of attending a course are mentioned. This could result in a direct referral to further education, as sometimes happens in job centres.
- *Superfluous bridging capital*: If the person affected themselves seeks contact to further education, then bridging capital from the support network may be superfluous.
- *Rejected bridging capital*: Bridging capital offered may also be rejected. This is the case when the person affected shows no interest in further education or when numerous attempts to involve them in further education fail.

6.5 Image of the affected person

The image of the person affected turned out to be relevant for creating types. It is often linked to considering whether the person in question is offered opportunities to learn or not. The image of the affected person can be divided into three approximate manifestations:

- The support network has a *deficit-orientated image* of the affected person if the person in question is described in terms of their deficiencies rather than their potential. In this case, the person affected is not just blamed themselves. Other circumstances are often referred to (difficult childhood, growing up in a care home, stigmatisation, multiple problems in the family etc.). The person affected is sometimes described negatively as being unwilling to learn or aggressive.
- The support network has a *resource-orientated image* of the affected person if their potential is recognised. Even when poor reading and writing skills are described, these shortcomings are not applied to the whole person. For example, this is the case if a colleague is said to be cheerful and active, that a friend gets by perfectly well or that somebody is an accomplished individual who does a good job.
- The support network has an *ambivalent image* of the affected person when both positive and negative aspects are mentioned and the person affected is only referred to indirectly. This is the case, for example, when an interviewee explains that they are amazed how the person in question manages at all, but does not talk directly about them.

6.6 How confidantes feel

One of the fundamental questions of the study was can being a confidante become a burden too. The category can be divided into four groups.

- *A burden on confidantes* The burden is described as a burden in terms of time or emotions. A burden in terms of time is seldom without confidantes in these cases being emotionally involved too. When there is an emotional burden, confidantes sometimes feel personally responsible for the shortcomings of the person affected. Confidantes describe that they feel sad that they are not able to help the affected person enough or describe how the burden impacts on their own life.
- *Confidantes who are happy to help* Regardless of how much support is given, confidantes are happy to help. For example, confidantes describe that they are able to distance themselves from the person affected, that they are pleased to see the person making progress with learning, or describe the support they put in place as perfectly manageable.

- *Professional distance*: Where confidantes have a professional relationship with the person affected, in most cases they can distance themselves professionally. This means that being a confidante does not become a burden.
- *Unclear findings*: After evaluating the interview, it is not clear how the confidante feels about the situation. For example, if the problem is rejected, or the confidante is annoyed that these shortcomings exist at all. The interviewee makes generalised statements, such as saying that spelling should not be a barrier to education.

6.7 Overview of the types

For creating the types the core categories were dealt with for each case and joint samples were elaborated. The categories shown in the different types have different forms and weighting. The table below provides an overview of the types produced, with the main category highlighted. The main category refers here to the category that describes a type particularly concisely and distinguishes it from the other types. A detailed further elaboration of the different types of confidantes is to follow in a later publication.

Table 3: Overview of the types of confidantes

Type of confidantes	Characteristics
Taboo confidanteship	In particular family , emotional burden, substantial tasks are often taken on
Pragmatic confidanteship	Support through learning together , very positive image of person affected, “capable of learning”, no burden
Caring confidanteship	A lot of tasks are taken on , image of person affected as “in need of help”, very emotionally involved
Accepting confidanteship	Image of person affected “they get by” , no burden, little support, “nothing more is required”
Resigned confidanteship	Affected person has multiple problems , attempts to refer them to further education have often failed, tasks taken on on their behalf
Insecure confidanteship	“How should I react to the situation?” , image of person affected is unclear, no support, no referral to further education
Distanced confidanteship	No support, as not close enough to person affected , no burden

Taboo confidanteship mainly occurs in family contexts. In most cases it concerns parents, who do not talk to their children about the weaknesses and try to hide them. When talking about the situation, there is generally anxiety, this is described by the support network as protecting the person affected. In these types of cases, families often take on a number of tasks, such as all the written correspondence for the father’s company. Because taboos are created, confidantes also carry an emotional burden.

People acting as confidantes in a **pragmatic** manner, accept the affected person’s poor reading and writing skills. They support them by setting up shared learning structures. This can range from prompting the person affected to read more to regularly and correcting texts together. In such cases, confidantes have a positive image of the person affected. They assume that they are capable of improving their skills. There is no burden.

Caring confidantes take on a considerable number of tasks on behalf of the affected person. In this respect, the focus is on helping, rather than on learning or education. Often, these confidantes complete written tasks for the person affected without them being present. The person affected is described as in need of help, the confidante feels strongly moved to do something. Correspondingly, confidantes are emotionally involved and moved by the issue.

Accepting confidantes do not think more about the affected person's reading and writing difficulties. The support network tries to create the conditions for the person in question to cope at work or in their everyday life. The image they have of the person affected is generally positive, they are considered to be coping well in life and do not appear to need more help.

Resigned confidanteship occurs when problems with reading and writing are concealed by other problems in the affected person's life. These might be family, health-related or physical problems. More often than not, in such cases the confidante has already experienced that referring the person affected to further education has failed on one or more occasions. Despite this, the support network takes on tasks on behalf of the person affected.

In cases of **insecure** confidanteship, the support network is primarily occupied with how to react to knowing about the situation. This insecurity overrides all other issues, for example, whether to support the person or not, whether further education should be mentioned or not. The confidante complains that they do not have enough information about the issue. Correspondingly, the image of the person affected is very diffuse, as the confidante is unable to assess the affected person's situation. Interestingly, these people do not generally try to acquire more information. Their insecurity leads, not to increased activity in this direction, but rather to remaining stuck in this insecure state.

Distanced confidanteship may be a precursor to other types. The person affected in question is not known well enough for any form of support to be come into question. The person affected might be a colleague at work, who is not seen on a daily basis or someone from a circle of acquaintances.

7. Conclusion

Right from the first description of the types of confidanteship, it is clear that the way that confidantes deal with poor reading and writing skills is very different. It is also obvious that the support network provides numerous support measures that help people affected to cope with everyday life and even assist them in improving their skills. The results show that addressing the support network is not just worthwhile to attract new participants to literacy courses, but also to provide confidantes with information to make it easier for them to react to people with poor skills. The interviews show that people are aware that there are further education opportunities for adults with poor reading and writing skills, but that this knowledge is often not passed on. Bridging capital is not made available either because the support network does not know well enough, *what* should actually be recommended or whether it is right to recommend anything at all. This insecurity on the part of the support network could be alleviated if information was provided. Confidantes have to be informed about course duration, course contents, course locations, competency levels and course levels. This would then help adults with literacy problems in this way to access better information and possibly even become aware of further education opportunities at a number of locations in their everyday lives. The theory of how interest develops additionally shows that multiple contact with a subject area (e.g. further education) is required before interest develops (see Epstein in this collection).

A more detailed elaboration and description of the types of confidanteship is planned for the next stage of this project. It may then be possible to develop different formats to address the different types of confidantes.

In conclusion, the results of this study do indeed raise questions regarding the individual-centred discourse about skills. Is it our social objective to qualify people to be as independent

as possible from others, so that they are capable of autonomously claiming and ensuring their participation in society, or do we accept delegating skills to a support network, where this is acceptable to both sides? This question is not answered by the results of the “Functionally illiterate adults and their confidantes” study, but can be discussed further on the basis of its results.

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