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

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Abstract

The supporting network of functionally illiterate adults – the 'confidantes' (or people who are trusted) who assist them in daily life – is considered a potential channel for providers of adult basic education to reach people with low levels of literacy. Indeed, the results of the quantitative *Studie zum mitwissenden Umfeld funktionaler Analphabetinnen und Analphabeten* 'Study of functionally illiterate adults and their confidantes'[1] (referred to as the study in the following) allow us to surmise considerable potential. The reason is that around 40 per cent of adults know of other adults who have difficulties with reading and writing – problems that range from having adequate spelling to severe limitations. Simultaneously the study shows that the potential here is only harnessed in a very limited manner. This article locates the study in the context of literacy research, provides an insight into the methodical aspects and illustrates the main findings of the quantitative study with the aid of two questions. Firstly, asking 'Who are the confidantes?' provides a socio-demographic description of the network of supporters of functionally illiterate adults. Secondly, asking 'How do these confidantes behave?' shows that awareness of the situation alone does not necessarily result in a discussion of the problem and that even the decision to support the[2] person affected does not necessarily engender learning processes. In her article entitled *Das mitwissende Umfeld funktionaler Analphabetinnen und Analphabeten – Ergebnisse der qualitativen* 'Functionally illiterate adults and their confidantes – results of the qualitative study' in this collection, Wibke Riekmann presents the results of the second study.

1. Why research on confidantes is important

A number of quantitative studies have shown that in Germany, but also in other OECD countries, there are greater than generally expected numbers of adults with limited reading and writing skills, despite well developed educational systems and compulsory attendance at school (UK: Skills for Life Survey: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011; France: IVQ Survey: Jonas 2012 and Jeantheau 2015; Germany: leo. study: Grotlüschen/Riekmann 2012; PIAAC: Maehler et al 2013). We are not dealing with 'illiterate adults' who is assumed have practically no reading and writing skills at all, but mainly with 'functionally illiterate adults'. According to the leo. study this group accounts for 7.5 million adults in Germany and is capable of reading and writing basic sentences, although often with errors and not without considerable effort (for a discussion of the term 'functional illiteracy' cf. Nickel 2011, p. 53ff.; Grotlüschen/Riekmann/Buddeberg 2012, p. 15ff.; Rosenbladt 2012). This means that they are able, either alone or frequently with support from confidantes (cf. Egloff 1997, p. 161; Nuissl 1999, p. 552; Döbert/Hubertus 2000, p. 70) to cope with the written-language requirements of everyday life, without drawing attention to their situation.

We are talking about adults with poor literacy skills, i.e. not just a 'non-reading target group' (Popp/Sanders 2011, p. 48), but a group that remains virtually invisible to adult basic education providers. In addition, this group is characterised by distinctly low levels of participation in further education (cf. Rosenbladt 2011, p. 89f.; Bilger 2012, p. 258f.). There are a number of reasons why this

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[2] This article refers to two core groups of people: confidantes and people affected. The term "affected" is not uncontroversial, as it carries implies a certain passiveness and a focus on shortcomings. However, as some kind of title is required for people with low levels of literacy in order to describe them, the term will be paraphrased as far as possible. However, it will not be dispensed with altogether in order to strike a balance between making the text sensitive and easy to read at the same time.

group does not participate in adult basic education initiatives. The expert commission called *Finanzierung Lebenslangen Lernens* 'Financing Lifelong Learning' (cf. 2004, p. 91ff.) highlights several obstacles in the way of participating in further education in general, (i.e. not just relating to adult basic education). These include financial factors, long working hours, heavy workloads – in particular women with children, the lack of appropriate programmes and failure to perceive learning as necessary (cf. here also the comprehensive research relating to the US from Beder 1990, p. 208f.).

Bremer discusses participation and non-participation in close conjunction with milieu affiliations. He talks about studies which cite insecurity, lack of self-confidence in abilities to learn and negative experiences at school as the main reasons behind non-participation (cf. Bremer 2007, p. 111). For people with poor literacy skills, attending a course also requires them to reveal their shortcomings to some extent (cf. Nienkemper/Bonna 2010, p. 217). This step could constitute a further barrier to taking part in a course. Lastly, potential participants are often simply not aware of learning opportunities (cf. Beder 1990, p. 209; Tippelt/Reich/Panyr 2004, p. 56). Lack of information can mean that the target group is simply not aware that opportunities exist for adults to improve their skills via adult basic education. It can also mean that they might know in principle that the local adult education centre offers these kinds of courses, but that they are unable to understand the course level, course size, form of learning, costs, opportunities for financial support etc.

In terms of how they can be reached and approached, in some circumstances an interface may be required to bring the person affected into contact with further education opportunities and to help bridge the gap between them and further education options. Similarly to Bourdieu's theory of capital (cf. Bourdieu 1983, p. 190), Putnam differentiates the concept of social capital into bridging social capital and bonding social capital further (cf. Putnam 2001, p. 16f.). Bridging social capital brings together people from different social groups; it helps to overcome the barriers between different sections in society. Whereas bonding social capital tends to cement a homogeneous social group. Where confidantes represent bonding social capital, no new resources will be accessed through them. As a result, the relationship may prove restrictive regarding the learning process of the person affected. Where confidantes show more bridging tendencies, they are more likely to support learning processes and take on the interface function described. In addition, to describe network relationships, relationships can be classified into 'strong ties' and 'weak ties'. Schmidt-Hertha (cf. 2009, pp. 162-163) emphasizes, with reference to Granovetter, that it tends to be weak ties that are mainly established to people who are located outside of closed networks. When seen in this perspective, the closeness or strength of the relationship between confidantes and people affected is a potentially influential factor.

In the leo. study, one criticism was that "in-depth knowledge via the confidantes of functional illiterate adults, i.e. people who are aware of the lack of other people's reading and writing skills, through the family or social environment or at work, was not yet available in systematically documented form" (Buddeberg 2012, p. 197). However, the study now provides systematic insights into functional illiterate adults' networks. Who are these confidantes and how do they provide support? Do they take on reading or writing activities for them, or do they encourage them to develop their literacy skills and provide information about the opportunities available for adult basic education?

The study consists of two studies of equal weighting – a qualitative study, based on 30 guideline-driven interviews and a quantitative study, based on 1,511 telephone interviews with adults in Hamburg. The research questions, methods and results of the qualitative study are discussed by Wibke Riekmann (2015). This article on the other hand focuses on the quantitative study.

2. Locating the study in the qualitative and quantitative spectrum of methods

As the research field is one that has hardly been investigated empirically at all, the decision was taken to use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods as a mixed-methods approach. In this respect, it is less a question of validating qualitative data via quantitative data. This approach dominated the early phase of methodical debates regarding triangulation (see the standard reference work Denzin 1978). Instead, as has become more customary in recent years, the approach involves complementing one method strand with another (cf. Kelle/Erzberger 2000/2013, p. 303). This is based on the assumption that "the flaws of one method are often the strength of another: and by combining methods, observers can achieve the best of each while overcoming their unique deficiencies" (Denzin

1978, p. 302). This suggests that "researchers should collect multiple data using different strategies, approaches, and methods in such a way that the resulting mixture or combination is likely to result in complementary strengths and non-overlapping weaknesses" (Johnson/Onwuegbuzie 2004, p. 18).

Using such an approach, it should not be expected, that qualitative and quantitative results exclusively confirm one another or converge, also complementary or contradictory results can be expected (cf. Kelle/Erzberger 2000/2013, p. 305; Flick 2014, p. 188; Mathison 1988, p. 15). The nature of the study is explorative and not based on systematic empirical preliminary studies. Right from the start it generated an expectation of results which do not easily corroborate one another, but which entail special potential for generating further research questions.

3. Implementing the quantitative study

The study required preliminary studies to assess feasibility. Firstly it was important to find out whether a representative survey of 1,500 people would provide sufficient prevalence, i.e. whether among the adults interviewed one would find enough people who knew someone with poor literacy skills. In addition, it was important to discover whether standardised questions would reveal whether someone was acting as a confidante or not.

Several questions regarding confidantes were posed in two preliminary studies. Evaluation of these non-representative samples (n = 344 and n = 68) resulted in a strong prevalence. Around 60 per cent of the interviewees stated that they personally knew someone who spoke German, but could only read or write with difficulty. As a result of this large number of confidantes in the specific subsamples, a sufficient number for a representative survey could be assumed with regard to the population as a whole. A second finding also proved equally important for designing the concept of the study. It became clear that it was possible to conduct research on people with poor literacy levels by using qualitative interviews, but also by using a standardised survey.

The questionnaire for the representative survey was developed using results of the qualitative study. The preliminary studies provided the initial contacts for access to the field of the qualitative study. After the first qualitative interviews had been conducted and discussed by the project team, further aspects arose that were then addressed in the representative study. This type of feedback was conducted several times throughout the development of the questionnaire. The evaluation of the preliminary studies also produced indications that were subsequently used to make the questions and answer categories more precise.

In addition to optimising the questions and answer categories, this included considerably extending the range of questions. A total of 14 questions were used in the preliminary studies which concentrated on the following areas:

- Evidence of acting as a confidante,
- Presumed reasons for poor levels of literacy,
- Source of the knowledge,
- Evidence of poor literacy levels in the person affected,
- Awareness of the person affected that someone else knew about the situation,
- Desire for change by the person affected,
- Support with reading and writing tasks,
- Awareness of courses, Alfa-Telefon (information hotline for low literates), online learning platform ich-will-lernen.de,
- References to these support options and if not,
- Reasons for not recommending them.

The range of topics was increased and the existing questions were adapted with regard to wording and answer categories. New topics included:

- Attitude to literacy,
- Questions relating to the socio-demographic characteristics of the person affected,
- Social field in which the relationship is located (family, job, neighbourhood),
- Nature of relationship to person (frequency of contact, closeness, trust),
- Estimation of the reading and writing skills,

- Kind of communication about the situation (openly, indirectly, not at all),
- Reasons preventing open discussion,
- Types of support,
- Encouragement to improve literacy,
- Stress caused by acting as a confidante,
- Existence of further confidantes, discussing the matter with other people,
- Person affected attending a course or improving literacy.

The questionnaire grew to include approximately 50 questions plus background questions. As a *between-methods triangulation* the questionnaire was developed by contrasting with the topics of the qualitative study. As part of *investigator triangulation* members of the project team discussed certain items. Subsequently items were discussed by the whole team of the institute at Hamburg University and finally with the staff of the social research institute in Berlin which realized the interviews (for more about the concept of triangulation cf. Flick 2014, 2011, p. 15). Coordination with the social research institute proved essential, in particular when it came to the telephone interview (CATI: Computer Assisted Telephone Interview). This resulted in changes to the questionnaire's script and in specific decisions between open and closed question formats. In addition, the involvement of the project team in both pretests (n = 75) allowed evaluation of the questionnaire under real-time conditions.

4. Who are the confidantes?

4.1 Socio-demographic characteristics

Representative large scale literacy surveys, such as PIAAC or the leo. study, do demonstrate that low performance in literacy is not just an isolated problem, but one that affects society as a whole in different degrees. Nevertheless, certain aspects do play a particular role in development of functional illiteracy, such as educational qualifications, the family's educational background, or the first language learnt during childhood (cf. Grotlüschen/Riekmann/Buddeberg 2012, p. 39ff.). It might therefore be assumed that social knowledge about illiteracy would reflect a certain milieu dependency. However, the empirical evidence clearly refutes this assumption.

Around 40 per cent of adults in Hamburg know other adults who have problems with reading and writing. The majority of confidantes are sure that this problem exists, in a small number of cases they only suspect it. In addition to this 40 per cent, there is a smaller group who know of these merely from hearsay. This awareness relates to people who are functionally illiterate according to the definition of the leo. study, but to the same extent also to people who have severe orthographic difficulties even with common and frequently used vocabulary (for definitions of the competence areas cf. Grotlüschen/Riekmann/Buddeberg 2012, p. 19f.).

The socio-demographic structure of this 40 per cent of adults corresponds largely to the socio-demographic structure of Hamburg's adult population. Table 1 shows the core socio-demographic parameters relating to the group of confidantes (left column) and relating to the adult population as a whole (right column). Systematic comparison of this data shows that the group of confidantes is not a specific sub-population, but rather a group composed of all sectors of the population.

Table 1: Socio-demographic parameters of confidantes as compared to the population as a whole

Socio-demographic characteristic	Confidantes in Hamburg/ in %	Population in Hamburg/ in %
Gender		
Women	51.0%	50.5%
Men	49.0%	49.5%
Highest educational qualification*		
Primary school or secondary school qualification	15.8%	16.2%
Secondary school leaving certificate	30.5%	30.7%
A-Levels	53.7%	53.1%
* not reported: no qualification or still in education (n = 13)		
Highest vocational qualification		
Still in apprenticeship/ training	1.7%	1.4%
Apprenticeship/ training without qualification (dropped out)	3.5%	2.3%
Qualification, e.g. assistant, apprenticeship, skilled worker	39.7%	40.2%
Technical college, vocational school with qualification, master craftman's certificate	7.5%	8.0%
University, university of applied sciences, or engineering qualification	32.6%	34.0%
Doctorate	2.3%	2.2%
None of the above, none of the above yet	11.6%	10.9%
Employment status		
Training, re-training, internship	12.1%	10.1%
Employed (full-time or part-time)	46.8%	42.4%
Self-employed (full-time or part-time)	11.9%	11.4%
not employed (unemployed, parental leave, not seeking employment)	7.0%	9.1%
Retired	22.2%	27.0%
People from immigrant families		
People not from immigrant families	63.6%	67.1%
People from immigrant families	36.4%	32.9%
Age groups		
18 to 29 years	22.0%	19.7%
30 to 39 years	19.7%	18.4%
40 to 49 years	20.9%	19.3%
50 to 59 years	15.6%	14.6%
60 to 69 years	10.9%	11.6%
70 years and older	10.9%	16.5%

N = 1,511 people interviewed in Hamburg, of whom 604 were confidantes, including confidantes who only know of the person affected from hearsay.

Looking at the **gender** parameter, we can see there is no unequal distribution. In each case, half of the interviewed sample (following the Hamburg sample census) and half of the confidantes are men and women respectively. While the leo. study found that on average men are more likely to be functionally illiterate (cf. Buddeberg 2012, p. 190f.), there is no such bias when it comes to the confidantes.

Confidantes' **educational qualifications** present a similar picture. The proportions of confidantes with low, middle or higher educational qualifications correspond almost exactly to the proportion from the samples based on the sample census. The same also applies here: people with poor literacy skills

generally have lower educational qualifications (cf. Grotlüschen/Sondag 2012, p. 230f.). By contrast, confidantes have the same educational qualifications profile as the Hamburg average. This therefore contradicts the assumption that problems with literacy are mainly apparent in less educated social milieus. Comparisons of the **highest vocational qualification** and employment status parameters produce similar results.

The **migration status**[3] and **age** parameters reveal larger – although still relatively minor – structural differences. The proportion of confidantes who come from immigrant families is 36.4 per cent – approximately three per cent lower than the overall population, which is 32.9 per cent (according to official statistics: 30 per cent, cf. Statistical Office of Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein 2013). This very small difference also refutes the assumption that awareness of problems with literacy exists to a greater extent in sectors of the population more affected by migration.

The group of confidantes is, in general, slightly younger than the overall population average. This is demonstrated in the comparison of the different **age groups** (Table 1), but also in the statistical mean and median values (Table 2). In both age groups from 60 years up, confidantes are under-represented. This could be explained by the successive retirement of this cohort from working life, so that awareness of problems with literacy at work plays less of a role, as well as a possible overall decrease in social contact (cf. Genuneit/Genuneit 2011, p. 47ff.).

Table 2:   Age of confidantes and the population represented by mean and median values

	Confidantes	Population
Mean	45.0 years	47.6 years
Median	44.0 years	45.8 years

N = 1,511 interviewees (population), of which 604 were confidantes, including confidantes who only know of the affected person by hearsay.

4.2 Fields of awareness[4]

The literature about persons of trust generally cites family and work as well as friends and acquaintances as important contacts (cf. Egloff 1997; Nuissl 1999; Döbert/Hubertus 2000). Empirically, it is now possible to describe the relationship between these different fields in numbers. The field showing the greatest amount of confidantes (38 per cent) is friends and acquaintances (Table 3). Work-related contacts account for 28 per cent, while the family accounts for 15 per cent of confidantes. Generally less intensive forms of contact, such as neighbours, account for nine per cent.

When examined, these fields of contact show some gender-specific differences. Men very often report awareness of individuals with literacy problems in their circle of friends or acquaintances. Women on the other hand tend to report more often of awareness within the family. When it comes to work-related awareness, there is no appreciable difference between men and women (cf. Table 3).

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[3]   The leo. study chose not to use the fact that people come from immigrant families as a differentiating factor. Instead, it measures literacy according to the first language learnt, as this criterion is decisive when looking at illiteracy (cf. Buddeberg/Riekmann 2012, p. 211). As the 'Study of functionally illiterate adults and their confidantes' only asked questions about the first language to part of the sample, namely interviewees who came from immigrant families, the study uses this as a parameter. Migration status was indicated if the interviewees have a different nationality to German, if they were born abroad or if their parent(s) have a nationality other than German or were born abroad.

[4]   Regarding differentiation of the fields of awareness, it should be noted that confidantes often know more than one illiterate adult. However, each of them is only providing information about one person, who they know relatively well. In this respect, strictly speaking we are dealing here with "reported fields of awareness".

Table 3: Fields of awareness according to gender

	Women	Men	Total confidantes
Family	21.2%	8.9%	15.1%
At work	26.1%	29.6%	27.9%
Friends or acquaintances	32.5%	44.3%	38.4%
Neighbours	8.8%	8.6%	8.7%
From school	4.9%	2.9%	3.9%
Other	3.2%	3.6%	3.4%
From hearsay	3.2%	2.1%	2.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

N = 562 confidantes

Work-related awareness often, but not always means that the person affected and the confidante work in the same company (*in-company awareness*). However, it can also take the form of *professional awareness*, where the person affected is a customer/ client/ patient etc. For example, the doctor who notices that a patient cannot read written information, or the job centre worker who becomes aware of a client's problems with writing, or the pre-school manager who notices that a parent has difficulty reading and writing. This professional awareness of problems with literacy applies to approximately a third of cases in the awareness at work category.

In-company awareness accounts for two thirds. There are fewer cases where people lower down in the hierarchy are aware of problems on the part of their bosses (6% of in-company awareness). Awareness generally involves employees at the same hierarchical level, i.e. colleagues (63%), followed by awareness of bosses about their employees (19%) or apprentices (12%). The prominence of awareness between employees underlines how important strategies are which aim to raise awareness among colleagues.

In total, 43 per cent of the confidantes know the illiterate adults from within the family or at work. This means that more than half of the confidantes know the persons affected from a different environment, mainly from within their circle of friends or acquaintances. In these cases, further questions were asked to determine how the contact came about. The sources of contact proved to be extremely diverse. The following list shows how the confidantes know the people they talked about (in descending order of frequency)

- via friends and acquaintances,
- from parties or celebrations,
- from school,
- from the neighbourhood (including local shops, park, hairdressers),
- from a club or association,
- via other family members,
- via their children's kindergarten or school,
- from the pub or events,
- through church or similar.

4.3 Awareness in one or more cases

The majority of confidantes know more than one person affected with (graduated) difficulties with reading and writing. One third of the confidantes know just one person, where they are sure that they have problems with literacy, while two thirds know two or more people (Table 4).

Table 4:   Number of people affected known, where the confidante is certain that they have problems with reading and writing

	Number	Percentage
Knows one person	156	34.1%
Knows two or more people	77	16.9%
Knows three or more people	79	17.3%
Knows five or more people	145	31.7%
	457	100%

N = 457 confidantes, who are certain that the people affected in the cases reported have problems with reading and writing.

This awareness of more than one person is greater in a working environment than in other fields. This result is similar to the findings of the SAPfA study (2014). The SAPfA study interviewed employees in certain industries, in which the leo. study showed that a proportionally high number of functionally illiterate adults were employed (for the disproportionately affected professions cf. Grotlüschen 2012, p. 145ff.). Therefore, the majority of confidantes in these industries know more than one person affected (cf. Ehmig et al 2015, p. 28).

Furthermore, as empirical evidence underscores, people affected generally have more than one person who is aware of their situation. Three quarters of the confidantes know, or presume, that there are at least one or several more confidantes (Table 5).

Table 5: Existence and number of further confidantes

	Number	Percentage
One other person knows of the problem (confidante)	30	5.4%
Several more people are aware of the problem	349	62.3%
More people are probably aware of the problem	70	12.5%
Nobody else is aware of the problem	45	8.0%
Don't know	66	11.8%
	560	100%

N = 560 confidantes

The fact that more than one confidante exist per se does not necessarily mean that they will discuss the situation (Table 6). Although it is difficult to quantify the reasons for this exactly, this aspect is a starting point for forming a hypothesis. The lack of discussion may be due to the fact that the confidantes do not know each other well enough. It may also be due to taboos which prevent any discussion. These taboos would mean that everyone involved is aware of the situation, but that no one talks about it.

Table 6: Discussion between confidantes

	Number	Percentage
Confidantes discuss the situation	163	43.1%
No discussion between confidantes	215	56.9%
	378	100%

N = 378 confidantes, who report that apart from themselves there are other people who know the person affected.

For this purpose, it may be helpful to take a differentiated look at the fields of awareness. More than 90 per cent of confidantes report that they are aware of further confidantes in families, although only 39 per cent of them said that they discuss the situation with these other confidantes. In other words, virtually everyone is aware of the situation but practically no discussion occurs. If interpreted in this way, taboos might exist, at least with relation to the family. The reason family confidantes very often

give for not talking openly with the people concerned is that they feel uncomfortable. This is either because the other person has made plain their unwillingness to talk about their problem, or because they feel the issue is a explicitly taboo for the person concerned.

After the family, work-related contacts are the people who are most aware of the person's problems. Two thirds of work-related contacts (in companies and by profession) know of, or suspect that several people are aware of the situation. In half of all cases, the confidantes discuss the situation amongst themselves. This equally concurs with the findings of the SAPfA study, which also describes a more open and pragmatic approach to the problem of poor literacy skills in work-related capacities (cf. Ehmig 2015, p. 29).

5. How do confidantes act?

Regarding research into functionally illiterate adults and their confidantes, we occasionally find an implicit assumption (and as will be demonstrated unreasonably optimistic) pattern. The assumption is that if people know other people with literacy problems they will try and talk to them ("awareness leads to dialogue"). Once the subject has been raised, appropriate support will also be given ("dialogue leads to action"). As far as support is concerned, a number of scenarios are assumed:

- Pessimistic scenario: The confidantes take on reading and writing tasks to a large extent, without encouraging people to learn for themselves. As a result, they conceal the problem and might even it make it worse in the medium term.
- Optimistic scenario: The confidantes provide support, they also involve the person affected in reading and writing exercises. This results either in informal learning scenarios as part of the confidante role, or the confidante establishes contact to adult basic education.

During this process, ideally only small transmission losses (Figure 1) occur. Virtually everyone who becomes aware of a situation, also talks about it. Nearly everyone who seeks a dialogue goes on to provide support.
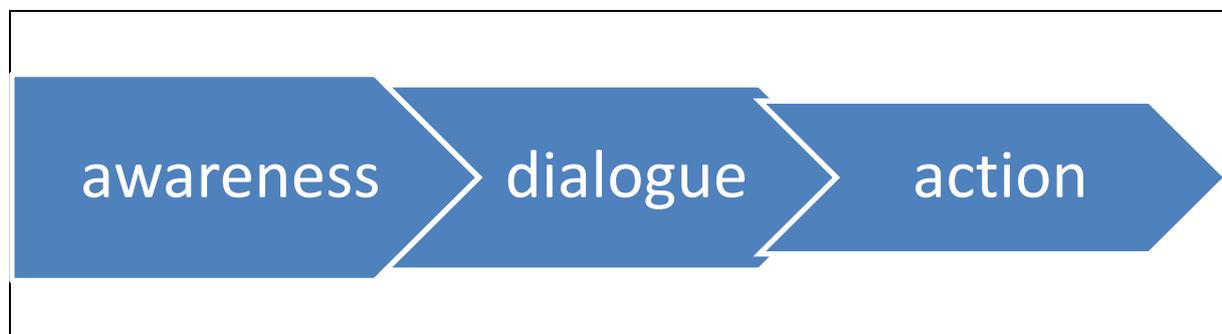

Figure 1: Ideal progression as regards confidantes

However, after empirical examination this over-optimistic expectation has to be distinctly relativised. Only subgroups of confidantes follow this ideal pattern. Awareness of the problem does not automatically lead to the people involved talking about the situation. In addition, talking about the situation does not necessarily lead to support (Figure 2). The results of the individual stages in this process are discussed in the following chapters.
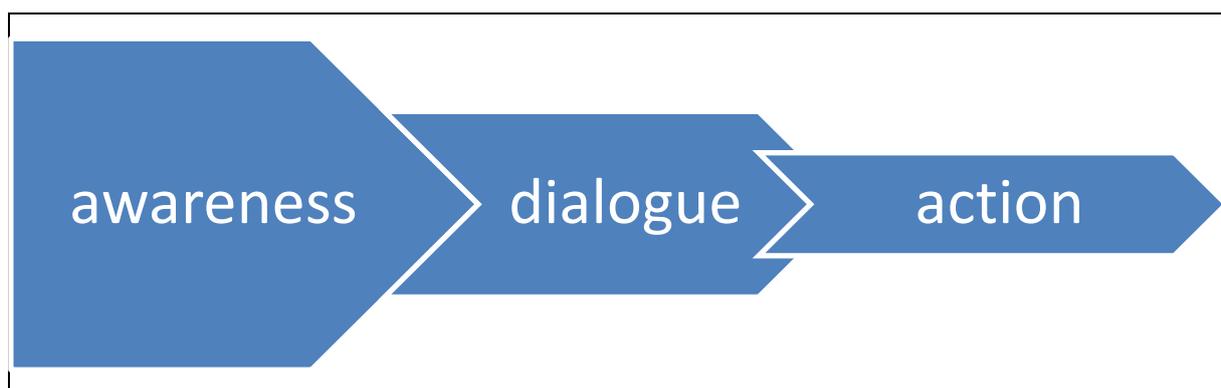
Figure 2: Actual progression of the confidante role

5.1 Awareness

Around 40 per cent of adults in Hamburg know someone who they are certain (or at least suspect) has difficulties with reading and writing. A small percentage of this group only knows of the person affected from hearsay. In some cases the confidantes even know more than one affected person. But where does this lead to? One expectation, which is related to the research of the milieu, is that potential learners can be addressed indirectly via this milieu. But does awareness directly lead to the situation being discussed?

5.2 Discussing the situation

In at least 61 per cent of cases where people were aware of the situation, there is a relatively strong degree of openness between the confidante and person affected. Either the person affected confides in the confidante by "partially outing" some of the problems (cf. Nienkemper/Bonna 2010, p. 217; Grotlüschen/Nienkemper/Bonna 2014, p. 69) or the confidantes opens the dialogue in case he or she observes low literacy performance. In many situations, confidantes describe that no further dialogue was necessary because the low literacy performance is evident ("It's obvious.").

Despite this mainly frank and open atmosphere almost one in two confidantes (46.7%) said that he/she does not talk to the person affected about the situation. Around 37 per cent talk openly about the situation; 12 per cent talk about it in a more indirect manner. Awareness of poor reading and writing skills does *not* necessarily lead to continuous dialogue.

One frequently given reason for not talking (Table 7) is that the relationship between the two parties does not foster any communication ("There is no space for this type of a discussion in our relationship.", "It's none of my business.", "I don't know the person well enough."). Another reason given is that confidantes themselves feel uncomfortable with the idea of talking about the situation, or assume that the other person is not willing to talk about it. Almost one in four states that the topic is completely off-limits. However, as shown above, this is more frequently the case in families. Creating taboos is not as widespread as usually assumed.

Table 7: Reasons for not talking about the problem

Why don't you talk about the problem? (Multiple answers possible)	Number	Percentage
Our relationship is not one where we can talk about it.	153	58.3%
It's none of my business.	142	53.9%
We don't know each other well enough, I hardly know them.	128	48.8%
I imagine it would be very uncomfortable.	100	38.1%
They have made it clear that they don't want to talk about it.	82	31.1%
Based on experience, the topic is off-limits for this person.	59	22.4%
Because I felt that I would have to then take responsibility.	42	16.1%
There is/was no need.	10	3.7%
The person affected doesn't believe their literacy is a problem.	3	1.3%
None of the above.	9	3.4%
No answer/ don't know	4	1.4%

N = 263 confidantes, who do not talk to the person affected about the situation. The percentages are based on this numerical basis, as multiple answers were possible.

5.3 Support

It can be displayed – as could be expected – that talking about the situation and support generally correlate positively. Anyone who has an open and communicative relationship, i.e. talks openly about the situation, is generally providing a form of support (Figure 3, top section). However, a problem is also sometimes discussed by both parties, but no support is given. Possible reasons are that the problems of the person affected are not considered serious, or that the confidantes are afraid of compromising the other person.

Vice versa the situation is less clear: People who are aware of the problem, but do not talk to the person affected about it, generally do not provide any support (58%). But even in these constellations, without open, or at least, direct discussion, one in three confidantes support the person affected (Figure 3, bottom section). This suggests a pragmatic approach to the situation, as shown in the qualitative study, in particular in work-related capacities (cf. Riekmann 2015) and also how it is presented in the SAPfA study. Here, as an important reason for providing support confidantes in certain industries say that "The work had to be done." Such pragmatic assistance is always also conceivable and possible, without having to address the subject in more detail (cf. Ehmig 2015, pp. 40-43).
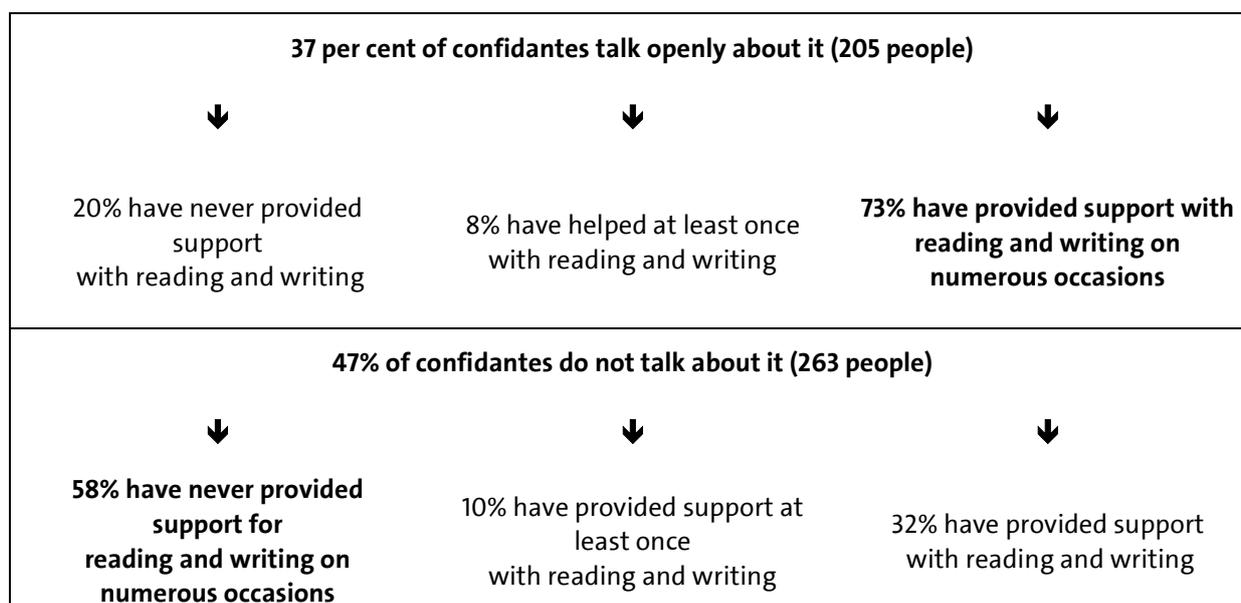

Figure 3: Talking about the problem and providing support

All in all, the majority of the confidantes provide support in different forms predominated, but only just. Overall, some 58 per cent of confidantes have provided support to the people affected once or at several occasions. Overall, confidantes provide support not very frequently. Two thirds of those who have provided support more than once, do so at most once a month or less (Table 8).

Table 8: Frequency of support

	Number	Percentage
Daily/nearly daily	27	9.6%
About once a week	56	19.9%
About once a month	63	22.4%
More seldom	111	39.5%
No longer	24	8.5%
	281	100.0%

N = 281 confidantes, who have already supported the person affected on more than one occasion

The frequency of this support varies vastly depending on how aware people are of the problem. In this case work-related areas should be mentioned where, probably because of contact among colleagues, 45 per cent of confidantes provide support at least once a week, or even daily. The results of the study and the SAPfA study also show clear parallels (cf. Ehmig 2015).

5.4 Interface function – indicating possible support

A key question from the perspective of adult education research is whether awareness of the situation and talking about the situation means that confidantes deliberately encourage learning. Empirical evidence shows that this is only the case in approximately one in three situations (Table 9). Besides indicating learning options in the form of reading and writing courses, there is clearly a whole range of informal learning scenarios. These manifest themselves when the qualitative study data is analysed (cf. Riekmann 2015).

Table 9: Encouragement to improve reading and writing skills

	Number	Percentage
Attempts to encourage the person affected to improve their reading and writing skills	177	31.5%
Does not try	358	63.7%
No answer	27	4.8%
	562	100.0%

N = 562 confidantes

Only a very small percentage of confidantes indicated courses as a way of learning. At first glance this is surprising since the majority of confidantes know about courses for adults to improve their basic skills. More than 90 per cent of adults know that courses exist for adults to learn how to read and write, or improve their reading and writing skills. The percentage of confidantes who are aware of this is even slightly higher again. Does this mean that confidantes convey this information as an informal piece of advice in passing? Do they in fact act as an interface?

Only an average of 20 per cent of confidantes who are aware of the availability of courses, point them out as an option to the people affected. This percentage varies depending on the type of literacy problem. In cases where confidantes assume[5] there are serious difficulties with reading and writing, one third of them (31%) recommend attending a course. If they believe the problems are less serious

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[5] The interviewees in the Hamburg telephone sample were asked to describe the reading and writing skills of the person affected. For this purpose, self-assessment items from the AlphaPanel were deployed (cf. Rosenbladt/Bilger 2011, p. 25). In this respect, the differentiations based on competence levels in the study are external ascriptions, which compared to empirical competency assessment are weak indicators, and should therefore be interpreted with some caution.

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and notice just incorrect spelling, also in commonplace vocabulary, then only 15 per cent recommend attending a course.

This can mean different things. It is conceivable that the literacy problems are so small that from the confidante's perspective it does not seem appropriate to recommend attending a course.

A second explanation might be that the confidante does consider that professional support in the form of a course is required, but might be unaware that there are appropriate courses for this level of skill. In this case, they would primarily assume that reading and writing courses, as offered by adult education centres and other providers, are mainly courses for alphabetization, where reading and writing are learnt from scratch. This assumption is supported by results of research on participants in adult basic education (cf. Grotlüschen/Nienkemper/Bonna 2014, p. 64).

However, even in cases where confidantes observed serious problems with reading and writing, two-thirds of confidantes made no recommendation to attend a course. Where attending a course is not recommended, there are two main reasons for this. Firstly, confidantes mention that the person affected does not view the situation as important enough. This is probably true in many cases from the subjective perspective affected. Corresponding findings from the research outlined at the start on the lack of participation in further education support this argument. Nevertheless this fact also alludes to a critical point. If confidantes are seen as gatekeepers, who can direct adults with poor literacy skills towards institutionalised further education, then this argument ("The affected person does not view the situation as important enough.") can also be used as an exit strategy, to free oneself from any clearly problematic entanglement.

The second reason as to why, despite being aware of courses and assuming that serious problems with reading and writing exist, no recommendation is made to attend a course, is that the confidantes know too little about the options available. This is remarkable and also illustrates that confidantes are obviously only have a hazy idea that courses exist. However, it would seem that they are not aware of the details of course formats, levels, cost, funding support, course duration etc. in order to provide corresponding advice.

6. Conclusions

The results of the quantitative study are ambiguous as regards whether the key to reaching functionally illiterate adults (and also adults with less serious reading and writing problems) lies in their supporting networks. To begin with, the unexpectedly high rate of awareness of literacy problems, as demonstrated by around 40 per cent of the adult population of Hamburg, enables verification that these problems are definitely noticed and perceived. The optimistic interpretation is that this network of confidantes offers considerable potential for "double addressing" (*doppelte Adressierung*), where both the potential learner and their support network are addressed (cf. Grotlüschen/Riekmann/Buddeberg 2014).

At the same time, this potential is not limited to specific individual sections of society. A programme supported by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF, Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung) focused on workplace-based literacy schemes which was justified because the majority of functionally illiterate adults are employed (cf. Grotlüschen/Riekmann/Buddeberg 2012, p. 33ff.) and also given the fact that there is widespread awareness between colleagues of difficulties with writing (cf. Ehmig 2015). Simultaneously however, this perspective also excludes people affected who are not involved in these types of networks through work. The latter group includes people who are at home (primarily women). This group was previously identified in the leo. study, as particularly at risk of exclusion from further education (cf. Buddeberg 2012, p. 204f.). The empirical findings of the study also suggest assuming very diverse sources of awareness and support, which also include family, friends or acquaintances and neighbours, as well as work. In addition, confidantes should not be sought in certain milieus, if they are to act as double addressees when it comes to adult education. On the contrary, the empirical evidence demonstrates that there is awareness of adults with difficulties with reading and writing in all sections of society.

There is an essentially seemingly positive conclusion of the potential of confidantes to act as an interface between people affected and adult education facilities. However, a significant limitation should also be mentioned. As has been demonstrated, the potential of this network of confidantes to

act as informal education advisers remains largely untapped. The desired low-loss sequence from awareness to dialogue and from dialogue to encouragement to learn does not exist in an ideal pattern. Awareness does not necessarily result in talking about the situation; equally talking about the situation does not necessarily result in support and encouragement.

A particularly important reason appears to be that awareness of the options available for adults to improve their basic education is too fragmentary to be able to provide well-founded and appropriate recommendations about learning opportunities. It seems that it is not enough to merely inform people in general that reading and writing courses *exist*. Instead, it appears to be advisable to provide precise information (e.g. via information campaigns) about course formats, course levels, the number of hours involved and potential financial support. This applies to both the people affected as well as the potential double addressees in their personal support network.

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