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**Department of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology**

**Research project for the Degree Speech-Language Pathology**

**Experiences and Practices of South African Speech-Language Therapists Related to  
Literacy**

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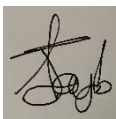
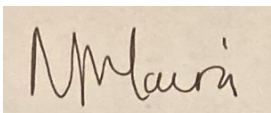
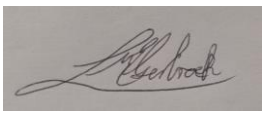
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## **DEFINITIONS OF TERMS THAT WILL BE USED FREQUENTLY**

### **Speech-Language Therapists (SLTs)**

SLTs assist in the promotion of normal communication, as well as the identification, prevention, assessment, diagnoses, treatment, and rehabilitation of a variety of developmental or acquired speech, language, and oral disorders. SLTs in South Africa play essential roles in literacy development (usually in close collaboration with a teacher). These include prevention, assessment, intervention, programme design, training, data gathering, analysis, and compliance (Wium & Louw, 2013).

### **American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)**

ASHA is the American professional, scientific, and credentialing association for audiologists, speech-language therapists, and various other members in the human communication sciences (ASHA, 2023).

### **South African Speech-Language-Hearing Association (SASLHA)**

SASLHA is an association of speech-language therapists and audiologists in South Africa. It promotes the professions to the public and protects the best interests of its members. SASLHA provides guidelines for best practices, encourages members to aspire to provide the highest standards of ethical conduct, and, through providing continuing professional development (CPD) and other learning activities, provides opportunities for improving professional competence.

### **Phonological awareness**

Phonological awareness is the awareness of the sound structure of a language and the ability to consciously analyse and manipulate this structure via a range of tasks, such as speech sound segmentation and blending at the word, onset-rime, syllable and phonemic levels (ASHA, 2024).

### **Phonemic awareness**

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate the individual sounds in spoken words (Chard & Dickson, 1999).

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS / ACRONYMS

<b>Abbreviation/acronym</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
ASHA	American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
HPCSA	Health Professions Council of South Africa
PA	Phonological awareness
PhA	Phonemic awareness
SASLHA	South African Speech-Language-Hearing Association
SASLT	South African speech-language therapist
SLT	Speech-language therapist

## **Abstract**

**Background:** Literacy development is a critical aspect of language acquisition, with speech-language therapists (SLTs) playing a pivotal role in supporting literacy skills. In South Africa, the unique linguistic and cultural landscape presents specific challenges and opportunities for SLTs in addressing literacy difficulties.

**Aim:** This study aimed to explore the experiences and practices of South African Speech-Language Therapists (SASLTs) related to literacy.

**Method:** Using a cross-sectional survey design, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 31 SASLTs through an online questionnaire.

**Results:** The results showed that 90% of SASLTs currently work with literacy difficulties, primarily focusing on phonological awareness and phonics. However, less attention is given to emergent literacy skills such as print conventions and writing. Many participants indicated a need for additional training and continuing education to address broader literacy development, including the connection between spoken and written language. The study also identified challenges such as inadequate undergraduate training, limited access to culturally relevant resources, and difficulties in multidisciplinary collaboration. SASLTs expressed a strong interest in professional development, especially in evidence-based literacy intervention.

**Conclusion:** The findings underscore the need for expanded literacy-focused training and resources, interdisciplinary collaboration, and culturally appropriate tools to improve literacy outcomes in South Africa. These implications are significant for enhancing SLT education and clinical practice, promoting a more comprehensive approach to literacy intervention that integrates both foundational and emergent literacy skills

**Keywords:** literacy development, speech-language therapy, emergent literacy skills, South African Speech-Language Therapists, experience and practices

## 1. Introduction

Literacy is the ability to use reading and writing for different contexts (Tompkins, 2017) and it involves a continuum of learning to enable individuals to attain their goals, expand their knowledge and maximise their potential (Montoya, 2018). Unlike oral language, literacy is not a biological natural skill (Snow, 2020) and, therefore, it requires further instruction for the individual to become fully competent. Children should, however, see and interact with print in their close environment before the formal instruction of literacy; as exposure to print and understanding print concepts aid in the development of emergent literacy skills (Giacovazzi et al., 2021).

Emergent literacy includes various behaviours and abilities, including the knowledge relating to the alphabet, symbolic representation and phonological awareness (Rhode, 2015). Phonological awareness is the ability to recognise and manipulate sound properties of spoken words, such as syllables, initial sounds, rhyming parts, and phonemes (Kilpatrick, 2016). Phonemic awareness is the ability to distinguish the smallest sound unit of oral language that makes a difference in the meaning of a word (Lynch, 2016). Phonemic awareness enables individuals to identify, manipulate, and understand the individual phonemes in words which is essential for the development of successful literacy skills including reading and spelling (Alhumsy, 2020). Phonological and phonemic awareness are fundamental abilities required for writing, spelling, decoding, and general reading proficiency. In turn, having adequate literacy skills is the foundation of lifelong learning and development due to its impact on education, social participation, and individual cognitive development (Elias, 2016).

Inadequate literacy skills have significant repercussions in the school context and society at large when considering the direct link between illiteracy and poverty, as well as the impact on economic growth (Cree et al., 2022). Challenges in the acquisition of literacy skills are particularly pronounced in South Africa, where the latest international assessment that measures and compares reading literacy among learners in various countries, the Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS) revealed a literacy crisis (Department of Basic Education, 2023). According to the PIRLS, 78% of South African Grade 4 learners have not yet acquired the basic reading skills required for academic success. In the most recent PIRLS report from 2021, it is indicated that 81% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa cannot read to locate and recall explicit information (Van Staden & Roux, 2022). The consequences of such deficiencies in literacy are dire, as Naiken (2016) suggests that individuals who experience reading difficulties are at a higher risk of dropping out of school early or performing poorly in Grade 12. The stark reality that many students lack basic literacy abilities highlights

the pressing need to investigate the causes of illiteracy and consider its complex effects on people and communities.

Illiteracy is associated with a wide range of poor life outcomes, including long-term illness, unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion, as reported by the World Literacy Foundation (Cree et al., 2022). Govender and Hugo (2020) as well as Caroulos and Moonsamy (2019) indicate that basic literacy skills directly correlate with economic development and stability within a country. Given the tremendous influence that literacy skills have on individual growth and social well-being, it is evident that effectively addressing literacy challenges is crucial. Along with teachers and parents, speech-language therapists (SLTs) are vital role players in this effort. It is therefore important to understand the roles and responsibilities of SLTs in literacy acquisition.

SLTs encourage the development of early language skills, foster rich literacy surroundings, and raise awareness of the value of early intervention (Oosthuizen et al., 2016). They identify potential risk factors for literacy challenges and put relief measures in place. This includes literacy assessment and intervention which are essential components of the SLTs' scope of practice. To assess language and literacy, SLTs use a variety of standardised, non-standardised, and culturally appropriate methods tailored to the client's abilities and needs (Alvarado, 2018). Additionally, SLTs in South Africa frequently employ a multilingual approach to literacy assessment and intervention, ensuring that the diverse linguistic backgrounds of their clients are addressed effectively. This approach aims to assist learners in their native language while also promoting proficiency in the language of instruction (Oosthuizen et al., 2016). It is evident that SLTs play a crucial role within schools by assisting teachers in addressing literacy challenges through specialised interventions and support.

The importance of SLTs in addressing literacy challenges is highlighted by several studies that explore their current practices and experiences. An American study investigating the experiences and perceptions of school-based SLTs related to literacy indicated that most SLTs had been introduced to reading and writing concepts during their undergraduate or postgraduate studies (Bridges & Kelley, 2023). However, the study found that the exposure was not necessarily through courses dedicated to literacy (Bridges & Kelley, 2023). Additionally, the study found that participants felt their clinical training in this area was somewhat limited and expressed a desire for more extensive training in reading and writing interventions (Bridges & Kelley, 2023). Similarly, a study investigating the self-rated confidence, knowledge, and skills of Australian SLTs in crucial literacy practices for children and adolescents revealed varied performance levels in measuring knowledge and skills related to essential literacy aspects (Stephenson et al., 2023). SLTs predominantly rated their

phonological and phonemic intervention skills as "good" or "excellent" while showing lower confidence in providing interventions across other literacy areas. The majority of SLTs indicated insufficient preservice training for literacy practice.

In the South African context, where linguistic and cultural diversity presents unique challenges, similar studies related to literacy and the SLTs' experiences are limited. A study by Erasmus et al. (2013) investigated whether privately practising SLTs in South Africa are fulfilling their role in providing services to adolescents with written language and reading difficulties. This study revealed that many SLTs perceived the current literacy assessment tools as culturally inappropriate, and some even regarded them as unsuitable for the intended age group. Despite acknowledging their role in the management of literacy challenges, nearly all the participants in that study felt that SLTs were not adequately involved in the identification, evaluation, and intervention of adolescent written-language difficulties. Geertsema and Le Roux (2020) reported similar findings whilst exploring the knowledge and practices of SASLTs regarding developmental dyslexia management; reporting that a significant number of SLTs showed minimal involvement in diagnosing and treating specific learning disorders. SLTs in South Africa furthermore reported that there was a lack of undergraduate training in providing services to individuals affected by language and literacy difficulties in a study conducted to determine the knowledge, needs and perspectives of South African professionals working with children with developmental dyslexia (Altin et al., 2023). Additionally, it was noted that interventions were often shaped by personal experience rather than existing research (Altin et al., 2023). The SLTs reported that their confidence levels were low and did not feel prepared to manage individuals with literacy difficulties such as Developmental Dyslexia (Altin et al., 2023).

It is evident that while a number of studies have been conducted exploring various elements of SLTs' experiences related to literature, these studies did not necessarily include an in-depth investigation of SLTs' experiences and practices specifically related to literature. Furthermore, the existing literature, where more in-depth studies were conducted, is dated, resulting in a dearth of current research evidence in this regard. Consequently, further research is warranted to thoroughly explore South African SLTs' experiences and practices regarding literacy. The research question is therefore: What are the experiences and practices of South African speech-language therapists related to literacy?

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Research Aim:**

The aim of this study was to determine the experiences and practices of South African Speech-Language Therapists (SASLTs) related to literacy.

### **2.2 Research Study Design**

A cross-sectional survey research design was employed. This design allowed for easy and relatively fast data collection using a questionnaire, offering flexibility and the simultaneous investigation of multiple variables. Data collection was inexpensive and occurred at a single point in time, reducing costs (Connelly, 2016). The survey design further allowed for the collection of data from a large population (Odoh & Chinedum, 2014).

### **2.3 Study Setting**

The study was conducted online using Qualtrics, with the questionnaire distributed through hyperlinks in social media posts. Utilising online platforms was both cost-effective and time-efficient, providing broader access across diverse geographical areas. The researchers sought permission from social media administrators and professional associations, such as the South African Speech-Language-Hearing Association (SASLHA) and the National Black Speech, Language and Hearing Association (NBSLHA), to share the questionnaire. Participants completed the questionnaire using electronic devices like smartphones, laptops, or tablets, making the physical setting dependent on their location at the time of completion.

### **2.4 Study Population and Sampling**

The target population were qualified SLTs registered with the Health Professionals Council of South Africa (HPCSA), practising in South Africa. A total of 31 SLTs participated in the study. Non-probability purposive and convenience sampling methods were used. Convenience sampling was used to select readily available participants for the study (Brink et al., 2018). In purposive sampling, participants are selected based on their representation of the study phenomenon (Brink et al., 2018). These non-probability sampling methods allowed the researchers to collect information about the study phenomenon from a readily available population knowledgeable about the phenomenon.

The demographic profile of the participants revealed that most participants were employed in school-based settings (58%) and private practice (52%). The majority had over 10 years of experience, and 65% held a Bachelor's degree. A significant majority (90%) are currently involved in treating literacy difficulties, with all participants having past involvement in this area. The majority of participants (39%) reported managing a client load of more than 15-20. The results are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

*Demographic Information*

<b>Current Employment Setting (n=31)</b>		
	<b>Percentage (%)</b>	<b>Frequency (n)</b>
School-based setting	58	18
Private practice	52	16
Healthcare facility	16	5
Academic institution	13	4
Other: (please specify)	0	0
<b>Years of Experience (n=31)</b>		
	<b>Percentage (%)</b>	<b>Frequency (n)</b>
<1	0	0
1-5	32	10
5-10	23	7
10-15	3	1
15-20	16	5
20 or more	26	8
<b>Educational Qualification (n=31)</b>		
	<b>Percentage (%)</b>	<b>Frequency (n)</b>
Bachelor's	65	20
Master's	32	10
Doctorate	3	1
Other (please explain)	0	0
<b>Practices in Treating Literacy Difficulties (n=31)</b>		
<b>Current Involvement in treating Literacy Difficulties</b>		

	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)
Yes	90	28
No	10	3
Past Involvement in treating Literacy Difficulties		
	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)
Yes	100	31
No	0	0
Client Load (n=31)		
	Percentage (%)	Frequency (n)
1-5	19	6
5-10	13	4
10-15	19	6
15-20	39	12
20 or more	10	3

\* Note: Participants were allowed to select multiple options for Current Employment Setting

## 2.5 Data Collection

### 2.5.1 Data collection tool:

Data were collected using an online questionnaire (APPENDIX E) hosted on the University of Pretoria's (UP) Qualtrics database. Questionnaires are a fast, efficient, and inexpensive means of gathering large amounts of data, and participants are more inclined to answer the questions honestly since they feel more anonymous (Brink et al., 2018).

The questionnaire used in this study was developed by incorporating and adapting questions from an existing questionnaire used in related studies by Bridges and Kelly (2023). Bridges and Kelly (2023) explored the experiences and perceptions of school-based SLTs in the USA related to literacy. The questionnaire was tailored to the specific needs of the South African research population. It was divided into five sections. Section A collected the demographic information of the participants. Section B determined the knowledge of the SASLTs related to literacy. Section C explored their experiences related to literacy, while Section D assessed the SASLTs' practices related to literacy. Finally, Section E identified the training needs of the SLTs related to literacy.

The questionnaire included close- and open-ended questions. A Likert scale was used to record the attitudes and feelings of the participants. Participants selected the most appropriate option using scaling responses (e.g., never, rarely, sometimes, frequently). The scaled

responses were organised in a ranking system to facilitate data analysis. The level of measurement included nominal and ordinal scales. The information obtained was kept confidential, and Microsoft Excel was used to organise the raw data.

### **2.5.2 Procedures for data collection:**

The researchers shared the aim of the research with the administrators of the various social media platforms including the professional associations, like SASLHA and NBSLHA, requesting permission to use their email lists and platforms to access the sample population. Letters of approval (APPENDIX B) were sent to the social media group administrators to gain this permission. Once ethical clearance was received, the researchers shared the approval letter with these administrators, who approached the study population on behalf of the researchers through their email lists and social media posts. The participants were informed of the study, its aim and benefits, and why their participation was requested. This was done through an infographic (APPENDIX F) containing the link to the questionnaire. With the permission of the social media platform administrators, follow-up posts were sent to the participants on a weekly basis for four weeks.

The link to the questionnaire was distributed to social media platforms and professional associations via WhatsApp and Facebook. The questionnaire, created on Qualtrics, took no longer than 20 minutes to complete.

### **2.6 Validity and Reliability**

To ensure content validity, all relevant variables were included in the questionnaire. This, along with the instrument's reliability, helped to guarantee accurate and consistent results. The adaptation and use of a pre-existing questionnaire (Bridges and Kelly, 2023) in this study added to the instrument's credibility and reliability. Additionally, a pilot study was conducted using the adapted data collection instrument to assess its validity and reliability before formal data collection. Participants of the pilot study included three staff members from the Department of Speech-Pathology and Audiology at the University of Pretoria. The pilot study revealed no significant issues that necessitated alterations to the original research design or instruments. The participants found the questions to be clear, unambiguous, and relevant to the study's objectives.

### **2.7 Data Analysis**

Closed-ended questions collected numerical information that was readily converted into statistics, percentages, or scores (Brink et al., 2018). Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data collected. Descriptive statistics explain and summarise data using measures such as frequency distributions, measures of central tendency, variability, and relationships

(Brink et al., 2018). Frequency distributions express the most typical or average scores in a distribution. Measures of central tendency express the most typical or average scores in a distribution. Variability describes how widespread values were in a distribution.

A qualitative approach was utilised in analysing open-ended questions. The responses were coded and categorised to identify common themes or categories evident from the data. The open-ended questions were also compared (comparative analysis) to the close-ended responses. They were analysed according to patterns or themes that appeared in the open-ended responses, which either aligned or contradicted the responses from the close-ended questions.

## **2.8 Ethical Considerations**

### ***2.8.1 Informed consent and transparency:***

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles. Participants were provided with an informed consent form (APPENDIX C), outlining their rights and responsibilities. This form ensured voluntary participation and addressed potential risks and benefits. The study adhered to principles of beneficence and non-maleficence, prioritising participant well-being and minimising harm. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

### ***2.8.2 Plagiarism/Scientific Anonymity/Privacy:***

The study addressed the principle of justice, particularly concerning confidentiality and anonymity. All the information provided by the participants will be kept strictly confidential and used solely for the purpose of this study. Participants answered the questionnaire anonymously, ensuring the protection of their personal information in adherence to the Protection of Personal Information Act (2013).

### ***2.8.3 Ethical Approval:***

Prior to the commencement of the research study, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria. Ethics reference number: SLPA2024/06 (APPENDIX A).

## **2.9 Data Storage and Security:**

The data collected in this research study will be stored on the UP - Data Repository for 10 years, to ensure that the study complies with all UP regulations and the Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act. Access to the data will be restricted to the researcher and the research

supervisors, as well as a statistician who assisted in processing the data. The research participants will also be allowed to access the research results upon request.

### 3. Results

The results are presented according to the objectives of the study, which were (a) to determine the knowledge of SASLTs related to literacy, (b) to determine the experiences of SASLTs related to literacy, (c) to determine the practices of SASLTs related to literacy and (d) to identify the training needs of SASLTs with regard to literacy.

#### 3.1 Knowledge of the SLTs related to literacy:

The study assessed SLTs' knowledge of literacy by investigating which professionals they identified as working with literacy difficulties and their understanding of (a) foundational literacy concepts (b) the link between literacy and language difficulties and (c) their familiarity with effective instructional practices. The results are as follows:

##### *Professionals Working with Literacy Difficulties:*

Figure 1 illustrates the primary professionals that the SLTs in this study identified as responsible for working with individuals who have literacy difficulties. It is evident that the participants consider SLTs as the primary professionals responsible for working with individuals who have literacy challenges.

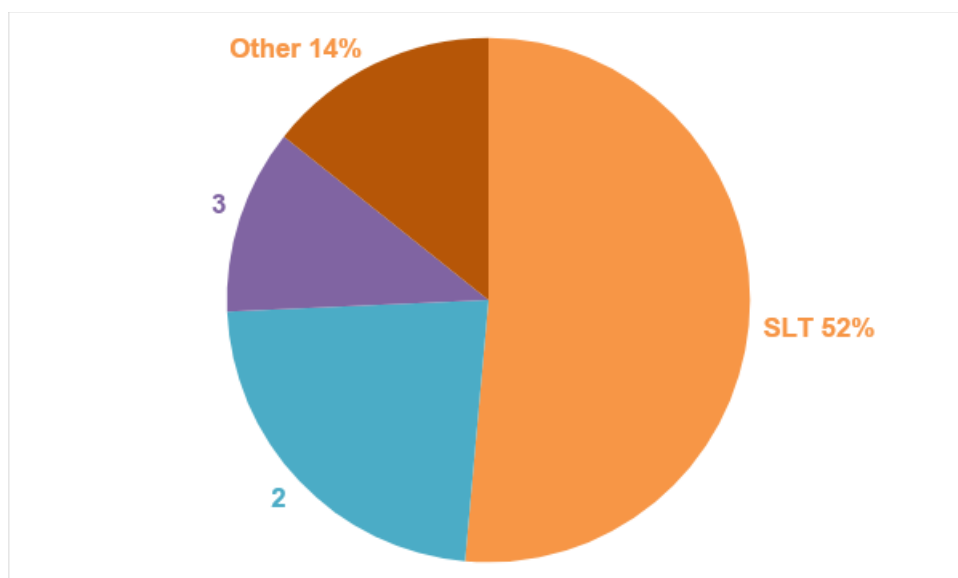


Figure 1  
*Primary Professionals for Literacy Support*

### *SLTs' Understanding of Literacy*

Table 2 provides a summary of the SLTs understanding of foundational literacy concepts, the link between literacy and language difficulties and their familiarity with effective instructional practices. The following is observed:

**Foundational Concepts:** A significant majority of participants (77%) agreed or strongly agreed that spoken language provides the foundation for reading and writing. Additionally, 90% believed that spoken and written language have a reciprocal relationship, with each supporting the other in developing overall language and literacy competence.

**Association with Language Difficulties:** Most participants (77%) agreed or strongly agreed that children with spoken language problems frequently have difficulty learning to read and write. Conversely, a substantial portion (90%) disagreed that children with spoken language difficulties are unlikely to have issues with reading comprehension, indicating a recognition of the link between these challenges.

**Instructional Impact:** Nearly all participants (93%) agreed or strongly agreed that instruction in spoken oral language can result in growth in written language, and 74% felt that instruction in written language could lead to improvements in spoken language.

**Instructional Focus:** Opinions were mixed on the focus of instruction, with 51% agreeing or strongly agreeing that reading and writing instruction should prioritise word recognition before comprehension, while 55% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this approach. Table 2 depicts these results.

Table 2:

*SLTs Knowledge (n=31)*

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Spoken language provides the foundation for the development of reading and writing.	6	19.35	1	3.23	13	41.94	11	35.48
Spoken and written language have a reciprocal relationship, such that each build on the other to result in general language and literacy competence, starting early and continuing through childhood into adulthood.	2	6.45	1	3.23	12	38.71	16	51.61
Children with spoken language problems frequently have difficulty learning to read and write.	2	6.45	5	16.13	12	38.71	12	38.71
Children with spoken language difficulties are unlikely to have difficulty with reading comprehension.	8	25.81	20	64.52	1	3.23	1	3.23
Children with reading and writing problems frequently have difficulty with spoken language.	1	3.23	13	41.94	8	25.81	9	29.03
For most children, reading develops naturally, without instruction.	6	19.35	23	74.9	0	0	1	3.23
Instruction in spoken oral language can result in growth in written language.	0	0	2	6.45	18	58.06	11	35.48
Instruction in written language can result in growth in spoken language.	0	0	7	22.58	14	45.16	9	29.03
Instruction in reading and writing should focus on word recognition before comprehension.	5	16.13	12	38.71	10	32.26	4	12.90

These results suggest a solid understanding among SLTs of the interconnectedness of spoken and written language and the importance of targeted instruction to support literacy development.

### 3.2 Experiences related to literacy

Table 3 presents the SLTs' experiences related to literacy. The results are as follows:

**Confidence in Identifying Literacy Difficulties:** A significant portion of SLTs (80.65%) "agree" or "strongly agree" that they feel competent in identifying clients with reading and writing difficulties, indicating a strong sense of self-assurance in their diagnostic abilities.

**Need for Collaboration:** Many SLTs (58.06%) agreed or strongly agreed that they appreciate assistance and direction from other professionals, such as reading specialists, when developing treatment plans. However, 41.94% disagreed, reflecting some preference for independent practice.

**Adequacy of Training:** While 64.52% of SLTs feel that their clinical and educational training is sufficient for delivering interventions for literacy difficulties, 35.48% express some concerns, indicating a need for additional training or support.

**Expertise in Literacy:** A strong majority of SLTs (77.42%) believe they have the expertise to collaborate with other educational professionals and share knowledge about literacy difficulties, reflecting their confidence in working across disciplines.

**Need for Additional Coursework:** Most SLTs (87.10%) acknowledge that they could have benefited from more coursework and training in literacy during their education, highlighting a gap in their formal training.

**Interest in Continuing Education:** A significant majority (90.32%) are interested in continuing education opportunities related to literacy, emphasising the importance they place on ongoing professional development to enhance their skills and knowledge.

Table 3:

*Experiences related to literacy(n=31)*

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
I feel competent in my ability to identify clients with reading and writing difficulties.	4	12.90	2	6.45	10	32.26	15	48.39
I usually like having assistance and direction from another professional or “reading specialist” when developing appropriate treatment for a client with reading and writing difficulties.	0	0	13	41.94	14	45.16	4	12.90
I have enough clinical and educational training to deliver intervention to clients with reading and writing difficulties.	2	6.45	9	29.03	12	38.71	8	25.81
I have expertise in reading and writing difficulties and could share knowledge and collaborate with teachers and other educational professionals.	3	9.68	4	12.90	14	45.16	10	32.26
I could have benefited from receiving additional coursework and training in reading and writing difficulties.	3	9.68	1	3.23	14	45.16	13	41.94
I could benefit from continuing education and other learning opportunities in reading and writing difficulties.	3	9.68	0	0	11	35.48	17	54.84

To gain a deeper understanding of SLTs' experiences, we analysed their open-ended responses which revealed several key themes regarding the challenges they encounter when working with clients who have literacy difficulties. These challenges can be broadly categorised as follows:

**Systemic Issues:** The responses highlight several systemic issues affecting SLTs working with children facing literacy challenges. One key issue is late intervention, with many children being referred for support too late. As one participant noted, "Intervention is not done timeously... resulting in teenagers who are functionally illiterate." This delay often makes it harder to address entrenched difficulties. Another added, "Children with literacy challenges often are not referred for speech therapy services early enough."

Limited access to support, especially for disadvantaged clients, is another significant concern. Additionally, there are resource constraints, particularly for Afrikaans-speaking learners. One therapist commented, "There are a lot of resources/programs available in English, but very few/none in Afrikaans." This lack of resources also extends to standardised assessments, as one SLT noted, "Access to appropriate and affordable assessment material is needed."

The responses also reveal challenges with inadequate teacher training and teacher resistance. One SLT shared, "When seeing their learners, the teachers are uninterested and reluctant on applying your strategies in class with the learner." Another added, "Carry over of therapy to the classroom is lacking due to lack of collaboration between professionals."

Finally, the shortage of SLTs and resources in public education compounds these challenges, limiting access to the necessary services. As one participant noted, "Minimal South African resources and courses equipped us to treat these clients." These systemic issues underscore the need for better resources, collaboration, and earlier intervention to support children with literacy difficulties effectively.

**Client and Family Factors:** Client and family factors also play a significant role in the success of literacy interventions. Poor parental literacy and involvement can hinder a child's progress, as noted by one participant: "Poor parental literacy and/or parental involvement in carrying over skills at home." This lack of engagement often limits the effectiveness of therapy, as important skills are not reinforced outside of the sessions. Additionally, financial constraints are a common barrier, with one therapist explaining, "Financial constraints of parents and non-compliance with homework," illustrating how financial difficulties can prevent families from accessing necessary support services and completing therapy-related tasks at home. These challenges highlight the need for more inclusive and accessible approaches to literacy intervention.

**Assessment and Intervention Issues:** Assessment and intervention challenges significantly impact the effectiveness of literacy support. Misdiagnosis and under-diagnosis are common, with delays or inaccuracies in diagnosis often leading to inappropriate interventions. As one participant noted, "Under-, or misdiagnosed. Late diagnoses." These delays prevent timely and targeted support. There is also a strong need for earlier identification of language,

reasoning, and memory difficulties, as another participant pointed out: "Children with literacy challenges often are not referred for speech therapy services early enough." Additionally, there is an inadequate focus on oral-written consistency, with many children struggling to bridge the gap between their spoken and written language skills. As one SLT observed, "The basis of phonological awareness is not there. Children are learning letter names instead of sounds and phoneme-grapheme matching." These issues highlight the need for more accurate assessments and interventions that address both oral and written language development.

**Collaboration and Carryover:** Collaboration and carryover are essential for the success of literacy interventions, yet they remain challenging. Inconsistent carryover of therapy across different settings can hinder progress, as one participant noted: "Often, it's the carryover. There needs to be consistency across the team helping the client with learning." Without this consistency, the strategies taught in therapy may not be reinforced, limiting their effectiveness. Additionally, misconceptions about learning difficulties, particularly the belief that literacy challenges equate to a lack of intelligence, can further undermine support for clients. As one therapist explained, "There's the misconception that literacy challenges equal stupidity, especially among some teachers, which is absolutely not the case." Lastly, poor collaboration between professionals, particularly between SLTs and teachers, can impede therapy progress. These issues underscore the need for greater understanding and cooperation to ensure that therapy strategies are consistently applied and clients receive the full support they need.

These themes highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of supporting clients with literacy challenges. Addressing these challenges requires an integrated approach involving collaboration between SLTs, educators, families, and policymakers.

### **3.3 SLT's practices related to literacy**

The study also explored SLTs' practices in addressing literacy. The results are as follows:

**Time Spent on Literacy Interventions:** A significant majority of SLTs reported that they spend at least half of their intervention time focused on language and literacy skills. A significant majority of SLTs prioritise language and literacy skills, with 45% dedicating 75-100% of their intervention time to these areas. Even those with a lesser focus still allocate a substantial portion of their time, with 23% spending 50-75% and 22% spending 25-50% on language and literacy. While a small percentage of SLTs (10%) allocate less than a quarter of their time to language and literacy interventions, the overall data demonstrates the critical role of these skills in their clinical practice.

**Frequency of Addressing Specific Literacy Skills:** Table 4 provides an overview of how frequently SLTs address specific literacy skills with their clients.

Table 4

*Frequency of Addressing Specific Literacy Skills*

Skill	Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Frequently	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Phonological Awareness	0	0	0	0	0	0	31	100
Conventions of print (e.g., left to right orientation)	0	0	8	25.81	12	38.71	11	35.48
Alphabet and letter recognition	1	3.23	1	3.23	7	22.58	22	10.97
Matching letters to sounds	0	0	1	3.23	6	19.35	24	77.42
Writing own name	1	3.23	18	58.06	9	29.03	3	9.68
Rhyming words and word families	0	0	3	9.68	12	38.71	16	51.61
Common prepositions (e.g., over, under, up, down)	0	0	3	9.68	18	58.06	10	32.26
Telling a personal story	0	0	2	6.45	17	54.84	12	38.71
Identifying the main idea and parts of a story	0	0	1	3.23	14	45.16	16	51.61
Answering questions about stories or text	0	0	0	0	7	22.58	24	77.42
Using context cues for comprehension	0	0	1	3.23	11	35.48	19	61.29
Communicating complete ideas orally	0	0	2	6.45	13	41.94	16	51.61

Composing and writing stories with an understandable beginning, middle, and end	0	0	6	19.35	9	29.03	16	51.61
Conventional spelling	0	0	5	16.13	8	25.81	18	58.06
Vocabulary	0	0	1	3.23	3	9.68	27	87.10
Reading aloud fluently	1	3.23	2	6.45	7	22.58	21	67.74

It is clear that SLTs consistently prioritise phonological awareness in their literacy interventions, with 100% addressing it frequently. While conventions of print were addressed less frequently by some SLTs (35.48% frequently, 38.71% sometimes, 25.81% rarely), matching letters to sounds and rhyming words were frequently addressed (77.42% and 51.61%, respectively), demonstrating their importance in early literacy.

A significant majority of SLTs also focus on comprehension skills, including identifying the main idea (51.61% frequently, 45.16% sometimes), answering questions (77.42% frequently), and using context cues (61.29% frequently, 35.48% sometimes). Additionally, SLTs frequently target skills that support both written and oral communication, such as communicating complete ideas (51.61% frequently, 41.94% sometimes) and composing stories (51.61% frequently).

Spelling and vocabulary development are also key areas of focus, with over half of SLTs addressing conventional spelling (58.06% frequently) and a large majority focusing on vocabulary (87.10% frequently). Finally, fluency in reading aloud is frequently addressed (67.74% frequently), indicating its importance in developing proficient reading skills.

### **Consumption of peer-reviewed journal articles**

On the consumption of peer-reviewed journal articles, the following distribution was found: 19.35% reported not reading any articles, 54.84% participants read between 1 and 3 articles, 9.68% individuals read between 3 and 5 articles, and 16.13% participants read more than 5 articles.

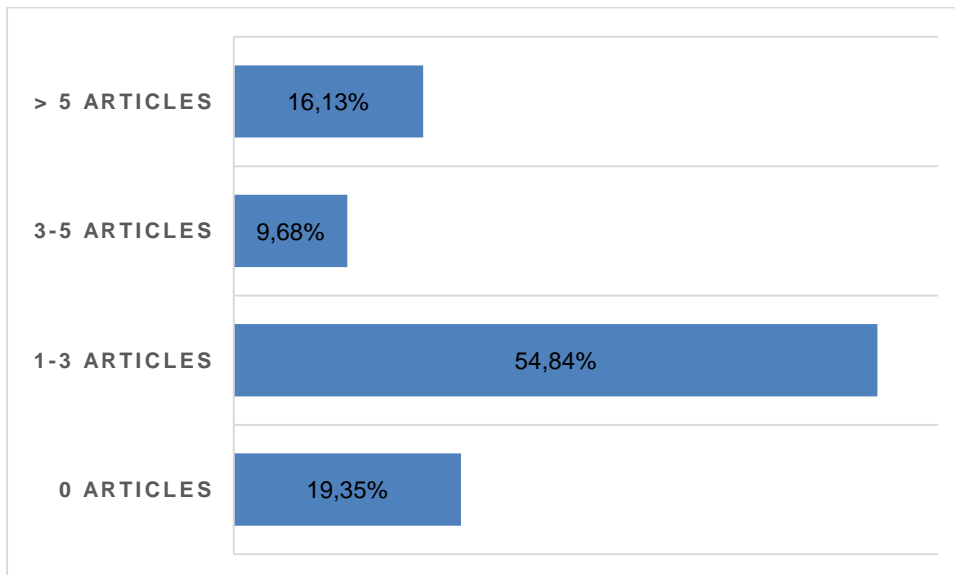


Figure 2

*Consumption of peer-reviewed journal articles*

The participants' responses to the open-ended question in this section suggest that SLTs' previous experiences have significantly shaped their practices in serving clients with reading and writing difficulties. The following key themes emerged:

**Individualised Instruction:** Therapists emphasised the importance of tailoring interventions based on individual needs. One participant noted, "It is never one size fits all," highlighting the necessity of customisation in therapeutic approaches. This tailoring process involves a deep understanding of each client's current level of functioning, as explained by one therapist, "I learned to start at the bottom to gain a better understanding of their current level of function in order to meet them where they are and to start the intervention at the right level."

**Continuous Learning:** SLTs emphasised the importance of continuous learning as integral to their practice, both through direct interactions with clients and through professional development opportunities. One therapist remarked, "I learn something new from each client that I work with and take that into my work with subsequent clients," underscoring the reciprocal nature of the therapeutic process. This commitment to learning extended to upskilling and knowledge exchange. For example, one participant shared, "Having not focused on the area as much when studying, I decided to upskill myself and do the RAVE-O course," illustrating a proactive approach to addressing gaps in expertise through specialised training.

**Collaborative Practices:**

The theme of collaborative practices was also evident, with many therapists recognising the value of working within a multidisciplinary team. One participant noted, "I work within a multidisciplinary team so discussions with the OT and teacher influence intervention as well,"

highlighting how collaboration with other professionals, such as occupational therapists (OTs) and teachers, enhances the intervention process. Another therapist reflected on the broader insights gained through these partnerships: “I have previously worked alongside OTs and educational psychologists who have broadened my understanding of literacy difficulties,” showing how cross-disciplinary collaboration can deepen understanding and improve outcomes for clients.

**Flexible Approaches:** Participants also demonstrated a strong appreciation for flexible approaches in intervention, recognising that strategies must be adapted to suit individual learning styles and needs. One participant explained, “I now explore different approaches and understand that what may work for one learner, may not work for another,” emphasising the importance of customising interventions. This flexibility ensures that therapists can meet the diverse needs of their clients, moving away from rigid, one-size-fits-all methods and instead fostering personalised, effective therapeutic experiences.

**Client-Centred Centred Focus:** Therapists placed significant emphasis on prioritising communication and understanding over technical perfection. As one therapist explained, “I’ve shifted towards less ableist goals and making literacy functional for the child, and not expecting perfection. I focus more on the content—are they expressing what they want to, are they able to understand the general story—instead of whether the spelling is perfect or whether they can read out loud fluently”. This shift highlights the importance of functional literacy, where the goal is not perfect performance but rather ensuring that children are able to convey their thoughts and grasp key concepts. In line with this, SLTs also celebrated the children’s strengths, as neglecting these can hinder engagement. One participant stated that, “In my experience, negating a child’s good effort, like when they write a good sentence, or can explain a story, by pointing out the poor spelling or reading out loud, can make the child less likely to want to engage, so I emphasise the strengths and allow the child grace while addressing weaker areas” (Response 9). This focus on fostering positive reinforcement encourages a child-centred approach that values the child’s effort and promotes sustained engagement in learning.

**Empathy and Advocacy:** Developing empathy for clients’ unique challenges was a recurrent theme among SLTs. Several reported gaining a deeper understanding of the challenges clients face in environments designed for neurotypical individuals. One participant described this shift: “I have specific empathy for students who experience this same difficulty but are still expected to participate in academic tasks specifically designed for the neurotypical population”. This empathy further extended into advocacy, as SLTs actively promoted positive and supportive perspectives of their clients. As one participant reflected, “My experiences

have made me someone that is more assertive re: serving clients with these difficulties. It's made me more aware of how these clients are seen; and it has evolved my practice into one that views the client from a lens of positivity, intelligence, and with the aim to support a client reaching their full potential despite their difficulties and in spite of it". The SLTs' advocacy role ensures that clients receive holistic support, grounded in an understanding of their unique challenges and potential.

**Self-reflection and Growth:** SLTs recognised their own personal growth and the importance of ongoing self-reflection as part of their professional development. This journey of self-awareness involved identifying knowledge gaps and taking proactive steps to improve. One participant noted their increased competence, stating simply, "Become more competent". Another therapist echoed this sentiment, recognising the importance of evolving their approach to be more patient and understanding: "I am more patient and understanding". This theme underscores the dynamic nature of therapeutic practice, where therapists continually reassess their skills and attitudes in order to provide better care for their clients.

These themes highlight a commitment to ongoing learning, collaboration, and individualised client-centred care among SLTs working with reading and writing difficulties. The findings suggest a focus on flexibility and fostering a positive learning environment for clients.

In terms of the strategies and approaches used to support clients with reading and writing difficulties, the following themes emerged:

**Foundational Skills and Explicit Instruction:** SLTs consistently emphasised the importance of foundational skills such as phonological awareness, phonics, and orthographic knowledge in developing literacy. Several participants noted that teaching basic phonological skills is essential for effective reading and writing instruction. One SLT shared, "Going back to basics and teaching them the foundation skills of reading and writing with some fun strategies. For example, COPS". This highlights the role of explicit instruction in phonological awareness as a cornerstone for literacy development.

Explicit teaching of phonics and decoding rules was also a common theme. One participant explained, "Phoneme grapheme matching, visual support for analysis and synthesis act initially and later just auditory". This underscores the importance of step-by-step guidance in helping learners decode language effectively. In addition, orthographic knowledge—understanding letter-sound relationships and building orthographic memory—was another focal point. As one participant noted, "I incorporate a lot of phonological awareness in

sessions. I also target specific sounds every week and I make sure that it is in line with the curriculum”.

**Comprehensive Approach to Literacy:** SLTs frequently used a multi-component approach to literacy, addressing a range of skills such as phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. One therapist articulated this approach: “I try to address phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, reading fluency, and comprehension in one session, as all of these components collectively play a role in appropriate literacy development”. This holistic view ensures that all aspects of literacy are targeted to provide comprehensive support for learners.

In terms of methodology, participants reported using structured literacy programs, which include systematic and explicit instruction across multiple linguistic domains. As one participant described, “Systematic explicit teaching of phonology, orthography, semantics, syntax, morphology. Integrated with application to written exercises”. While structured literacy programs were favoured, some therapists also incorporated whole language approaches, blending different pedagogical methods. One therapist noted, “Whole language approach and structured literacy programmes”, highlighting the flexibility in their instruction to meet diverse needs.

**Individualised and Differentiated Instruction:** Individualised instruction emerged as a core principle in therapists’ practice. Many emphasised the importance of tailoring interventions to the specific needs of each client. One therapist explained, “My methods differ accordingly to the needs of each child”. This client-centred approach ensures that the therapy is both relevant and impactful, addressing each child’s unique challenges and strengths.

Functional literacy was also a focal point for therapists, particularly in creating practical, real-world literacy applications. One participant remarked, “Functional activities and types of written work that have relevance to the child”, illustrating the importance of aligning literacy tasks with the child's everyday experiences. Furthermore, differentiation strategies were widely employed to cater to diverse learning needs. “Using more than just paper-based activities, differentiating instructions, using different reading frameworks and phonographic programs”, one participant shared, showing the variety of strategies used to ensure all learners can engage successfully.

**Engagement and Motivation:** Creating a positive learning environment that fosters confidence and motivation was a recurring theme. SLTs emphasised the importance of enjoyable and functional activities to build engagement. One participant reflected, “I like to use wordless videos or graphic novels initially to build up confidence with understanding a story or creating narratives, especially when they already have a negative opinion towards written

language”. This approach helps to reduce anxiety around literacy tasks and allows students to develop their narrative skills in a more relaxed and engaging way.

Visual supports were commonly reported as valuable tools to enhance understanding and maintain engagement. One therapist noted, “Building on existing knowledge, discussing new vocabulary, reading for the learners, visual aids”. Visual aids help scaffold complex tasks, making them more accessible for learners. Additionally, shared reading experiences were mentioned as a way to foster a love of reading. “Orthographic memory, shared reading, create a love for reading and writing”, one SLT commented, underscoring the emotional connection that shared reading can facilitate.

**Collaboration and Home Involvement:** The participants highlighted the importance of collaboration, particularly with parents and educators, in fostering successful outcomes. Parental engagement was viewed as essential in reinforcing the skills learned in therapy sessions. One SLT stressed the significance of “Homework, Parent meetings”, indicating that involving parents ensures continuity in the child's learning.

Collaboration with educators was also frequently mentioned, with therapists emphasising the need to align therapeutic interventions with classroom instruction. As one participant pointed out, “If conventional strategies are not working in the classroom, then it cannot be expected that they will work in the therapy room”. This approach ensures that both therapy and classroom activities are cohesive and mutually supportive, increasing the likelihood of successful literacy development for the child.

These themes demonstrate the multifaceted nature of supporting clients with reading and writing difficulties. Effective intervention involves a combination of foundational skills instruction, comprehensive literacy development, individualised approaches, and strategies to enhance engagement and motivation

### **3.4 Training needs of the SLTs related to literacy**

Overall, the data suggests a strong commitment to literacy-related CPD among SASLTs, with a preference for evidence-based practices and flexible, accessible training formats. The results were as follows:

Most participants had taken undergraduate (77%) and/or postgraduate courses (58%) in literacy, and nearly all (90%) had obtained CPD points related to reading and writing difficulties. Phonological awareness and dyslexia emerged as key areas of interest for CPD, with over 60% of participants choosing these topics. Online resources were the preferred formats for CPD (81%), followed by small group coaching and mentoring (48%).

National/provincial/regional training events and SASLHA sessions were highly valued (58% and 52%, respectively). Participants expressed a strong interest in evidence-based practices, particularly in treatment and assessment (58% and 45%, respectively), but collaboration with other team members was less prioritised. Overall, the findings highlight a focus on foundational literacy skills, a preference for flexible training formats, and a commitment to continuous professional development in the field of speech-language therapy. Table 5 reflects the results.

Table 5

*Training Needs of SLTs*

<b>Undergraduate Courses Focussing on Literacy (n=31)</b>		
	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
No literacy courses:	23	7
1-3 literacy courses:	77	24
3-5 literacy courses:	0	0
More than 5 literacy	0	0
<b>Postgraduate Courses Focussing on Literacy (n=31)</b>		
	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
No literacy courses:	6	2
1-3 literacy courses:	58	18
3-5 literacy courses:	3	1
More than 5 literacy	32	10
<b>Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Points Related to Reading and Writing Difficulties Postgraduate (n=31)</b>		
	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Yes	90	28
No	10	3
<b>CPD Topics (n=31)</b>		

	Percentage	Frequency
Phonological Awareness	61%	19
Assessment	48%	15
Reading Comprehension	45%	14
Dyslexia	65%	20
Other	32%	10
Most Convenient Formats for Continuous Professional Development (n=31)		
	Percentage	Frequency
National/provincial/regional training events	32%	10
Online resources	81%	25
School-sponsored training events	32%	10
Sessions at HPCSA conferences	19%	6
Sessions at SASLHA	39%	12
Small group coaching/mentoring	48%	15
Ideal Professional Development Material Format (n=31)		
	Percentage	Frequency
School-sponsored training events	32%	10
National/provincial/regional training events	58%	18
Sessions at HPCSA conferences	19%	6

Sessions at SASLHA	52%		16					
Journal articles	35%		11					
Areas of Interest for EBP Training and Support (Most interested = 1 to least interested = 4)								
Rank	1		2		3		4	
	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency
Treatment practices	56.7	17	20.0	6	16.7	5	6.7	2
Assessment practices	20.0	6	43.3	13	30.0	9	6.7	2
Interpreting research	6.7	2	10.0	3	30.0	9	53.3	16
Collaboration	16.7	5	26.7	8	23.3	7	33.3	10

\* Note: Participants were allowed to select multiple options for some of the items in the above table

#### 4. Discussion

##### Knowledge of SASLTs Related to Literacy

The knowledge of South African Speech-Language Therapists (SASLTs) concerning literacy is foundational to their roles in addressing literacy challenges in their clients. Quantitative data from the study revealed that most SASLTs demonstrate a strong understanding of key literacy concepts, as evidenced by their responses to literacy-related statements. For instance, the majority of participants correctly answered questions about phonological awareness and the relationship between spoken and written language, indicating a good grasp of these critical areas (Tompkins, 2017). The results indicate a solid understanding among SLTs of the interconnectedness of spoken and written language and the importance of targeted instruction to support literacy development. However, specific knowledge gaps were identified, particularly concerning the connection between word recognition and comprehension, and the link between reading/writing difficulties and spoken language impairments. Only 51% of participants correctly addressed these relationships, reflecting confusion or varying interpretations of literacy instruction methodologies (Oosthuizen, 2016).

These gaps suggest that while SASLTs have a firm understanding of certain aspects of literacy, they may benefit from further education, particularly in areas where there are misunderstandings about the literacy development process. For example, the contradictory opinions about whether word recognition should precede comprehension may reflect differences in training or exposure to more recent literacy models (Erasmus, 2013). As SLTs work closely with children facing literacy difficulties, addressing these knowledge gaps is crucial to ensure effective interventions.

The qualitative data supports the need for more targeted professional development. Many therapists expressed a desire for continuing education on topics like the reciprocal relationship between spoken and written language. This highlights the ongoing need for refinement in training programs to ensure SLTs are equipped with both foundational knowledge and more advanced literacy strategies (Stephenson et al., 2023).

### **Experiences of SASLTs Related to Literacy**

The results suggest that SASLTs have confidence in identifying literacy difficulties, as the majority reported a strong sense of competence in this area. This finding aligns with prior research, which suggests that SLTs are generally well-prepared to diagnose literacy-related issues, particularly when these difficulties overlap with broader language disorders (Serry, 2020; Loveall, Pitt, Rolfe, & Mann, 2022). However, just over 19% of the SLTs also reported feeling less confident, suggesting a potential gap in formal training. This finding is consistent with that of Davis and Murza, (2019) who reported that many SLTs felt inadequately prepared to address literacy difficulties, highlighting the need for enhanced training in literacy interventions during SLT undergraduate education.

Collaboration with other professionals, such as reading specialists, is another key theme that emerged from the findings. While the majority of the participants in this study SLTs value interdisciplinary work, a significant proportion preferred to work independently. This mixed response supports findings by Starling et al. (2012). Similarly, Wium and Louw (2013) suggested that collaboration between SLTs and teachers can be hindered by unclear role definitions and communication strategies. These results suggest that creating stronger interdisciplinary frameworks and clearer communication channels could enhance collaboration, benefiting both professionals and clients.

Systemic issues including late referrals and limited resources for certain language groups like Afrikaans-speaking clients, were also identified as a significant challenge by SLTs. These challenges align with findings from Catts, Nielsen, Bridges, and Liu, (2016), who reported that delayed identification of literacy difficulties is a common barrier, significantly reducing the effectiveness of early interventions. Additionally, resource constraints, particularly in

multilingual contexts, were noted by Ancell and Hopf, (2022) who found that unequal access to services across different language groups poses significant challenges for SLTs. The findings from this study suggest that addressing these systemic issues, including improving referral processes and ensuring resource equity, should be a priority for policy makers and healthcare providers.

Client and family factors also played a critical role in the effectiveness of literacy interventions. Many SLTs reported that poor parental literacy and low levels of parental involvement hindered therapy outcomes, particularly in disadvantaged socioeconomic contexts. This is consistent with Ha, (2021) who found that active parental involvement is critical to the success of literacy interventions, yet often hindered by socioeconomic barriers. Similarly, Law, Reilly, and Snow, (2013) emphasised the role of socioeconomic factors in limiting access to necessary services and follow-through with therapy-related tasks. It is evident that whilst the need to prioritise family involvement in the therapeutic process is essential, actionable plans to facilitate this engagement, particularly in low socioeconomic context must be developed and implemented to ensure its effectiveness and sustainability.

Lastly, assessment and intervention remain central to effective literacy interventions. SLTs in this study reported frequent delays and inaccuracies in diagnosis, which limit the timeliness of support. This finding aligns with Snowling et al. (2015) who highlighted the critical need for more accurate and early diagnosis of literacy difficulties. Furthermore, many SLTs noted a gap between oral and written language development in children, a challenge similarly noted in research by Hill and Launder, (2010). These results indicate that more targeted assessments focusing on both oral and written language skills are needed to provide more comprehensive support to children with literacy difficulties.

### **Practices of SASLTs Related to Literacy**

The practices of SASLTs in literacy interventions are shaped by both their knowledge and the challenges they encounter in educational settings. Quantitative data revealed that 90% of SASLTs are involved in literacy intervention, with many spending a significant portion of their time addressing language and literacy difficulties. Approximately 45% of therapists reported dedicating 75-100% of their therapy time to literacy-related issues. Notably, skills such as phonological awareness and matching letters to sounds were the most frequently targeted, highlighting the focus on foundational literacy skills. However, while phonological and phonemic awareness were a priority, there was less emphasis on emergent literacy skills like writing and print conventions, as reflected by only 9.68% frequently addressing writing names. Overall, the data indicates a strong focus on language and literacy skills within intervention sessions for clients with reading and writing difficulties. However, this suggests that while

SASLTs are addressing critical literacy skills, there may be gaps in their approach to early literacy development.

The qualitative data provided further insights into the challenges SLTs face in implementing these practices. Many therapists reported feeling underprepared by their undergraduate training to handle the full range of literacy challenges. While they felt confident in targeting phonological awareness, they expressed difficulty with more complex literacy issues, such as dyslexia or the connection between spoken and written language.

When comparing the quantitative and qualitative findings, it becomes clear that while many SASLTs dedicate significant time to literacy intervention, they often feel that their training has not fully equipped them to handle the complexities of literacy challenges. The high percentage of SLTs seeking additional training, alongside reports of inconsistent undergraduate preparation, suggests that while SLTs are actively engaged in literacy work, they require more comprehensive support to address these gaps effectively.

The implications of these findings are significant for both SLT education and clinical practice. First, there is a need to reform SLT education to provide more targeted and practical training in literacy. Additionally, the strong desire for continuing professional development indicates that SASLTs would benefit from increased access to online resources, small-group coaching, and more training opportunities focused on areas like phonological awareness, dyslexia, and assessment practices.

Moreover, the findings highlight the need for more comprehensive literacy programs that address not only phonological awareness but also other critical components of literacy, such as comprehension, vocabulary, and writing. This would help ensure that SLTs are equipped to offer well-rounded literacy interventions. Additionally, increasing access to continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities, particularly in evidence-based practices, is crucial for ensuring that SLTs remain equipped to implement the most effective interventions. Lastly, the qualitative data emphasised the importance of culturally relevant interventions. Given South Africa's linguistic diversity, developing more culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment and intervention materials is crucial to ensuring that SLTs can meet the diverse needs of their clients.

### **Training Needs of SASLTs**

The training needs of SASLTs, as highlighted in both quantitative and qualitative data, point to significant areas for improvement. While 80% of SASLTs indicated a preference for webinars and 66% for online resources for continuing education, many therapists expressed a need for more practical, hands-on training in literacy intervention (Sartania et al., 2022). The

findings show that therapists feel their undergraduate training did not adequately prepare them for the demands of literacy intervention, particularly in areas like classroom-based interventions and advanced literacy strategies (Gallagher et. al, 2019).

To address these training gaps, SLTs call for more seminars and case discussions with experienced lecturers. Engaging in case studies and collaborative learning experiences can significantly enhance their problem-solving skills and application of theoretical concepts (Sartania et al., 2022). Additionally, there is a pressing need for more information on structured literacy programs, differential diagnoses, and the practical application of theoretical knowledge in real-world settings.

A systematic review by Apel and Lawrence (2018) emphasises the importance of ongoing education for SLTs, suggesting that structured training modules focusing on literacy could empower therapists to deliver more effective interventions. This need for continuous learning highlights the critical role of SLTs in educational settings and the necessity for advocacy to elevate their status within the educational landscape.

SASLTs expressed a desire for more structured professional development, including small-group coaching and case discussions with experienced professionals. Many therapists indicated that more guidance on structured literacy programs, differential diagnosis, and the practical application of theoretical knowledge would enhance their ability to manage complex cases effectively. This reflects a broader trend in the profession, with therapists seeking more tailored support to address the specific literacy challenges faced by their clients (Zucker et. al, 2021).

While foundational training is essential, there is a growing recognition of the need for national advocacy to promote the significance of SLTs in addressing literacy challenges. Elevating the profession's profile within the educational system can ensure better integration of their expertise and facilitate collaboration with other professionals. A coordinated effort could include awareness campaigns, policy advocacy, and collaboration with educational institutions to emphasise the role of SLTs in literacy development.

The need for interprofessional collaboration training was also a key theme. SLTs expressed uncertainty about interprofessional boundaries, particularly when working alongside occupational therapists and remedial educators. Many therapists called for clearer guidelines on collaboration and referral practices to ensure comprehensive support for clients (Wallace et al., 2022).

A recurring theme throughout the study was the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration in literacy intervention. Many therapists emphasised the benefits of working alongside

teachers, remedial educators, and other professionals to provide holistic support to children with literacy difficulties. One therapist stated, "I learnt a lot from exchanging knowledge with teachers as well as remedial therapists," illustrating the mutual benefits of shared expertise (Gosselin & Sundeen, 2018).

Quantitative data supported this, with a majority of therapists recognising the importance of collaboration. However, the qualitative responses revealed challenges in effectively implementing multidisciplinary approaches. Some SLTs reported unclear roles and responsibilities when working with other professionals, leading to inconsistent support for children with literacy difficulties (Wilson et al., 2019). Addressing these barriers is crucial to ensuring that all professionals involved in a child's care are aligned in their goals and interventions, maximising the impact of therapy.

Research shows that effective collaboration can significantly enhance literacy outcomes, particularly for children with extensive needs who may receive less literacy instruction due to therapy sessions (Gosselin & Sundeen, 2018). When SLTs work closely with teachers and other professionals, they can create a cohesive support system that integrates language and literacy interventions within the broader educational context, leading to better academic and communication outcomes for children (Stephenson et al., 2023).

## **5. Limitations**

One key limitation of this study is the sampling method used. As it relied on non-probability purposive and convenience sampling, the findings may not be fully generalisable to all SASLTs. The majority of participants were recruited via online platforms, which may have excluded therapists who do not frequently use these media or who do not have access to digital resources. Additionally, a small sample size might have reduced the ability to generalise to a broader SLT population in the South African context. The results might only reflect the characteristics of the small group studied.

The gaps in evidence base and recent studies which resulted in gaps in comparing the literature in the South African context. A scarcity of relevant articles can lead to overreliance on a few outdated or contextually irrelevant sources, potentially introducing bias or an incomplete understanding of the topic.

Only descriptive findings were reported in this study, while correlations and causal relations were not investigated. This may be expanded upon in future studies. The self-reported nature of the data also introduces the possibility of bias, as participants may have provided socially desirable answers, especially regarding their perceived competencies and practices related

to literacy. In any survey, there is always the potential for participants to misunderstand the wording of certain phrases.

## **6. Recommendations**

Based on the findings, there are several recommendations for improving the literacy practices of SASLTs. First, undergraduate and postgraduate training programs should integrate more comprehensive and structured literacy-focused coursework, particularly covering the broader aspects of literacy, such as written language and the connection between spoken and written language. Increasing clinical exposure to literacy-related interventions during training would also ensure that future therapists are better prepared for the practical demands of literacy intervention.

Continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities should be expanded to include more accessible online resources, webinars, and small-group coaching focused on evidence-based literacy practices, such as phonological awareness, reading comprehension, and dyslexia intervention. This would address the desire of many SASLTs for ongoing learning and help bridge the gap between their academic preparation and current practice needs.

Moreover, there should be efforts to develop culturally relevant and context-appropriate resources for literacy intervention in South Africa. Given the country's linguistic diversity, it is important to create tools that reflect this diversity and are tailored to the specific challenges faced by therapists working in multilingual environments.

Finally, fostering collaboration between SLTs, teachers, and other educational professionals is crucial. Developing interdisciplinary training programs and encouraging joint literacy interventions could enhance outcomes for children with literacy difficulties.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study highlights the significant role that South African Speech-Language Therapists play in literacy intervention. While many therapists are dedicating substantial time to foundational literacy skills such as phonological awareness and phonics, the study revealed important gaps in their overall training, particularly in areas like the connection between spoken and written language and the availability of culturally relevant resources. There is a clear need for more comprehensive education on literacy, particularly regarding the connection between spoken and written language, as well as more culturally relevant resources to support diverse learners.

The study also underscores the therapists' interest in continuing education and the need for accessible, evidence-based training that addresses current literacy challenges. By improving

training and fostering greater collaboration between professionals, SASLTs can be better equipped to address literacy difficulties more effectively and holistically. These changes could have a meaningful impact on improving literacy outcomes in South Africa, especially in the context of the country's ongoing literacy crisis.

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APPENDIX A



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA  
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA  
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Faculty of Humanities

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe  
Lefapha la Bomotheo



**29 February 2024**

Dear Researchers,

**Project:** Experiences and Practices of South African Speech-Language Therapists Related to Literacy

**Researchers:** Aamina Bibi Ebrahim Tayob (u17052263) Nicole Mlauzi (u16155450)  
Lennie Elsenbroek (u20581433)

**Supervisors:** Prof S Geertsema, Prof M le Roux, Dr C Milton

**Department:** Department of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology

**Reference Number:** SLPA2024/06

Thank you for the application submitted to the Research Committee of the Department of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology, Faculty of Humanities. We have the pleasure of informing you that the above application was approved on 29 February 2024.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'L Pottas'.

**Prof Lidia Pottas**  
**Chair: Departmental Research Committee**

A larger, more stylized handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Lidia Pottas'.

**Prof J van der Linde**  
**HEAD: DEPARTMENT OF SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGY AND AUDIOLOGY**  
**UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA**

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## APPENDIX B



### Faculty of Humanities

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe  
Lefapha la Bomotheo



Dear Administrator

You are cordially invited to participate in a research study. We are a group of third-year students at the University of Pretoria, in the Department of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology.

The Department of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology is conducting an undergraduate research study on the experiences and practices of South African speech-language therapists related to literacy. The aim is to determine the experiences, practices, knowledge, and training needs of South African speech-language therapists who provide intervention to clients with literacy (reading and writing) difficulties. The aim includes the perspective of improving these aspects in the future. We are looking for participants who fit the following criteria:

1. Qualified and registered speech therapists.
2. Residing in South Africa

We hereby request your permission to post our link and invitation to the questionnaire in your Facebook group. The participation of your community will be a valuable addition to our research. For any questions, you can contact the research supervisor, Dr Carmen Milton [carmen.milton@up.ac.za](mailto:carmen.milton@up.ac.za)

Thank you for your valuable time and consideration.

Kind regards

**Supervisors:** Dr C. Milton; Prof M Le Roux, Prof S Geertsema

**Researchers:** Lennie Elsenbroek, Nicole Mlauzi, Aamina Bibi Ebrahim Tayob

## APPENDIX C



### Faculty of Humanities

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe  
Lefapha la Bomotho



## PARTICIPANT INFORMATION & INFORMED CONSENT

**Student Numbers:** u20581433, u16155450, u17052263

**Supervisors:** Dr C. Milton, Prof. M. le Roux, Prof. S. Geertsema

**Title:** Experiences and practices of South African speech-language therapists related to literacy

We are a group of undergraduate students in the field of Speech-Language Pathology in the Department of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology, University of Pretoria. You are invited to participate in our research project titled “*Experiences and practices of South African speech-language therapists related to literacy*”. This letter contains information regarding the study. If you have any other questions, do not hesitate to contact us.

The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences and perceptions of South African speech-language therapists (SLTs) regarding several field-related aspects of literacy. The study will investigate the SLTs' knowledge, experiences, and practices as well as their continuous professional development needs in this regard.

This study requires you to complete an online questionnaire. This will take about 20 minutes. The resulting anonymised and confidential data will be uploaded to a password-protected computer folder in a locked room in the Communication Pathology Building at the University of Pretoria as well as the “Figshare” data repository of the University of Pretoria. Access to the data will be restricted to certain stakeholders. The Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria will grant written approval for this study prior to its commencement.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can decline to participate or withdraw participation at any time without giving any reason. As you will not be required to supply your name on the online questionnaire link, your information will be completely confidential. Furthermore, any possible identifying information will be anonymised as the questionnaire will be allocated an identifying number only, prior to capturing, analysis, and saving. Once you have submitted the questionnaire, you cannot recall your consent as we will not be able to trace your specific questionnaire.

**Note: The implication of submitting the questionnaire is that informed consent has been given by you. Thus, any information derived from your form (which will be totally anonymous) may be used e.g. publication by the researchers.**

We sincerely appreciate your assistance.

Yours truly,

**Supervisors:** Dr C. Milton, Prof M Le Roux, Prof S Geertsema

**Researchers:** Lennie Elsenbroek, Nicole Mlauzi, Aamina Bibi Ebrahim Tayob

## APPENDIX D



### Faculty of Humanities

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe  
Lefapha la Bomotheo



### **INFORMED CONSENT TO THE RESEARCH STUDY: Experiences and practices of South African speech-language therapists related to literacy.**

#### Consent Questions:

- I consent to begin the study
- I do not consent, I do not wish to participate

In this questionnaire, we will use the term “reading and writing difficulties” to include problems in the areas of word recognition (i.e., reading, decoding, and sight word recognition), reading comprehension, written spelling, or written expression. For young children, reading and writing difficulties can include areas of emergent literacy (i.e., phonological awareness) and oral language (i.e., answering questions about stories). Many children with reading and writing difficulties have other areas of impairment, including spoken language disorders.

**CLICK HERE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOU READ AND UNDERSTOOD THIS INFORMATION**

## APPENDIX E

### Questionnaire

#### **Experiences and practices of South African speech-language therapists related to literacy**

Consent Questions:

- I consent, to begin the study
- I do not consent, I do not wish to participate

In this questionnaire, we will use the term "reading and writing difficulties" to include problems in the areas of word recognition (i.e., reading, decoding, and sight word recognition), reading comprehension, written spelling, or written expression. For young children, reading and writing difficulties can include areas of emergent literacy (i.e., phonological awareness) and oral language (i.e., answering questions about stories). Many children with reading and writing difficulties have other areas of impairment, including spoken language disorders.

#### **CLICK HERE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOU READ AND UNDERSTOOD THIS INFORMATION**

Please review the following questions and select the relevant option(s) by checking the appropriate box(es) or provide your answers in the open-ended text box. Your input is valuable in helping us gather important insights."

#### **A. Demographic Information**

Please indicate your current work setting(s):

- School-based setting
- Private practice
- Healthcare facility
- Academic institution
- Other: (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_.

How many years have you worked as a Speech-Language Therapist?

- <1

- 1-5
- 5-10
- 10-15
- 15-20
- 20 or more

Highest degree completed:

- Bachelor's
- Master's
- Doctorate
- Other (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_

Do you currently treat clients with reading and writing difficulties?

- Yes
- No

If not, have you treated any clients with reading and writing difficulties in the past?

- Yes
- No

How many clients with reading and writing difficulties do you serve?

- 1-5
- 5-10
- 10-15
- 15-20
- 20 or more

**B. Knowledge of the SLTs related to literacy**

**For each of the statements below, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree:**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
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Spoken language provides the foundation for the development of reading and writing.				
Spoken and written language have a reciprocal relationship, such that each builds on the other to result in general language and literacy competence, starting early and continuing through childhood into adulthood.				
Children with spoken language problems frequently have difficulty learning to read and write.				
Children with spoken language difficulties are unlikely to have difficulty with reading comprehension.				
Children with reading and writing problems frequently have difficulty with spoken language.				
For most children, reading develops naturally, without instruction.				
Instruction in spoken oral language can result in growth in written language.				
Instruction in written language can result in growth in spoken language.				
Instruction in reading and writing should focus on word recognition before comprehension.				

**C. Experiences related to literacy**

Think about those clients with reading and writing difficulties. Other than the classroom teacher, who was primarily responsible for working on reading and writing with these clients?

- You (SLT)
- Reading Specialist
- Special Education Teacher
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

What formats are most convenient for continuous professional development?

- School-sponsored training events
- National/provincial/regional training events
- Sessions at Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) conferences
- Sessions at the South African Speech-Language and Hearing Association (SASLHA)
- Journal articles
- Webinars
- Online resource
- Individualised coaching/mentoring
- Small group coaching/mentoring

**For each of the statements below, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree:**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel competent in my ability to identify clients with reading and writing difficulties.				
I usually like having assistance and direction from another professional or “reading specialist” when developing appropriate treatment for a client with reading and writing difficulties.				
I have enough clinical and educational training to deliver intervention to clients with reading and writing difficulties.				
I have expertise in reading and writing difficulties and could share knowledge and collaborate with teachers and other educational professionals.				
I could have benefited from receiving additional coursework and training in reading and writing difficulties				

I could benefit from continuing education and other learning opportunities in reading and writing difficulties.				
---	--	--	--	--

What challenges have you experienced working as an SLT who works with clients who have literacy challenges?

**D. SLT's practices related to literacy**

For clients with reading and writing difficulties, how much intervention time was spent working on these language and literacy skills?

- Less than 25% of intervention time
- Between 25-50% of intervention time
- Between 50-75% of intervention time
- Between 75-100% of intervention time

For these clients with reading and writing difficulties, how often did you work on the following skills?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently
Phonological Awareness				
Conventions of print (e.g., left to right orientation)				
Alphabet and letter recognition				
Matching letters to sounds				
Writing own name				
Rhyming words and word families				

Common prepositions (e.g., over, under, up, down)				
Telling a personal story				
Identifying the main idea and parts of a story				
Answering questions about stories or text				
Using context cues for comprehension				
Communicating complete ideas orally				
Composing and writing stories with an understandable beginning, middle, and end				
Conventional spelling				
Vocabulary				
Reading aloud fluently				

How many peer-reviewed journal articles did you read during the last year on topics related to evaluation or assessment of reading or writing?

- 0
- 1-3
- 3-5
- More than 5

How many peer-reviewed journal articles did you read during the last year on topics related to intervention or treatment of reading or writing difficulties?

- 0
- 1-3
- 2-5

How have your previous experiences influenced your practices to serve your clients with reading and writing difficulties?

What strategies and approaches do you use to support your clients with reading and writing difficulties?

**E. Training needs of the SLTs related to literacy**

During your undergraduate studies, did you have any courses that focused specifically on literacy?

- 0
- 1-3
- 3-5
- More than 5

After your undergraduate studies, how many courses did you take that included literacy or reading as part of the course?

- 0
- 1-3
- 3-5
- More than 5

Did you have clinical exposure in assessing and diagnosing, reading and writing difficulties at an undergraduate level?

- Yes
- No

Do you have clinical exposure in assessing and diagnosing, reading, and writing difficulties after you've graduated as an SLT?

- Yes
- No

Did you have clinical exposure in doing intervention/treatment for individuals with reading and writing difficulties at an undergraduate level?

- Yes
- No

Do you have clinical exposure in doing intervention/treatment for individuals with reading and writing difficulties after you've graduated as an SLT?

- Yes
- No

Since receiving your highest degree, have you obtained Continuing Professional Development (CPD) points related to reading and writing difficulties?

- Yes
- No

What CPD topics have you chosen?

- Phonological Awareness
- Assessment
- Reading Comprehension
- Dyslexia
- Other

What formats are most convenient for continuous professional development?

- School-sponsored training events
- National/provincial/regional training events
- Sessions at Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) conferences
- Sessions at South African Speech-Language and Hearing Association (SASLHA)
- Journal articles
- Webinars
- Online resource
- Individualised coaching/mentoring
- Small group coaching/mentoring

How would you best learn professional development material if time and money were not a concern?

- School-sponsored training events
- National/provincial/regional training events
- Sessions at Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) conferences

- Sessions at South African Speech-Language and Hearing Association (SASLHA)
- Journal articles
- Webinars
- Online resources
- Individualised coaching/mentoring
- Small group coaching/mentoring

Please rank your interest in the following areas of training and support for Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) in literacy from most interested (1) to least interested (4). Use each number only once.

- Treatment practices that are supported by scientific evidence
- Assessment practices that are supported by scientific evidence
- Interpreting published research findings for practice
- How to collaborate with other team members in literacy intervention

How do you think your undergraduate training (in terms of literacy) could have been adapted to help you become more prepared to work with clients who have literacy challenges??

**Thank you for filling out this questionnaire. Your response has been recorded.**

# EXPERIENCES AND PRACTICES OF SOUTH AFRICAN SPEECH-LANGUAGE THERAPISTS RELATED TO LITERACY

Invitation to Speech-Language Therapists in South Africa to participate in a research study.



## AIM



This study will aim to determine the experiences and practices of South African speech-language therapists (SASLTs) related to literacy.

## WHAT?

What are the experiences, knowledge, practices and training needs of South African SLTs related to literacy?

## WHO?

Any SLTs currently registered with the HPCSA. They can be school-based, hospital based or work in a private practice in South Africa.

## HOW?

Please click on the link provided to complete the questionnaire (takes about 20 minutes to complete). The survey will close on 20 June 2024. Thank you!

## CONTACT INFORMATION

Research supervisors:  
Dr Carmen Milton (carmen.milton@up.ac.za)  
Prof. Mia le Roux (mia.leroux@up.ac.za)  
Prof. Salomé Geertsema (salome.geertsema@up.ac.za)

## RESEARCHERS



Nicole Mlauzi  
Aamina Bibi Ebrahim Tayob  
Lennie Elsenbroek



## LINK FOR THE SURVEY

[https://pretoria.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_OVzihSpJTeOc742](https://pretoria.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_OVzihSpJTeOc742)