

POLISH JOURNAL *of* EDUCATIONAL STUDIES

ISSN 2657-3528

2025, Vol. VII (LXXVII)

DOI: 10.2478/poljes-2025-0002

Creating Activities Towards Improving Functional Literacy: Examples from North Macedonia

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the implementation and results of a project focused on improving functional literacy in North Macedonia, which I initiated and coordinated from 2023 to 2025. The motivation behind the project was to initiate changes in the traditional lecturing model predominant in the country, with low-level participation from students in class, and with very little focus on critical or creative thinking. The main research question was how to transform the curriculum and in-class activities in order to improve functional literacy among primary and secondary school students in Macedonia. I describe the stages and outcomes of the project, and report on the benefits of the undertaken activities on the well-being of teachers and students, the implications of which may be helpful to practitioners in similar educational contexts.

KEYWORDS: functional literacy, North Macedonia, PISA, reading comprehension, curriculum

Introduction

In the last several decades, there have been public discussions in the Macedonian society about the need to change the approach and teaching methods in schools. Elements that have for long time been emphasized as being of crucial importance are introducing reforms that will modernise education, putting greater emphasis on stu-

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dents as participants in the educational process, taking into consideration their views on the educational process, establishing an atmosphere of cooperation and respect.

The need to address the low level of functional literacy

Functional literacy refers to the capacity to engage in activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning, and also for comprehension of texts, and development of meaningful writing. The level of functional literacy in North Macedonia requires improvement, as media report in the past years. Related to functional literacy is PISA, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which measures the ability of students at the age of 15 to use the knowledge and skills of reading, mathematics and natural sciences when facing challenges from reality. Macedonia is reported as having 'among the lowest results in the region in the 2018 OECD PISA tests' (MIA, 2023). Apart from media reports, research findings similarly note this concerning trend, which necessitates a transformation in the educational strategies.

The project 'Improving Functional Literacy in Primary and Secondary Education in the Republic of North Macedonia' was intended to address the issue of low functional literacy and increase it in the long term by taking specific steps in several phases, as outlined below. Its general aim is to move towards an environment that prioritizes collaboration, mutual respect, and engaging activities designed to enhance students' comprehension and analytical skills.

In this article I will discuss the motivation for initiating the project, its short-term and long-term objectives, the results that were obtained from the research carried out as part of the project, its implementation and its future implications.

Context: background of the project

This project was initially motivated by my personal experience both as a student in the primary and secondary educational system in Macedonia in the past, and my present observation and analysis of today's educational system and the specific problems that children face in the present in the primary and secondary schools. Additionally, media have also reported in the past years about the poor results shown by students in R.N. Macedonia at the international OECD PISA tests, which shows the necessity to address and transform teaching methods.

According to the results of language literacy, mathematics and natural sciences, Macedonia, for several years, has been ranked among the last countries according to the results shown by students at the age of 15. Several media outlets have reported on this situation: according to an article on *mkd.mk* from 2016, during the first testing in 2000, 'students' achievements in the country were among the weakest', and the situation with the results in language literacy, mathematics and natural sciences are similar in 2015. *Fakulteti.mk* in an article from 2022 reports that Marko Trosanovski,

president of the Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis”, stated that Macedonia has the lowest result for the media literacy index, of all countries in Europe. The reports in other media are similar.

Such results are also noted in the report of the State Examination Center. “The achievements of students from the Republic of Macedonia are very low, i.e. out of 79 countries participating in the study (...), we are in 62nd place in natural science literacy, 66th in reading comprehension, and 67th in mathematical literacy” (Lameva et al., 2020, p. 13) The report also contains more detailed information about the achievements of students in Macedonia on the PISA tests.

The ‘concluding observations and recommendations’ of this Report are general, for example that young people ‘should be prepared for life in a modern society, using applicable knowledge and acquired skills, i.e. competences for reading and exchanging information.’ The report also notes that low achievements indicate that ‘much more in-depth analyses are needed, in order to determine the cause-and-effect relationships that need to be worked on much more.’ (p. 67) These observations are given in the form of recommendations, and no institution is under any obligation to undertake them. The report also identifies numerous factors that influence achievement.

As a literature professor at the ‘Blaže Koneski’ Faculty of Philology, I am aware that higher education institutions have the capacity to work on this issue. I have therefore initiated and coordinated this project, in which the overall main aim was to establish collaboration between teaching staff of the Faculty of Philology and of several primary and secondary school, with the expected result of transforming teaching approaches. Specifically, the goal of this project was to undertake specific activities that would lead to the improvement of functional literacy.

Literature review

Debates around literacy and the various approaches used in teaching it in pedagogical contexts have emerged as significant themes in educational research in the past several decades (Whittaker et al., 2006; Verhoeven, 2002; Knain, 2015; Sisson, 2014). Research done in the area of teaching literacy provides the starting positions of the project, taking into consideration the experiences in various contexts.

International research on aspects of functional literacy

As an efficient method of teaching literacy, Frances Christie proposes a model that has a ‘dual concern’, and ‘involves holding a robust theory of the nature of the language system and its purposes, and an equally robust commitment to a pedagogy that makes a knowledge of this system explicitly available to learners’ (Christie, 2006, p. 45). She

points out that learning to read is a much more complex task than simply recognising the letters and developing an ability to spell. Instead, it also involves learning 'to anticipate and predict the emerging meanings in a written text, interpreting what is said while also shaping what is to come' (Christie, 2006, p. 56).

Research carried out in Indonesian context on literacy and numeracy has shown that an important issue is the life-long learning of the teachers in order to equip them with skills needed to further develop their own literacy, as well as create approaches that would develop their students' literacy. According to Winarno, Muchtarom and Fauziyah, 'effective strategies for enhancing literacy and numeracy can be implemented through various means, including expanding access to relevant reading materials, providing guidance, and connecting these skills to real-life applications' (Winarno et al., 2024, p. 1220). The findings suggest that, apart from teaching the material envisaged in class, literacy also entails other activities that help students connect that material to their own environment, such as analyzing the news.

Another area of concern in regard to literacy is the development of students' independent thinking and independent work, based on the knowledge obtained in lecturing. How to encourage independent work among school children has been examined, among others, by Kadłubowska in her research in Polish context on how primary school pupils react to homework. She points out that opinions on the effectiveness of giving homework vary. Taking into consideration the importance of the ability to learn independently, especially in early childhood education stage, 'it is worth considering alternative methods of fostering such independence rather than simply giving homework' (Kadłubowska, 2024, p. 74). Developing independent thinking was one of the major concerns of this project as it is closely related to improving functional literacy. Not only the early childhood education stage, but also later, as children develop through their adolescence, it is significant for the educational process to provide not only information and knowledge, but also ways of developing their skills of independent thinking, and contemplating about their identity and their place in society. Crocetti (2017) has carried out substantial research in this area, considering how process-oriented models of identity have contributed with new insights to the understanding of young people maintain identity.

In terms of the teaching approach to developing such skills of reading and comprehension of texts from different disciplines, the active role of the participants in class, on any level of education, is stressed. To achieve this, Karl F. Whitley argues for reconceptualisation of teacher efficacy research. Such 'reconceptualisation is needed in order to provide useful understanding about educational approaches in which power relationships are transformed, and learners take a more active role in their own learning' (Whitley, 2005, p. 748). Similarly, according to Mark Wyatt and Elena Ončevska (2005), not only in educational contexts in schools, but also in teacher education,

excessive top-down continuing professional development can be demotivating, and they argue in favor of bottom-up strategies.

Apart from teaching and introducing engaging didactic methodologies in order to transfer knowledge to students, functional literacy is also in a large part about creating a positive atmosphere in class. Hadfield reports on the results of a questionnaire sent to language schools and state colleges in Britain. 'Teachers nationwide seem to be far less worried by such concerns as finding new and exciting ways to teach the present perfect or getting students to retain new vocabulary items, than by the atmosphere in the class and the chemistry of the group' (Hadfield, 2000, p. 8).

Research on functional literacy in Macedonian context

In Macedonian context recent discussions on matters of methods used in the classroom have focused on specific aspects of language appropriation among students in various levels of education, for example teaching present tense (Алексова, 2017), the speech act of request (Trajkova, 2011), the concept of culture in teaching a foreign language (Беќар, 2011), how to create an appropriate test (Stevkovska, 2014). Teaching literacy as a skill in reading a text, understanding it, as well as producing oral or written response to it has appeared occasionally in discussions on didactics (Котевска, 2017), as well as focus on teacher development (Ончевска Ареп, 2019; Николовска, 2019).

Although this issue of creating more student-centered classes is often discussed, in practice in primary and secondary school in Macedonia it is rarely employed. Peer bullying is also an alarming problem. Taking into consideration these two significant aspects, the project is aimed at primarily creating a safe atmosphere by encouraging support, cooperation and freedom of expression, and on the basis of that improving the skills of reading comprehension, argumentation, critical thinking and using the knowledge to address practical everyday problems.

Ongoing research in the context of the project

Since the research within the project of improving functional literacy was focused mainly on the area of language, developing reading comprehension skills was one of the significant aspects. In this context, Christie's findings that reading is not only about recognizing the words and sentences, but also about the more complex processes of predicting what is to come and using previous knowledge in order to understand new texts was helpful in considering how to prepare reading materials that would point out how these processes are related.

Winarno's, Kadłubowska's, and Crocetti's research has been taken in this project as important guidance in creating activities that focus on much broader aspects of functional literacy, which are not limited only to reaching comprehension or connecting the material to everyday life, but also to establishing an atmosphere in which

students can think about their identity, their place in society, their mutual relations, and develop independent thinking. Hadfield, similarly, points out the significance of creating a positive atmosphere of cooperation and solidarity in class, which is one of the main points taken into consideration when designing the activities for this project. Namely, many of the activities designed encompass elements of encouraging acceptance and integration and emphasizing the negative aspects of bullying.

Apart from the focus on students, one of the concerns that was raised in the course of this year and a half of the implementation of the project was the preparedness of teachers to learn new teaching methodologies that they could adapt and implement in their classes. The life-long learning of teachers as a crucial element in helping their students improve is a focal concern in the research of Whitley and Wyatt and Ončevska.

1. Research methodology and objectives

The research questions explored in this context are as follows:

- How can the level of functional literacy be increased?
- To what extent does the teaching approach contribute to improving students' skills in critical thinking or reading comprehension?
- Is there anything else that is needed, besides changes in teaching methodology?

To address these questions, as participants in the project, we adopted and applied a variety of approaches: analysis of the textbooks and reading materials, designing lesson plans that envisage more active student participation in class, employing methods to improve class atmosphere and thus encourage students' creative thinking, working on exercises that offer more opportunities to students to express themselves in different ways about the material (through writing, but also drawing, music and other activities).

Specifically, in the classroom, two main objectives were set, which the project aimed to achieve: to test the level of functional literacy, and, on the bases of the results, to improve the level of functional literacy. The methods applied were aligned with the stated objectives: implementing two tests—on in the beginning and one at the end of the testing period; and implementing activities prepared to develop functional literacy skills.

In order to test the results, we decided to carry out one test before the start of the activities, and one test after the end of the implemented activities, which lasted six-eight weeks. The test includes a short text and five questions that require critical thinking, argumentation and connecting information in order to provide the answer,

taking into consideration that the answer cannot be readily found in the text. Both tests (before and after the activities) are on the same level of difficulty.

The short-term objectives of this project are:

- establish collaboration between teachers of language and literature at primary, secondary and tertiary level in order to exchange experience about varieties of teaching methods that can be implemented with the aim of improving the atmosphere and the reading and comprehension skills in classes,
- create materials that can be used for researching the issue of functional literacy,
- design and create materials, activities, exercises for lesson plans
- implement those activities in classes in primary and secondary schools as part of the research,
- analyze the results from the implemented activities.

Namely, one of the things that were noticed in the course of the research was that teachers of English in primary and secondary schools frequently participate in organized workshops focused on various aspects of the teaching process, such as mentoring younger colleagues, class management, second language acquisition and numerous other topics. Such workshops have been organized by teacher organizations, British or American centers in the country, or university professors in the related field teaching methodology. English teachers also typically have access to latest developments in international research related to teaching methodology. However, workshops for themes related to teaching are rarely organized for teachers of Macedonian or other subjects at primary and secondary level. Access to latest research for these other subjects is also more limited due to constraints in translating into Macedonian relevant theoretical literature published recently. Therefore, the objective of bringing teachers of Macedonian together for closer cooperation seemed very important for the project.

Additionally, materials that provide guidelines or specific activities concerning the development of critical thinking are lacking in the country, as textbooks mostly focus on the content of the material that is to be covered, and rarely include a variety of activities that pupils and students can engage with. Designing adequate materials, therefore, was especially important as one of the main goals of the project.

These are expected to lead to the following long-term objectives:

- to increase functional literacy in Macedonia in the long term;
- specifically, to provide students with skills that will enable them to connect information from multiple sources, to draw relevant conclusions from given texts, to express their opinion by using arguments;

- students to acquire the skills needed to solve problems—based on knowledge and understanding—in the contemporary society.
- through activities and publications to contribute to the designing of course curricula that integrate the development of the functional literacy aspects in the material.

The focus in teaching, generally speaking, is lecturing and assessing students' level of acquiring the material through tests or asking them to answer orally questions about the lectures. Other approaches that focus more on understanding the material and connecting it to other areas of knowledge are rare, and largely depend on individual teachers who implement them in their classes rather than on systematic solutions in the forms of guidelines or seminars for establishing basic principles of skills development. This is why the long-term objectives were formulated to indicate the need for broader change in the area of education.

The project is approved by the Teaching and Research Council of the “Blaže Koneški” Faculty of Philology. In regard to the financial aspect, it is carried out completely on voluntary basis, without financial compensation.

2. Participants and stages of the project

There are twenty-one participants in the project: eleven members of the teaching staff from the “Blaže Koneški” Faculty of Philology at UKIM in Skopje, three postgraduate students at the Faculty, and seven teachers from primary and secondary schools in North Macedonia.

Phase 1: Analysis

Activity	Time frame
Assembling a group of collaborators	November 2023–January 2024
Acquaintance of project participants with the basics of PISA: what it is, why it is important, what it measures, what can be achieved	January–April 2024
Analysis of Macedonian language and foreign language textbooks for primary and secondary education	January–April 2024
Analysis of educational methods and educational systems in other countries	January–April 2024
Creation of a database of questions (modeled after the PISA questions, but also other types of questions), which would serve for the testing that will be carried out within the framework of the research and adaptation according to the social-cultural context.	January–April 2024

The first phase was a necessary step to assemble a group of interested researchers who would dedicate themselves to addressing the needs of students to learn with more focus on understanding. Since no comprehensive research exists in Macedonia on analysing existing textbooks, the project aimed at filling in this gap by exploring textbooks in order to determine what kind of questions, exercises, activities are missing.

Phase 2: Designing lesson plans

Activity	Time frame
Collaboration between all participants in the project (from the schools and from the Faculty of Philology) to consider teaching activities for the first half of the academic year 2024-25 that will focus on developing functional literacy	March–June 2024
Planning and designing lesson plans, with exercises and activities focused on data analysis, connecting the acquired knowledge and information from different sources, applying them in new situations, drawing conclusions	April–August 2024

Before the project activities could be implemented in class, it was necessary to prepare them since it was determined that the textbooks themselves do not have a sufficient number of various exercises that require students' active participating in class. On the basis of these findings, the participants designed lesson plans that were based on the themes envisaged in the programme of the state Bureau for the Development of Education and covered in the textbook, but including approaches to teaching that material that would focus on improving functional literacy.

Phase 3: Implementing activities in schools

Activity	Time frame
Student testing: conducting an initial test, before the start of the activities	September 2024
Introducing activities during the lessons with a focus on data analysis, connecting the acquired knowledge and information from different sources, applying them to new situations, drawing conclusions.	September–October 2024
Retesting to determine if there is a difference in results.	November 2024

Phase 3 was planned together in the collaboration of all participants in the projects who contributed with a variety of activities. Then, in practice, it was implemented by the teachers from primary and secondary school in their classrooms.

Fourth stage: Analysis of the research results

Activity	Time frame
Analysis of the results	January 2025

After the implementation of the activities, the teachers shared the results with all participants. The results include the answers of the pupils and students to questions prepared for the initial and the end-test. They also included material such as reflection text written by the teachers to discuss their experience in class when implementing the activities prepared in the project, as well as statements of the students reflecting on their own perception of the activities. These results are analysed by the participants in the project who, according to the planned design of the project, are going to write chapters on the results in the forthcoming publication envisioned within the project.

Example of a lesson plan produced within the project

Numerous Macedonian researchers exploring classroom dynamics, including Ončevska, Bekar, Koteska, have noted that the predominant method of teaching in Macedonian context is the teacher-centered method. The same was noted by the teachers from primary and secondary schools who took part in the project. At the workshops that were organized, we have been discussing approaches and methods to use different methods, more aligned with functional literacy, within the lesson plans prepared as part of the project.

Here is an example of a lesson plan on a topic from literature (literature and grammar are the two main themes covered in Macedonian language classes) that was created as a result of the activities undertaken during the project. It starts from a typical lesson plan that is predominantly used in high school teaching on the topic of 'myth and folklore', then the new suggested lesson plan transforms the roles of the teacher and students, and offers activities engaging students and encouraging their potentials to be expressed.

This lesson plan was devised as part of the second phase of the project, when the participants were creating lesson plans based on elements that, according to the latest international research, encourage critical thinking and improve reading comprehension.

The typical (traditional) lesson plan envisages that the teacher gives a definition on myth, explains to the students the origins of myth, concepts such as mythical time and space, how the myths are divided (creation myths, eschatological myths, etc.), the influence of myth on people's beliefs and art, its importance in folklore, and then asks

the students to write down what they have learned about myths from the lecture, and what they would like to know about them.

What was largely missing from this approach was, first, any active engagement on the part of the students, and, second, any reference to any actual specific myth. Therefore, the proposed plan focuses on these two and several other aspects.

The first suggestion about the beginning of the class is: the teacher does not define or explain anything about myths.

The next suggestion: the lesson starts by reading two specific myths, after which, through discussion, students themselves come to a conclusion of what are some characteristics of the myths through their direct encounter with the selected myths. The myth of Icarus, and the myth of Arachne can serve as examples. Students read a version of each of the two myths in class, followed by a discussion in which the teacher mainly asks questions rather than holding a lecture. Questions that encourage discussion may be: 'Did you like the myths? Why or why not? Which one do you prefer and why? What do you think about each the myths? What elements do they have in common?' Such questions will encourage students to explore their emotional and rational reactions to the myths, as well as their analytical skills in exploring the logic, the narrative structure of the myths, comparing them to find certain underlying similarities.

By suggesting that there are no wrong answer to such questions that explore personal reactions to instances of cultural inheritance, the teacher would also contribute to an atmosphere of acceptance among students, which is crucial for creating a positive atmosphere where learning can take place, as noted by Hadfield (2000).

In the later part of the class, the teacher can raise more complex questions, eliciting from the students analytical and critical thinking about the myths they read. For example, why are Icarus and Arachne punished? What have they done? Was what they did so terrible to deserve such punishment? Is it bad to try to achieve something that is not otherwise predetermined for you to achieve, according to social norms? Why did the gods consider Icarus's and Arachne's acts punishable? What does that tell us about the perception of gods in antiquity? What does it tell us about the values promoted by these myths?

Then the teacher can transfer the discussion and knowledge they have acquired to their environment in order to draw their attention to the connections between myths or any literary works to the everyday life. This can be performed by asking them if they know of any similar examples from their personal experience of authorities and their behavior towards those around them, or similar examples from any other books, films, games, the internet.

This is also a good opportunity to point out, through the stories, the negative sides of bullying and peer violence, which are also pressing problems in the contemporary Macedonian school life, in which those who are stronger abuse their strength to harm

others. A lengthy discussion on this issue would bring to light both the significance of the myths, contributing to students learning about the historical meaning and narrative structure of mythical stories, and the relevance of myths for any contemporary issues.

The two discussed stories can also be related to other forms of art, such as Breughel's painting about Icarus, which can be shown in class to point to yet another dimension of the myth that is not visible in the myth itself, but shows later artists' perceptions on what potential topics can be entailed from the myth. A discussion of the painting can indicate one such topic, in this case people's indifference to someone else's pain. Reimagined versions of the two myths can also contribute to emphasizing a variety of perceptions and interpretations.

As a continuation of the topic of myths at the class immediately following the above described one, the teacher can give a task to the students to produce something in class, which doesn't necessarily need to be the same for all students. The teacher can suggest several activities, allowing students to choose one of them: make a drawing or a painting with a motive from a myth (this can be connected to their art class, in the sense of using a painting technique that they are studying in their art classes at the same time); to write a poem or a short story as re-imagining the myth or narrating it from the perspective of some other character; to write a story which resembles a creation myth (about the origin of any plant, animal or anything else they would like to talk about). This would give opportunities to students to express themselves creatively in a way they feel comfortable with.

Discussion of the results

The project for improving functional literacy aimed to address problems such as the teacher-centered classroom that has been a recognizable feature of Macedonian education for decades, a class atmosphere that does not discourage bullying, and focus on memorizing and repetition of the material from textbooks. The results showed that through the designing and implementation of specific activities that require thinking about rather than just remembering the texts, activities in which each action or response of the students can be discussed in the light of reflection of their behavior and identity encourage independent and critical thinking skills, and also encourages an environment in which students can feel sufficiently safe to express their opinions without being mocked or criticized.

The results are viewed from multifaceted aspect. The most immediate results refer to the testing before and after the activities implemented in the classes by the

teachers participating in the project. The long-term results emerge from the overall experience and outcomes of preparing more student-centered activities.

Short-term results from the test

In regard to the short-term results, no significant change was noticed. Several classes were part of the research with the following number of students from primary and secondary schools:

Group 1— 48 students

Group 2— 10 students

Group 3— 23 students

Group 4— 34 students

Group 5— 28 students

Group 6— 12 students

The test involved a short text and five questions that require understanding of the text in order to be answered. No direct answer can be found in the text, instead the student is supposed to come to a conclusion what the right answer would be on the basis of combining information.

No significant changes in the results were shown when comparing the answers after the six weeks of activities encouraging functional literacy implemented in class to the answers given before the beginning of the activities. For example, in the group of fourth year high school students, out of 16 respondents, 13 had all five correct answers, and three had four (out of five) correct answers before the activities. Following the activities, 12 students gave five correct answers, while four of them had four (out of five) correct answers. There was a similar situation in the sixth-grade primary school students, with two-to-three differences in terms of the distribution of correct-incorrect answers.

The risk of such results was foreseen. The time period is too short, and the activities were carried out within only one subject (Macedonian language and literature) out of a dozen subjects that students in primary and secondary schools have, depending on the type of school (general or vocational education).

Long-term results from implementing the activities

However, the long-term results were effective. The primary and secondary education teachers involved in the project reported excellent impressions from themselves and their students, and therefore continued employing similar methods and techniques in classes, after the testing period which lasted September-October 2024. The engage-

ment of the students increases, and the class atmosphere improved, according to the reflexive notes of the teachers.

Unlike the usual method of teaching through lecturing and focusing solely on text and textual analysis, one of the teachers applied a more inter-medial approach. "The work in groups enabled the students to express themselves creatively through different media—drawings, colors, music, mimicking. This variety enabled each student to find himself/herself in the most adequate manner of expression," this teacher states. In another note, she also refers to how the interactive discussion during a class focusing on the study of signs drew the attention of students to the concept and function of signs, inspiring students to request more interactive discussions in the future.

Another teacher, also in primary school, writes in her reflective notes that with the methods she used of eliciting answers and discussions from the students by posing questions rather than lecturing, "all students got actively involved".

In secondary school context, the Romantic period in literature was part of the curriculum for one of the classes. Rather than speaking about the characteristics of Romanticism in literature and then reading poems that illustrate those characteristics, the teacher approached the class with the opposite sequence of activities. She first asked students to read several poems from the period of Romanticism, and try to find certain elements they have in common, so that they can come up by themselves with reflections and conclusions about what elements typically constitutes Romanticism. According to her notes, "a discussion developed about the emotions of the poets (...), description of nature, rebelliousness, the feeling of sadness and melancholy, fear, mystery", and the students supported their statements with excerpts from the poems.

The results, however, also showed the numerous difficulties in implementing in practice the activities designed within the project. One of the major obstacles is that an approach that values critical thinking and interdisciplinarity is in clash with the traditional principle of teaching the envisaged material, carrying out written or oral examination to determine how well the students have learned that material, and grading them. Furthermore, creating a positive class atmosphere has never been a priority in any of the state documents related to primary or secondary education, and thus depends on the approach of individual teachers. For the principles of functional literacy to be applied in primary and secondary education it is necessary for coordinated workshops on aspects of functional literacy to be organized for all teachers from primary and secondary schools countrywide, which is a very comprehensive undertaking, and this has not yet been included in the strategy of the adequate state bodies.

Conclusion

Improving functional literacy is a very challenging task that involves complex changes and transformations on all educational levels—from designing adequate strategies on the level of the competent Ministry and other state institutions, to permanent teacher training and development, to specific changes in the in-class teaching methods.

The project “Improving Functional Literacy in Primary and Secondary Education in North Macedonia” has tackled only one of those issues, specifically changing lesson plans to include more activities that require active participation of students, creative responses to questions, relating their everyday experience to the material studied. The results from the project show that there are many benefits to the teaching environment. Despite the small changes in terms of skills for reaching correct answers to reading comprehension questions, all the other benefits are significant, namely improvement in the atmosphere in class, increasing the enthusiasm of students to actively participate, content on the part of the students that they can express their knowledge with creative activities rather than mechanical repetition of the lectures. These experiences may have implications for other countries that face a similar problem.

For further and more extensive results in terms of functional literacy, many other competent institutions need to become dedicated to improving the educational policies in the country. One of the major aims of this project is precisely to draw the attention of the public to the importance of supportive class environment and offering opportunities to students for creatively approaching the materials.

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