



# **EUROPEAN DECLARATION OF THE RIGHT TO LITERACY**

**(Full version)**

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# Introduction

Literacy is fundamental to human development. It enables people to live full and meaningful lives, and to contribute towards the enrichment of the communities in which we live. By literacy we mean the ability to read and write at a level whereby individuals can effectively understand and use written communication in all media (print or electronic), including digital literacy.

Literacy is an essential prerequisite for all kinds of learning. In the knowledge-based societies of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the rapid spread of new technologies and a constantly changing work environment, literacy learning is no longer limited to childhood and adolescence but must be recognised as a lifelong need and requirement.

## **The European literacy challenge**

In Europe one in five 15-year-olds and nearly 55 million adults lack basic literacy skills. Not only does this make it difficult for them to find a job, it also increases their risk of poverty and social exclusion, limiting opportunities for cultural and civil participation, lifelong learning and personal growth.

The European Commission recognises that there has been little improvement in literacy in the last 10 years. Yet, with affirmative action, we can make a difference. This Declaration shows that, with the right support in place, children and young people *can* develop strong literacy skills, and adults *can* improve their skills and take their rightful place in society.

## **Literacy as a basic right**

Everyone in Europe has the right to acquire literacy. European Union Member, candidate and associate States should ensure that people of all ages, regardless of social class, religion, ethnicity and gender, are provided with the necessary resources and opportunities to develop sufficient and sustainable literacy skills and knowledge in order to effectively understand and use written communication in print and digital media.

**11 CONDITIONS ARE REQUIRED TO PUT THIS BASIC LITERACY RIGHT INTO PRACTICE:**

# **1 YOUNG CHILDREN ARE ENCOURAGED AT HOME IN THEIR LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND LITERACY ACQUISITION.**

Young children have a right to parental support for their language development and literacy acquisition, including parents/carers interacting with them and talking and listening to them regularly, on matters of interest to them, and reading diverse and interesting materials to and with them, both on paper and through digital means. Children's early language skills (in both their mother tongue and the language of instruction, where these are different) have a major impact on the development of their literacy skills. Strong early language skills give children the essential foundation for learning in primary school. A wide range of empirical data shows the benefits of reading to children: it helps them to develop their vocabulary, love books and reading and become familiar with the elaborated language of books and other genres of written language, provides them with access to imaginative worlds, places, and perspectives, enlarges their knowledge, and builds emotional bonds with their parents/carers.

The main way that young children's rights regarding literacy acquisition can be safeguarded is by involving – and giving support to – their parents/carers, a fact that is considered in our second condition below.

Recommendations: Policy-makers and governments should

- Raise parental awareness (mothers *and* fathers) of how important it is to listen to and talk with children and to read books with them from the first year of life.
- Create a culture and a practice of multisector involvement and multi-disciplinarity in family literacy promotion. Programmes may thus involve paediatricians, nurses, libraries, and early childhood education and care centres, among others.
- Address the intergenerational literacy challenge and help every child succeed through developing policies and associated resources for parental and family literacy education.
- Encourage book-gifting to overcome economic barriers and promote early use of books within the family.
- Promote and encourage library membership from the earliest age.
- Provide extra support for children and their parents whose mother tongue is different from the language of instruction.

## **2 PARENTS RECEIVE SUPPORT IN HELPING THEIR CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND LITERACY ACQUISITION.**

Families play a major role in building a sustainable basis for lifelong literacy skills of children and adolescents. They are important language and literacy models for their children by reinforcing the relevance, value, and importance of reading and writing at home, in the workplace, and in the wider society. Yet many parents/carers themselves lack the confidence, skills, or 'know-how' to support their children in becoming confident and eager literacy learners, and would welcome advice on how to do this. In addition, some parents will need additional help to access this advice, including help to develop their own literacy.

Recommendations:

- Encourage all parents to talk copiously and frequently to and with their children to develop their vocabulary, grammar and communicative skills.
- Help all parents to experience the pleasures of reading with their children from the earliest age, through book-gifting programmes and regular visits to the library.
- Inform parents about the importance of introducing their children to a variety of quality books, appropriate for each developmental stage, and provide expert guidance to parents for informed choice.
- Ensure that authorities at all levels (local, regional, national) provide support and advice (with recommendations, materials, etc.) to motivate parents to use this support and advice, especially by:
  - providing all parents/carers with accessible guidance, including through digital formats, on how to support their children's language and early literacy acquisition and throughout their primary education.
  - providing parents/carers with family literacy programmes.
  - providing programmes of support for parents who are not literate in their mother tongue.
  - providing parents in prison and within the criminal justice system with opportunities and support to help with their children's literacy development.
- Ensure that policy-makers and governments recognise that parents (especially from socially disadvantaged, minority and migrant groups) need support in this essential task, through the development of parenting skills, including how to read to and with their children, access digital environments together, visit the library together, and discuss their children's reading choices as they grow and develop.
- Promote campaigns for parents to read more with their children, supported by business, schools and communities, and celebrate reading successes widely.
- Identify ways of supporting parents to help their children's literacy acquisition by utilising the full range of digital tools and digital apps, working with digital companies and digital publishers.

### **3 AFFORDABLE HIGH-QUALITY PRESCHOOL, OR KINDERGARTEN, FOSTERS CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE AND EMERGENT LITERACY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PLAY.**

Young children who have attended kindergarten or preschool settings have better performance in their academic achievement, including reading and writing. Investing in preschool is recognised as a key factor in developing early language and literacy skills, as well as overall child development, and in improving readiness to learn when starting school.

Recommendations:

- Make preschool education free or affordable so that economically disadvantaged families do not miss out.
- Provide language support so that each child entering school speaks the language of instruction.
- Provide preschool teachers with high-quality training, including how to encourage parents to read stories regularly to their young children at home.
- Collaborate with health and early years specialists to provide screening programmes for early identification of speech and language delays, and of eyesight problems or hearing deficits.
- Ensure that kindergarten and preschool education respects the developmental phase of young children and offers a play-like environment, with regular opportunities for story-time, reading picture books, singing and rhymes.
- Read often to children with the aim of familiarizing them with the language of books as well as increasing interest and motivation to read.
- Ensure that children are motivated to engage in a variety of pre-writing and writing activities. These activities also help children develop their fine motor control, which is needed for good handwriting and use of the keyboard.
- Engage children actively in literacy activities in print-rich classroom environments to help them understand the communicative nature of reading and writing.
- Foster children's attention to the forms of language by using rhymes, tongue-twisters and poems, by singing and clapping syllables, and by identifying related words.



## **4 HIGH-QUALITY LITERACY INSTRUCTION FOR CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS AND ADULTS IS REGARDED AS A CORE GOAL FOR ALL EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS.**

High-quality literacy instruction is a central task of teachers in all grades, all schools, and all school subjects. High-quality teaching includes evidence-based and cognitively demanding reading and writing instruction that builds both the skill and the desire to read and write increasingly complex material. It includes regular and continuous formative assessments that identify both the literacy strengths and needs of learners, and involve them in making decisions about their own learning needs and objectives. High-quality teaching helps learners to develop positive beliefs and confidence in their own learning abilities. Quality teaching should include pedagogically-sensitive use of digital tools to motivate learners, provide assessment opportunities, and improve literacy and digital competences.

Recommendations:

- Allocate sufficient time and resources for literacy teaching.
- Base literacy teaching in schools on a coherent literacy curriculum encompassing grades and subjects and taking into account gender and cultural differences, as well as specific difficulties, and including appropriate reading and writing aids such as assistive communication technologies.
- Involve students in making decisions about their own learning needs and objectives.
- Provide opportunities for cooperative and collaborative learning.
- Provide cognitively enhancing literacy teaching by using higher-level comprehension strategies.
- Provide constant and effective feedback, including the definition of clear goals and specific actions for achieving them.
- Develop standards/benchmarks for each school year as the basis for assessment with the aim of assisting the learning process of individual pupils by identifying their specific learning needs and adapting teaching accordingly.
- Ensure that in adult education institutions literacy and basic skills training is the core of the curriculum/programmes offered.
- Develop methods and materials which are adapted to the needs of adult learners.
- Develop and implement standards/benchmarks to assess learners' progress in adult literacy programmes.

## 5

**ALL TEACHERS RECEIVE EFFECTIVE INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN LITERACY TEACHING AND LEARNING IN ORDER TO BE WELL PREPARED FOR THEIR DEMANDING TASKS.**

It is essential that teachers are well prepared for teaching foundational and discipline-specific reading and writing skills (“content area literacy”) in every subject and in all grades. Teachers should be up-to-date with the latest evidence-based practices, and be knowledgeable about both traditional and contemporary children’s and young adult literature that unlocks students’ imaginations and expands their reading interests.

Recommendations:

- Provide evidence-based teacher training in language and literacy development, learning theory and motivation, instructional strategies at word and text levels, reading–writing connections, instructional approaches in remedial reading, writing, materials, and assessment techniques, and in teaching digital literacy skills.
- Create awareness among teachers, head teachers and educational authorities about the need for continuous professional development on literacy issues; and provide teachers with the necessary resources and opportunities to take literacy-related courses, including knowledge of contemporary authors and their books.
- Develop specific teacher training programmes to meet the learning needs of adults.

## **6 DIGITAL COMPETENCE, INCLUDING CRITICAL AND CREATIVE USE OF DIGITAL MEDIA, IS PROMOTED ACROSS ALL AGE GROUPS.**

The most effective literacy teaching for the 21st century makes extensive use of digital technology and fosters digital literacy and digital competence. Digital literacy is not just reading and writing online but includes specific abilities: Online reading includes: being able to find information on the internet (identifying key words, search for phrases, scan heterogeneous links); using navigation devices (e.g., assess the relevance of verbal expressions, understand the hierarchical structure of information); accumulation of information across multiple passages; and critical evaluation of the source of information.

Digital competence goes beyond digital literacy, as it includes multimodal skills such as the use of visual and auditory information to produce online texts.

Quality teaching involves the use of digital tools to help motivate learners, provide assessment opportunities, and improve literacy and technology skills for future employment.

Recommendations:

- Equip schools to access the internet (including free-of-charge connectivity).
- Provide schools with adequate ICT equipment. Make multiple digital resources (books, notebooks, supervised internet access) available in classrooms and ensure that these are used regularly to support learners' digital literacy.
- Offer students at all levels rich and equitable opportunities to use digital resources for student-led and teacher-led enquiry, as well as with an understanding of the risks and opportunities connected to digital literacy.
- Encourage children and adolescents to contribute their out-of-school and multi-literate digital skills and knowledge to classroom learning.
- Integrate digital literacy across all teaching areas at all educational levels.
- Provide resources and appropriate training for teachers at all levels to ensure that teachers are competent to develop their students' digital skills and that digital media are integrated in literacy pedagogy.

## 7 **READING FOR PLEASURE IS ACTIVELY PROMOTED AND ENCOURAGED.**

Regular reading for pleasure has been shown to improve the literacy skills of children, young people and adults, which can lead to greater participation in society and wider employment opportunities. This includes access to appropriate learning environments in and outside schools, as well as committed and well-trained educators who support students' engagement in reading and writing for pleasure, with access to books and other reading materials in all formats. Support is needed from parents, teachers and the wider community, including publishers and booksellers, schools and public libraries, and health and early years professionals.

Recommendations:

- Frame reading and writing for pleasure within a home and community literacy policy that draws on parental and community support.
- Support book-gifting programmes that make books accessible to parents and bring them directly into children's homes, taking advantage of the cost-saving dynamics of digital books.
- Create time for independent reading in school, showing appreciation of literacy learners' reading choices, with opportunities to choose their own reading material, in both print and digital media.
- Provide print and digital reading materials in schools that meet the diverse interests of students and, where appropriate, include foreign languages.
- Provide trained and supported literacy volunteers where needed or desired.
- Foster author and storytelling events in schools and communities.

## 8 LIBRARIES ARE ACCESSIBLE AND WELL RESOURCED.

Wider access to books or other reading materials results in more reading and more reading leads to better literacy development. Numerous studies show a positive relationship between library quality and reading achievement. Everybody should have the opportunity to access a wide variety of books and other print and digital reading materials in classroom, school, public and community libraries that are well stocked and resourced.

Recommendations:

- Ensure community/public libraries are accessible, operate all day, throughout the week, and are well stocked with print and digital materials.
- Make community/public libraries free or affordable for all.
- Offer reading materials in multiple languages spoken in the area.
- Staff libraries with qualified library professionals, including digitally competent staff.
- Create child-friendly spaces that encourage usage by families with young children.
- Promote library membership for all age groups, as widely as possible, including and especially among minority language groups.
- Ensure that public and school libraries are adequately funded, contribute actively to local and school-based literacy policies, and run book groups, including some specifically for reluctant readers.

## **9 CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO STRUGGLE WITH LITERACY RECEIVE APPROPRIATE SPECIALIST SUPPORT.**

Early identification of literacy difficulties and tailored support are crucial to prevent and eliminate literacy problems. Everyone should receive remedial teaching when needed, and opportunities to engage with diverse and interesting reading materials to motivate and encourage them to read and write more and improve their skills.

Recommendations:

- Make it a legal right that students who have not reached the standard of functional literacy are entitled to receive individual support and catch-up programmes.
- Ensure that primary and secondary schools can provide support to struggling readers and writers from professionals (e.g. literacy specialists, literacy coaches) specifically trained in both theoretical and practical issues related to literacy.
- Bring together teams of professionals (from social workers, health professionals, psychologists, special education teachers, ICT specialists) to support struggling readers and writers where needed.
- Allow time in the curriculum for access to reading materials that reflect different cultures, interests and literacy levels.
- Motivate young people to engage in reading and writing.

## **10 ADULTS ARE SUPPORTED TO DEVELOP THE LITERACY SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE NECESSARY FOR THEM TO PARTICIPATE FULLY IN SOCIETY.**

Literacy is a foundational skill that is required for adults to function effectively in society as citizens, employees and family members. The literacy demands on adults are increasingly complex and the price of poor literacy is increasingly high. Accordingly, accessible, flexible, high-quality adult literacy provision is an essential part of any modern education system.

Recommendations:

- Conduct regular surveys to understand adult literacy needs.
- Carry out campaigns to engage adults in literacy provision and help them understand its benefits.
- Establish a national curriculum framework that supports the needs of the full spectrum of adult literacy learners.
- Make high-quality adult literacy provision widely accessible and affordable to all.
- Raise the status of adult literacy educators by improving their working conditions and celebrating their work.
- Ensure appropriate and high-quality initial and continuing education and training for adult literacy teachers.
- Implement monitoring and evaluation systems that are linked to national standards.

## **POLICY-MAKERS, PROFESSIONALS, RESEARCHERS, PARENTS AND COMMUNITIES WORK TOGETHER TO ENSURE EQUAL ACCESS TO LITERACY BY CLOSING THE GAPS IN SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL LEVELS.**

Poor literacy has a negative impact on a wide range of social outcomes and the 'problem of poor literacy' cannot be resolved by educators alone. Instead, collaboration is required among a wide range of groups and across different policy areas.

Recommendations:

- Conduct national surveys of literacy levels at key stages, including adult literacy, to identify needs and gaps.
- Set up a policy review mechanism at national and local level, engaging all parts of the literacy community to identify policy challenges and propose solutions.
- Involve policy-makers across government in considering the impact of poor literacy and formulating joined-up policy responses.
- Involve practitioners and policy-makers across all sectors including library services, reading champions, publishers, communities, businesses, the criminal justice system and other non-governmental organisations in this process.
- Formulate national and local literacy plans with clear targets and review points.



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