

# BE THEIR ADVOCATES

## Children's rights to read—and our responsibilities to protect them

By **Emily Chiariello**



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*i*n the 21st century, education is a global indicator of health and wealth, though access to quality education remains precarious for certain populations. Despite progress, women and girls still face disproportionate and gender-based barriers to education. Globally, girls of primary school age are more likely to be out of school compared with boys, and two-thirds of illiterate adults in the world are women.

“The ability to read is the difference between inclusion in, and exclusion from, society,” says Bernadette Dwyer, lecturer at Dublin City University in Ireland and president of the Board of Directors of the International Literacy Association (ILA).

And yet, as we know, access to education is not protected in all corners of the world. In fact, in June, a United States federal judge in Michigan handed down a most disappointing ruling: literacy—though important—is *not* a fundamental right.

The plaintiffs in *Gary B. vs. Snyder*, a group of low-income students of color from the lowest-performing public schools in Detroit, argued that, due to low-quality instruction and poor conditions of their schools, state education officials had denied them even a “minimally adequate education.”

Dwyer and the Board of ILA, which had supported the plaintiffs in the case, were dismayed by the ruling. “We must continue to work toward the goal of an equitable education for all,” Dwyer said at the time of the decision. “Issues of equity, equality of opportunity, quality of instruction, and social justice should permeate all that we do to ensure that every child has the opportunity to learn to read.”

Literacy—the passport to all learning and a harbinger of social progress—is a fundamental human right, ILA has long argued.

To that end, ILA convened a task force last year, chaired by Dwyer, to craft Children’s Rights to Read—work that yielded 10 rights and a common language for educators, policymakers, and literacy advocates of all types to protect and follow. (This work can be found at [literacyworldwide.org/rightstoread](http://literacyworldwide.org/rightstoread).)

“Society has the responsibility to nurture and grow children as readers—children who can read, who do read, and who love to read,” says Dwyer, explaining the purpose behind this important campaign.

In short, it is society’s responsibility to advocate for children, and by using a framework such as the one that follows based on the rights, we can help ensure that protecting these rights does indeed permeate all that we do.

### Protect access and equity.

Globally, 617 million school-age children and youth across the world are reading at below minimum proficiency levels. We are responsible for providing our students with access to high-quality reading instruction and resources and for advocating on their behalf to the individuals and institutions charged with equitably protecting their right to read.

How do we make this happen?



■ **Be reading strong.** What are your shared values around reading in your school and community? Have the conversation, communicate a shared message, and then align all reading stakeholders and efforts to that vision.

■ **Flood the zone.** Design reading-rich environments in obvious and not-so-obvious places. Books are in your classrooms and libraries, but what about the nurse's office? How about a read-aloud during lunch or the morning announcements?

■ **Build a network.** Create a reading network that links home, school, and community and incentivizes the sharing of resources, assets, and funds of knowledge to promote increased access to literacy for all students and families.

■ **Get involved.** Support, join, and follow literacy associations and organizations that advocate for education rights. Pay attention to local, national, and global education issues and policy debates. Make your voice heard.

## Foster positive social and intellectual development.

As stated in the Children's Rights to Read, "Wherever they live and learn, children need carers who shape

their reading in supportive reading environments."

Literacy partners can include daycare staff, preschool teachers, and classroom teachers, as well as family caregivers, community members, school and public librarians, peers, and older children. We are responsible for being culturally responsive and knowledgeable literacy partners to our students and for using our expertise and energy to help them learn and love to read.

■ **Curate windows and mirrors.** Are you providing a balance of diversity and representation in the materials students read? Become familiar with the scholarship of Emily Style and Rudine Sims Bishop. Conduct a diversity text audit of the books in your classroom and library.

■ **Invest in professional learning and development.** Being a knowledgeable literacy partner requires staying current with reading instruction research. Literacy coaches and reading specialists play a valuable role in helping improve and enhance teacher effectiveness.

■ **Be a reading role model.** A teacher who reads and talks about their reading life motivates their students to read more often at home and school. Talk to students about your "textual lineage," what

you've read in the past and how it's shaped you.

## Promote enjoyment and wonder.

According to Alyson Simpson of the University of Sydney in Australia, the ability of a student to choose a book indicates his or her degree of intellectual engagement with the act of reading. Simpson, author of *Reading Under the Covers: Helping Children to Choose Books* (PETAA), believes there is a dialogic relationship between choice-making and effective reading instruction.

"As soon as you make something meaningful to children and respect their opinions, you begin to set the context for developing their voice and realizing they have an opinion to give," says Simpson, who served as a member of the Children's Rights to Read task force.

This means we are responsible for allowing our students to have agency in their own reading experiences and for giving them the space to make choices and the time to enjoy and become more curious about what they read.

■ **Teach children how to choose.** From an early age, children need to practice being alert to the world and using language to distinguish what they see. This metacognitive awareness helps



young readers form, voice, and justify their opinions, skills that become increasingly important as they mature into readers capable of making meaningful choices, according to Simpson.

- **Balance choice with curation.** Be intentional about setting the purpose and parameters for when, why, and how students can choose their reading. Children's choice awards and reading lists, literature circles, teacher-curated thematic text sets, and student interest surveys are ways to promote choice within boundaries.
- **Put a premium on reading for pleasure.** Resist the testing culture that dominates so much of a child's reading life. Carve out time during the school day for no-strings-attached independent reading, with the proper teacher supports when needed.

## Encourage critical inquiry and creative expression.

Award-winning illustrator and author Shane W. Evans says reading involves creative vision. "I am often tasked with interpreting words as visuals," he says. "If the cliché 'a picture is worth a thousand words' is true, then my ability to read is greater than the written language."

Here, we are responsible for designing meaningful reading experiences that allow our students to construct knowledge and communicate ideas that transcend the text and inspire a vision of the world they want to live in.

- **Teach critical literacy.** Design instruction that places students in critical dialogue with the text, its author, subject and characters, and with other readers. Integrate writing, speaking, and visual representation as ways students create meaning from reading.
- **Move students from reading to action.** Plan project-based learning and performance assessments that draw upon disciplines like civics or the visual arts, and place reading within authentic problem-solving contexts that student care about.
- **Make global connections.** Literacy specialist and ILA Board member Jennifer Williams, who

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also served on the Children's Rights to Read task force, says we can facilitate reading experiences that move from "being *about* the world to being *with* the world." Inspire students to communicate beyond the borders of their school community by leveraging social media, integrating technology, and teaching digital literacy.

## Be the defender.

These are steps any educator and literacy advocate can follow to make the ripple effects needed to promote high-quality reading instruction throughout the world. It can start in your classroom and in your community.

Be the advocate your students need and they will reap the benefits for a lifetime. ■

## CHILDREN'S RIGHTS TO READ

1. Children have the **basic human right** to read.
2. Children have the right to **access** texts in print and digital formats.
3. Children have the right to **choose** what they read.
4. Children have the right to read texts that **mirror** their experiences and languages, provide **windows** into the lives of others, and open **doors** into our diverse world.
5. Children have the right to read for **pleasure**.
6. Children have the right to **supportive** reading environments with knowledgeable literacy partners.
7. Children have the right to extended **time** set aside for reading.
8. Children have the right to **share** what they learn through reading by collaborating with others locally and globally.
9. Children have the right to read as a springboard for other forms of **communication**, such as writing, speaking, and visually representing.
10. Children have the right to benefit from the financial and material resources of governments, agencies, and organizations that **support** reading and reading instruction.

To download the Children's Rights to Read, and pledge your support to the campaign, visit [literacyworldwide.org/rightstoread](http://literacyworldwide.org/rightstoread).