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# THE RIGHT TO **DIGITAL** **LITERACY**

## **The challenge to develop the digital literacy skills of children**

By **Renate Valtin**

Literacy is fundamental to human development and an essential prerequisite for all kinds of learning, especially in the knowledge-based societies of the 21st century characterized by the rapid spread and change of new technologies.

### **Literacy as human right**

The ELINET Association is a network of European literacy professionals. Several of its members also belong to the International Literacy Association (ILA). ELINET's vision is that everyone in Europe shall be literate. The goal is for people of all ages, regardless of social class, religion, ethnicity, and gender, to be 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.

The ELINET Association is the follow-up of the ELINET project, which consisted of 80 partner organizations from 28 European countries, the majority representing the Federation of European Literacy Associations (FELA), a partner organization of ILA. ELINET was funded with €3 million (EUR) by the European Commission from 2014 to 2016. The aims of this project were to develop evidence-based tools for all professionals in the diverse fields of literacy locally, regionally, nationally, and transnationally, to support existing and initiate new activities in reducing the numbers of poor readers and improving literacy policies in all EU member countries.

One of the resulting products was the European Declaration of the Right to Literacy ([elinet.pro/policy-statements](http://elinet.pro/policy-statements)), which was launched in 2016. This declaration was inspired by the 10 rights of children to read, released in 2000 by ILA and revamped in 2018 as Children's Rights to Read ([literacyworldwide.org/get-involved/rightstoread](http://literacyworldwide.org/get-involved/rightstoread)).

## Digital literacy as a right

Literacy has been recognized as a human right for more than 50 years in several international declarations and initiatives. In 2019, ILA declared high-quality literacy instruction as a human right. Members of the ELINET network believe that this basic right should be extended explicitly to digital literacy, especially for children, because digital literacy requires new skills of navigation, synthesis, and evaluation.

The data from ePIRLS 2016 show that only 50% of the students reached the High International Benchmark necessary for future learning—the ability to integrate information across webpages and interactive features and evaluate how graphic elements support content. All children should be able to locate, comprehend, integrate, evaluate, create, and use data from multiple information sources (e.g., online texts, videos, audio, images, interactive graphics) as well as to communicate and express themselves effectively in various ways (e.g., text, visual, digital).

Not addressing these skills risks exacerbating the digital divide and perpetuating existing inequalities amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

To respond to these issues, at the 22nd European Conference on Literacy in Dublin, Ireland, in July 2022, a new declaration was launched by ELINET: European Declaration of Digital Literacy as a Basic Right of Children.

The basic right is:

*Every child has the right to acquire digital literacy. EU Member States should ensure that children, regardless of social class, religion, ethnicity, origin, and gender, are provided with the necessary resources and opportunities to develop sufficient and sustainable digital competences in order to effectively understand and use digital devices as new ways to learn, communicate, explore, entertain, and fulfill personal aims.*

## Putting this right into practice

In order to put this basic right to digital literacy into practice, several conditions are required. The ELINET network has collected and reviewed a number of good practice examples, which can be found at <https://elinet.pro>.

Ten conditions have been identified:

1. European countries create an efficient digital infrastructure and strive to realize the EU goals for the Digital Decade: for every European household to have access to high-speed internet coverage by 2025 and gigabit connectivity by 2030.
2. All children must acquire sufficient oral language, reading, and writing competences which are foundational skills for digital literacy.
3. Parents and preschool teachers are supported to enable their children to use digital devices safely and confidently in the home.
4. Kindergartens, preschools, and schools are equipped with tablets and user-friendly apps and services

where privacy and ethical standards are respected.

5. Digital literacy is part of the school curriculum. Children will be equipped with the necessary skills and competences to navigate safely and responsibly online from an early age and to identify and evaluate misleading and fake information.
6. All school teachers receive effective initial teacher education and professional development in teaching digital literacy in order to raise literacy standards in the classroom for all children, including those with special needs and language issues.
7. Digital tools are used as a way to create and communicate in various modalities and to promote and encourage reading and writing for pleasure.
8. Libraries and other places, where children can learn and interact through digital technologies, are made accessible to all and well-resourced with digital devices and services that are inclusive and children centred.
9. Ministries of Education need to incorporate digital literacy in all future policy, planning, and investment and provide digital clouds where literacy experts and teachers share teaching and learning materials.
10. Policymakers, professionals, parents, and communities work together to ensure equal access to literacy devices by closing the gaps in social and educational levels.

These 10 conditions include the four tenets described in ILA's Children's Rights to Excellent Literacy Instruction position statement: knowledgeable and qualified literacy educators, support systems, supportive learning environments and high-quality resources, and policies that ensure equitable literacy instruction.

May these declarations not remain just good intentions and lip service, but rather be helpful to foster the digital competence of children so that they are enabled to use digital tools for learning, communication and, not to forget, pleasure and enjoyment. ■