



Learning to Read is a Basic Human Right & Enshrined in the Constitution

– André Gaum (SAHRC Commissioner for Education)

The right to a basic education is immediately realisable. One of the fundamental rights enshrined in South Africa's Constitution is: "Everyone has the right to a basic education". This right is a special right and different from many other Constitutional rights because it is 'immediately realisable', that is, there is no inherent qualification to the right to a basic education.

For the SAHRC, the right to read and write is a minimum core outcome. The South African Human Rights Commission (the Commission), a Chapter 9 institution established to strengthen constitutional democracy in South Africa, has a unit dedicated to education. The unit has since its inception conducted a wide range of research and consultations on the meaning of the right to a basic education. For the Commission, the ability to read and write, is one of the most important minimum 'core' outcomes with respect to the right to a basic education. The Commission therefore welcomes President Ramaphosa's 2019 State of the Nation Address (SONA) which identifies a key priority for 2030 as all children should be able to 'read for meaning' by the age of 10.

The instantiation of the Right to Read and Write in September 2021. To better understand the concrete implications of reading for meaning, the Commission established a Section 11 Committee consisting of child rights experts and experts in reading in all South African languages. The Committee was tasked with developing a document on the minimum reading norms in the home languages of children in South Africa. The document, The Right to Read and Write, was launched at the Constitutional Court in September 2021, and provides the following definition of reading: "Every child in South Africa has the right to read at a basic level, in their home language, by the age of 10. That is to say, they can read and understand a short and simple text and answer 80% of the literal and straight-forward inferential questions they are asked based on that text." The minimum reading norms adopted in the document are adapted from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), an international assessment and research project designed to measure reading achievement.

A minimum set of resources is needed if we are to ensure all children learn to read. The Right to Read and Write also argues that a necessary, although not sufficient, condition for children reading and writing with meaning by the age of 10, is access to a minimum set of appropriate Learning and Teaching Support Materials (LTSM). In the Right to Read and Write document, there is a proposal for the minimum number and type of LTSM for each of Grades 1, 2 and 3. This includes books in the home language for every Foundation Phase class and for every Foundation Phase learner. These books are available, many are Open Access, and they can be delivered through existing distribution channels at relatively low cost.

At the launch of The Right to Read and Write, the Commission called on government and civil society to embrace the right to read and write, and to support efforts to achieve the right to read for all South African children.

The Commission therefore welcomes the establishment of the South African Reading Panel as an important impetus to the attainment of the right to a basic education and government's stated aim for children to read for meaning by the age of 10 by 2030.

In particular, the Commission calls on the Reading Panel to support the provision of a minimum LTSM package in every Foundation Phase classroom. This is an immediately realisable step towards the 2030 goal of all children reading for meaning by the age of 10.