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# Artikel

## A Children's Rights Approach to the Right to Read

M.F.A. Mendes LLM & mr. dr. M.P. de Kruijf\*

### Introduction

Every Monday, my mother takes us to the library around the corner. We are allowed to take out seven books each. On those days, No one is there to say, *Not that book*, when I stop in front of the small paperback with a brown boy on the cover.

*Stevie.*

[...]

If someone had taken that book out of my hand said, *You're too old for this* maybe

I'd never have believed that someone who looked like me could be in the pages of the book that someone who looked like me had a story.<sup>1</sup>

– *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Jacqueline Woodson

In her award-winning memoir book *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Jacqueline Woodson recalls growing up as an African American in the '60s, living with the remnants of segregation laws and a growing awareness of the Civil Rights

Movement. In the poem 'stevie and me', a children's book becomes one of her first moments of awakening to her own identity and self-worth, amidst the broader struggle for civil rights. Despite not being framed in legal terms, the book she picks up from the library effectively communicates to her, as a child, core values that would become crucial for her identity, cultural life, political participation, and overall understanding of the world.

Unfortunately, that simple act of finding a library or a bookstore and freely picking up a book of interest is still not a reality for many children, as significant challenges and barriers remain worldwide in ensuring that every child is able and free to read, with access to books. Needless to say, when children's ability to read and access books is not protected, governments and authorities are in breach of their obligations, including internationally agreed commitments, to uphold the right to education, the right to participate in cultural life, freedom of expression, and so on.

For instance, a close look at the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history – the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) – reveals that State parties had already implicitly agreed upon a *right to read*, in the intersection of other well-established rights. In particular, the outputs of its monitoring body, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee) – including general comments, days of general discussion, and concluding observations – frequently highlight aspects of other rights that are relevant to the recognition and enforcement of a right to read.

In this contribution, we briefly revisit the CRC to clarify the current legal framework surrounding the right to read. We focus on three key dimensions frequently highlighted in legal and interpretative documents: (1) the right to learn to read, (2) the freedom to choose what to

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1 J. Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Penguin Group 2014.

read, and (3) the right to access reading materials. Alongside a recap of the relevant legal framework, we offer brief reflections on how these three aspects manifest both globally and in the Dutch context. We argue that adopting a children's rights-based approach to the right to read could provide valuable guidance for addressing these challenges.

## The CRC and the right to learn how to read

By the time the CRC came into force, the international community had already established a children's right to literacy or, precisely, a *right to know how to read by the time they are of age to complete primary education*. This right is an articulation of the obligation contained in Article 13(2)(a) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) ('[p]rimary education shall be compulsory and available free to all') with the International Standard Classification on Education (ISCED) which places great emphasis on literacy as part of the primary education curriculum.<sup>2</sup>

In the CRC, education rights are dealt with in a distinctive way that reflects both an acknowledgment of existing standards and the challenge of adopting a 'child-centred, child friendly and empowering' perspective.<sup>3</sup> While the Convention builds on prior frameworks such as the ICESCR, it shifts emphasis from learning tools (like literacy, oral expression, numeracy and problem solving) to learning contents (such as knowledge, skills, values and attitudes), which are elaborated in Article 29.<sup>4</sup> Literacy, for instance, appears only once in the CRC, in Article 28.3, within the context of international cooperation – a provision proposed by Algeria during the 1985 Working Group meetings.<sup>5</sup>

Despite this limited reference, the drafting history makes clear that the omission of learning tools does not diminish the scope of educational rights; instead, it aligns with broader interpretive principles of the CRC, such as the child's evolving capacities and right to be heard.<sup>6</sup> As clarified by General Comment No. 1, the CRC's approach advances a more holistic understanding of education, recognising not only access but also a child's individual and subjective right to a specific quality of education, that is directed to the aims of education presented in Article 29.<sup>7</sup>

- 2 M.F.A. Mendes, *A Child Rights-based Approach to the Right to Read*, Master's thesis, Leiden: Leiden University 2024, p. 9.
- 3 Committee on the Rights of the Child (2001), *General Comment No. 1: The Aims of Education*, CRC/GC/2001/1, para. 2.
- 4 Mendes 2024, p. 18.
- 5 OHCHR, *Legislative History of the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, HR/PUB/07/1 and 2, 2007, p. 644.
- 6 C. Courtis & J. Tobin, 'Art. 28 The Right to Education', in: J. Tobin (red.), *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: A Commentary*, Oxford Commentaries on International Law, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019, p. 1059.
- 7 Committee on the Rights of the Child (2001), *General Comment No. 1: The Aims of Education*, CRC/GC/2001/1.

In this context, the CRC framework adds a *qualitative measurement* to the right to literacy: it is not enough that a child can decipher and comprehend text, as this ability by itself does not prepare the child 'to face the challenges that he or she can expect to be confronted with in life'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the CRC framework grants children not only the right to know how to read by the time they are of age to complete primary education (in line with ICESCR Article 13), but also creates a qualitative measurement for this right – children have to be able to use their literacy skills as tools to achieve the aims of education.

## The right to learn how to read in the global and Dutch context

The world is still going through an illiteracy crisis. Despite the global decline in adult illiteracy rates from 34.4% in 1976 to an estimated 12.9% in 2022,<sup>9</sup> an estimated 773 million adults still cannot read and write at a basic level.<sup>10</sup> This number is not very different from the number of adults that were illiterate in 2000, 862 million,<sup>11</sup> showing that efforts to reduce illiteracy have not kept pace with population growth. In the Netherlands, 1.3 million people between the ages of 16 and 65 struggle with the Dutch language.<sup>12</sup>

The persistence of high adult illiteracy rates is a direct consequence of educational disparities during childhood. The world is falling behind on its Sustainable Development Goal 4 commitment to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for children, particularly when it comes to reading proficiency.<sup>13</sup> In 2022, approximately 70% of children in low and middle-income countries lacked foundational skills in reading and numeracy by Grade 3,<sup>14</sup> with an even more severe situation in sub-Saharan Africa, where less than one in ten children is able to achieve foundational learning skills by the same grade.<sup>15</sup>

Despite being more severe in low and middle-income countries, insufficient reading skills are also becoming a

8 *Ibid.* para. 9.

9 Our World in Data, *Data adapted from UNESCO Institute for Statistics* (2024). (<https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/literacy-rate-adults?tab=chart#research-and-writing>), last accessed (30-6-2024).

10 UIS, *More Than One-Half of Children and Adolescents Are Not Learning Worldwide*, Fact Sheet No. 46 UIS/FS/2017/ED/46 (2017).

11 UNESCO, *The Literacy Decade: Getting Started 2003-2004* (2004).

12 Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, *Working together for a skilled Netherlands: follow-up approach to low literacy 2020 - 2024* ('Samen aan de slag voor een vaardig Nederland: vervolgaanpak laaggeletterdheid 2020 - 2024'), ref. nr. 1479729, 18 March 2019. Meerjarenplan Alfabetisering | Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal.

13 J.D. Sachs, G. Lafortune & G. Fuller, *The SDGs and the UN Summit of the Future: Sustainable Development Report 2024*, Dublin University Press 2024, at 17.

14 World Bank, UNICEF, FCDO, USAID & Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, *The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update* (2022). (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/publication/state-of-global-learning-poverty>), last accessed (30-6-2024).

15 *Ibid.*

new trend in high-income countries. The international PISA survey,<sup>16</sup> which measures the skills of 15-year-olds worldwide, shows that Dutch pupils' reading skills have deteriorated. In 2022, a third of pupils did not reach the required reading level, up from a quarter in 2018.<sup>17</sup> The gap in reading skills between children of low and high-educated parents has increased by over 80% in 15 years, the PISA survey shows.

Whether a child learns to read well increasingly depends on its home environment rather than formal education, according to the Expertise Centre for Dutch and the Inspectorate of Education.<sup>18</sup> Children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families, such as children of low-educated parents and/or parents with a migration background tend to struggle more with reading skills than children of highly and moderately educated parents without a migration background. They are also at greater risk of struggling with reading and writing later on. These differences emerge very early in life and can have long-term consequences.<sup>19</sup>

## The CRC and the freedom to choose what to read

The right to read is also a very essential part of the right to freedom of expression and the child's sense of identity and selfhood,<sup>20</sup> as writing and reading are two of the main forms through which children can seek, receive and impart information and ideas. Article 13 of the CRC represents the first time where the right to freedom of expression is explicitly included in a child rights convention.<sup>21</sup> Its formulation, inspired by Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), clearly grants to all children the *freedom to choose what to read*.

The practical application of this article is more challenging than it first appears. The CRC Committee has, on many occasions, expressed concern about the laws and

regulations banning 'educational materials and books dealing with certain topics, such as sexual orientation and gender identity',<sup>22</sup> disapproving practices that deny access to sexual and reproductive health and information to adolescents, or allowing parents to restrict the access to this type of information from their children.<sup>23</sup> The Committee has presented a non-exhaustive list of modes and types of materials that children should have access to 'through accessible and appropriate channels'.<sup>24</sup> The Committee also highlights that '[t]he obligation of parents and caregivers to provide appropriate guidance in accordance with the evolving capacities of adolescents should not interfere with adolescents' right to freedom of expression'.<sup>25</sup>

In the context of digital technologies, the Committee acknowledges that, in the digital environment, the child might be exposed to 'gender-stereotyped, discriminatory, racist, violent, pornographic and exploitative information, as well as false narratives, misinformation and disinformation and information encouraging children to engage in unlawful or harmful activities'.<sup>26</sup> It highlights, in this context, the protection dimension of Article 13, but importantly acknowledges that '[a]ny restrictions on the operation of any Internet-based, electronic or other information dissemination systems should be in line with article 13 of the Convention,' mentioning the strict criteria of necessity and lawfulness.<sup>27</sup>

## The freedom to choose what to read in the global and Dutch context

103

Book banning – 'the process by which individuals, private organisations, schools, or government officials remove books from public access on library shelves or reading lists because they find the content of the books objectionable'<sup>28</sup> – remains a common practice around the world. Some of these bans happen at a regional or national level – restricting the publishing of specific titles –, others happen in specific places, such as prisons, public libraries and schools. Book banning can also take other forms such as author shadowbans.<sup>29</sup>

16 The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international assessment that measures 15-year-old students' reading, mathematics, and science literacy. The assessment is administered by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

17 M.R.M. Meelissen, N.A.M. Maassen, J. Gubbels, A.M.L. van Langen, J. Valk, C. Dood, I. Derks, M. in 't Zandt & M. Wolbers, *Resultaten PISA-2022 in vogelvlucht*, Universiteit Twente – 2023, <https://doi.org/10.3990/1.9789036559461>.

18 *Ibid.*; Also, reading skills of pupils in (special) primary education have declined compared to 10 years ago and half of pupils (at the end of primary school) read for less than 15 minutes a day outside the school setting (Inspectorate of Education, *Peil.Leesvaardigheid einde (speciaal) basisonderwijs*. [Reading skills at the end of (special) primary education] Utrecht: Inspectorate of Education, 2022).

19 Centraal Planbureau, *Ongelijkheid van het jonge kind (notitie)*, december 2020; Y. van Dijk & M.-J. Klaver, 'De kloof verwijdt zich. De leescrisis in het onderwijs (2)', *De Groene Amsterdammer* 2022 no. 27.

20 See also I. Vallejo, *Manifiesto por la lectura* ('Uit liefde voor het lezen'), 2020.

21 J. Tobin & A. Parkes, 'Art. 13 The Right to Freedom of Expression', in: J. Tobin (red.), *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: A Commentary*, Oxford Commentaries on International Law, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019, at p. 347.

22 CRC Committee, *Concluding observations: United States of America*, CCPR/C/USA/CO/5, para. 58 (2023).

23 On the 17th of April the Dutch court in Utrecht banned the distribution of the 'Black book Spring Fever' ('Zwartboek Lentekriebels') (ECLI:NL:RBMNE:2025:1778).

24 CRC Committee, *General comment No. 21 on children in street situations*, CRC/C/GC/21, at para. 42 (2017).

25 CRC Committee, *General comment No. 20 on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence*, CRC/C/GC/20, at para. 42 (2016).

26 CRC Committee, *General comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment*, CRC/C/GC/25, at para. 54 (2021).

27 *Ibid.*, at para. 50.

28 M. Deutsch, 'Burned, banned, and censored: the need for an international framework that addresses the right to read', *Wisconsin International Law Journal* 2022 39(2), at p. 330.

29 D. Davis, H. Sutton & M.F.A. Mendes, *The Right to Read (Educational Curriculum)*, Los Angeles: The Rights of Every Child 2025.

Book banning is usually targeted at books that discuss sex, religion or other topics that might be considered offensive to a segment of society, based on socio-cultural grounds. It can also be aimed at censoring certain political ideas.<sup>30</sup>

Take the United States as an example – the country's decentralised approach to censorship has allowed parents and school districts to challenge a growing number of children's books at schools. According to the American Library Association, in 2023 alone, 4,240 titles were targeted for removal from schools and public libraries.<sup>31</sup> The number is a historical high and represents a 65% spike from the previous year.<sup>32</sup> Among the ten most challenged titles of 2023, seven featured LGBTI<sup>33</sup> characters or themes.<sup>34</sup>

Attempts to prevent children from having access to books does not only happen in the United States – it happens all around the world<sup>35</sup> and takes different forms, from book banning, to 'book wrapping',<sup>36</sup> to online filtering.<sup>37</sup> In the UK, an Index survey of school librarians revealed that more than half of respondents had been asked to remove books from the shelves.<sup>38</sup> Most requests came from parents who don't want their children exposed to 'inappropriate content'.<sup>39</sup>

In the Netherlands, legal attempts to ban books are not a common practice, with one exception: *Mein Kampf* (1924).<sup>40</sup> The country's strong national attention to children's books, reading promotion, and language development – both in and outside education – is paying off, with children's book sales rising by 4% in 2024 com-

pared to the previous year, when over 10 million were sold.

*The Letter for the King* (*De brief voor de koning*) by Tonke Dragt is often considered one of the best children's books of all time in the Netherlands. Last year, two journalists published an article titled 'Is children's literature simplifying? And if so, is that bad?' – a reflection of the public debate around children's books that also highlights growing concerns regarding the reading level declines in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhoods and localities.<sup>41</sup>

## The CRC and the access to reading materials

What is the point of knowing how to read and being free to read when there is nothing to read? That's the question Shaver (2015) raises when she concludes that the access dimension of the right to read is 'much less clearly established, yet just as necessary'.<sup>42</sup> The author is right in the sense that references to a right to access reading materials are less common than those addressing the freedom and ability dimensions. Nonetheless, the importance of access has not gone unrecognised by the CRC Committee.

The Committee has encouraged measures to promote reading among children,<sup>43</sup> such as the establishment of libraries in schools;<sup>44</sup> it has also encouraged the dissemination of books for children and the establishment of State support, like tax reduction, for the publication of children's books, in line with Article 17(c).<sup>45</sup> The Committee has also mentioned the issue of shortages<sup>46</sup> and lack of assistance to purchase<sup>47</sup> text books as aspects of poor educational infrastructure.

At its eleventh session, in 1996, the Committee dedicated one day of general discussion to the issue of 'the child and the media'. Based on the discussions, 12 recommendations were formulated by the Rapporteur, including a recommendation to document and disseminate the experience of dynamic child libraries or child departments within public libraries; and a recommendation to incentivise budgetary support and international cooperation 'to ensure the production and dissemination of children's books, magazines and papers,

30 Deutsch at p. 339.

31 American Library Association, *American Library Association reports record number of unique book titles challenged in 2023* (2024) ([www.ala.org/news/2024/03/american-library-association-reports-record-number-unique-book-titles](http://www.ala.org/news/2024/03/american-library-association-reports-record-number-unique-book-titles)), last accessed (30-6-2024).

32 *Ibid.*

33 The acronym LGBTI is chosen in this contribution in order to 'denote the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex community'. While this acronym is 'inclusive of a broad range of people across our community [...] it is not exhaustive, nor is it universally accepted or used.' OutRight Action International, Gender Justice and Freedom of Opinion and Expression for LGBTI persons, submission to United Nations Independent Expert on Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression (2021).

34 D. Arkin, *More than half of 2023's most challenged books have LGBTQ themes*. NBC News (2024) ([www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/banned-books-lgbtq-library-association-rcna146236](http://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/banned-books-lgbtq-library-association-rcna146236)), last accessed (21-6-2024).

35 OutRight Action International, *Gender Justice and Freedom of Opinion and Expression for LGBTI persons*, submission to United Nations Independent Expert on Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression (2021).

36 ILGA Europe, *Hungary*. Annual review of the human rights situation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people covering the period of January to December 2023 (2024) ([www.ilga-europe.org/files/uploads/2024/02/2024\\_hungary.pdf](http://www.ilga-europe.org/files/uploads/2024/02/2024_hungary.pdf)), last accessed (21-6-2024).

37 OutRight Action International, The Citizen Lab, OONI, *No Access: LGBTIQ Website Censorship in Six Countries* (2021) (<https://outrightinternational.org/our-work/human-rights-research/no-access-lgbtq-website-censorship-six-countries>), last accessed (21-6-2024).

38 Index on Censorship, *Banned: school librarians shushed over LGBT+ books* (2024) ([www.indexoncensorship.org/2024/08/banned-school-librarians-shushed-over-lgbt-books/](http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2024/08/banned-school-librarians-shushed-over-lgbt-books/)), last accessed (15-09-2024).

39 *Ibid.*

40 See Dutch Supreme Court of 14 February 2017 (ECLI:NL:HR:2017:220), at para. 3.4.

41 L. de Jong & P. van Lenteren, 'Is de kinderliteratuur aan het versimpelen? En zo ja, is dat erg?', *de Volkskrant*, 24 oktober 2024.

42 L. Shaver, 'The Right to Read', *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law* 2019 54, at p. 34.

43 CRC Committee, *Concluding Observations: Latvia*, CRC/C/LVA/CO/2, at para. 28 (2006).

44 CRC Committee, *Concluding observations: Madagascar*, CRC/C/15/Add.218, at para. 36 (2003).

45 CRC Committee, *Concluding observations: Lithuania*, CRC/C/15/Add.146, at para. 27 (2001).

46 CRC Committee, *Concluding observations: Lesotho*, CRC/C/15/Add.147, at para. 51 (2001).

47 CRC Committee, *Concluding observations: Sierra Leone*, CRC/C/15/Add.116, at para. 66 (2000).

music, theatre and other artistic expressions for children.<sup>48</sup>

To deepen the analysis of access, the CRC Committee's recommendations can be read alongside structured frameworks commonly used in international law to define the normative scope of rights. In a preliminary report to the Commission on Human Rights, Tomaševski (1999) highlighted 'four essential features that primary schools should exhibit, namely availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability.'<sup>49</sup> The four dimensions of this framework (also known as the 4-A framework) can be used in order to set up an analytical framework for reading materials, drawing parallels from the work of interpretive bodies and commentators utilising this framework in other contexts (education, primary education, cultural rights and the right to play).<sup>50</sup>

This analytical framework validates the affirmation that every child has the *right to have access to reading materials that are available in sufficient quantity; accessible, without discrimination;*<sup>51</sup> *acceptable in terms of cultural relevance and quality; and adaptable to meet changing needs and contexts.*

## Access to reading materials in the global and Dutch context

Globally, many children are ready and willing to read but face a severe shortage of accessible books, due to factors such as the lack of materials in accessible formats, limited investment in local publishing capacity, and disparities in distribution.

Regarding the lack of accessible format works, the World Blind Union estimates that over 90% of all published materials are still inaccessible to people who are blind, partially sighted or print-disabled (including developmental and learning disabilities).<sup>52</sup> A major barrier remains copyright law, which in many jurisdictions treats the production of accessible format copies as copyright infringement. However, some countries have already conformed their legal frameworks – either through leg-

islative initiative<sup>53</sup> or litigation outcomes<sup>54</sup> – to align with international obligations under instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired or Otherwise Print Disabled.<sup>55</sup>

In many countries, the lack of investment in local publishing capacity also creates a general imbalance in the availability of books. Shaver (2010) reminds us that:

'[T]he German publishing industry produces 93,600 new titles and re-editions each year, while Pakistan's publishing industry produces only 3,500. The U.K. publishing industry produces approximately six books per British child each year; the Indian publishing industry produces one book for every twenty Indian children. In many very poor countries, there is a shockingly inadequate supply of reading material available for purchase. When people have spoken of Africa's "book famine," they typically have had in mind this basic criterion.'<sup>56</sup>

Finally, the disparities in distribution of books relates to the accessibility dimension of the right to read. *Accessibility* implies that reading materials must be accessible to everyone, without discrimination. There are two relevant dimensions of accessibility.<sup>57</sup> *Physical accessibility* involves ensuring that reading materials are within safe physical reach, either through local facilities or modern technology.<sup>58</sup> *Economic accessibility* requires that reading materials are affordable for all, including consideration of both direct and indirect costs.<sup>59</sup>

In many countries, such disparities persist due to an insufficient number of public libraries, the high cost of books, or the significant gap in the quality and availability of library resources between public and private schools.

From 1 July 2022, anyone under 18 years old throughout the Netherlands – including the islands of Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba (BES islands) – can receive a free public library membership. There are about 133 public library organizations in the Netherlands, which together operate about 800 branches. School libraries, unfortunately, are quietly disappearing. In the UK, writers have called on the government to make libraries in all schools a legal requirement.<sup>60</sup> This call is also being

48 CRC Committee, *General discussion on the child and the media*, CRC/C/15/Add.65, at p. 44-45 (1996).

49 UN, *Preliminary report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education*, Ms. Katarina Tomaševski, submitted in accordance with Commission on Human Rights resolution 1998/33, E/CN.4/1999/49, at para. 50 (1999).

50 Mendes, 2024, p. 13.

51 In the Netherlands, for example, characters of colour appear (relatively) rarely in Dutch picture books. This is shown in an analysis of 64 popular picture books from 2009-2018 for zero to six-year-old children. Only white characters appear in 42% of the books. 14% of the books feature white characters or characters whose ethnicity is unclear. 44% of books are populated by both white characters and characters of colour. Books with only characters of colour do not appear in the selection (Y. de Bruijn, R.A.G. Emmen & J. Mesman, 'Ethnic Diversity in Children's Books in the Netherlands', *Early Childhood Education Journal* 2021, at p. 413-423).

52 World Blind Union, *Marrakesh Treaty Ratification and Implementation Campaign*. (<https://worldblindunion.org/programs/marrakesh-treaty/>), last accessed (30-6-2024).

53 See, e.g., European Commission, *Report on the availability of certain copyright protected works for persons with disabilities within the internal market*, Commission Staff Working Document (2022).

54 See, e.g., S. Samtani, *Copyright Exception to Convert Works into Formats Accessible to People with Visual and Print Disabilities*, GRUR International, 72(3) (2023).

55 WIPO, *Contracting Parties Marrakesh VIP Treaty (Total Members: 96)*. ([www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/treaties/ShowResults?start\\_year=ANY&end\\_year=ANY&search\\_what=C&code=ALL&treaty\\_id=843](http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/treaties/ShowResults?start_year=ANY&end_year=ANY&search_what=C&code=ALL&treaty_id=843)), last accessed (30-6-2024).

56 Shaver (2015), at p. 35-36.

57 CESCR, at para. 6.

58 *Ibid.*

59 N. Lott, *The Right to Play*, University of Nottingham 2020, at p. 166-169.

60 V. Thorpe, "Every school should have a library": Philip Pullman calls for new UK laws', *The Guardian*, 21 January 2024.

made by writers in the Netherlands,<sup>61</sup> including the importance of support by knowledgeable school librarians. Accessibility is typically seen as just one of several dimensions through which states' obligations to fulfil economic, social, or cultural rights can be assessed. Books must also be available, acceptable, and adaptable.<sup>62</sup> Applying the 4-A framework opens the door to many important reflections.

For instance, under the dimension of acceptability, the lack of cultural representation and diversity in children's books highlights the urgent need for inclusive reading materials that reflect and resonate with the lived experiences of all students.<sup>63</sup> In the Netherlands, characters of colour appear relatively rarely in Dutch picture books, as shown by an analysis of 64 popular titles for children aged zero to six published between 2009 and 2018: 42% feature only white characters, 14% include either white characters or characters whose ethnicity is unclear, and 44% depict both white characters and characters of colour, while none feature only characters of colour.<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

The existence of a rights-based framework protecting the right to read as a children's right has been advocated by researchers across various disciplines and supported by human rights organizations for some time.<sup>65</sup> Evidence-based studies show how urgent it is to uphold the right to read and to go beyond addressing reading as a public policy. We need to improve how we monitor and protect the right to read: not as a secondary concern buried within other frameworks like education or freedom of expression, but as a children's right.

This brief contribution has also shown that addressing the right to read remains highly relevant even in contexts where children grow up with more resources or stronger educational systems, such as the Dutch context. The 2022 PISA report was particularly alarming, revealing that the reading skills of Dutch 15-year-olds had declined sharply once again, falling below the EU average. There is also an increasing gap between pupils from different socioeconomic backgrounds, which is worrisome. So when it comes to further implementing

the right to learn how to read, the freedom to choose what to read, and the right to access reading materials, continuous attention is needed if we do not want Dutch pupils' reading skills to deteriorate any further. Reading as a right for children is a perspective not often used in the Dutch debate on promoting children's reading and this article aims to contribute.

Books are like *mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors* – mirrors when they reflect the reader's life on the page; windows when they allow the reader to view stories that are different from their own; and sliding glass doors when the reader transports into the story and empathises with the characters.<sup>66</sup> Recognizing the right to read as a children's right is also recognizing the importance of these stories, not only to children's education but also to their full enjoyment of many other rights, including the right to development, the right to freedom of expression, the right to access media from a diversity of sources, the right to cultural life and the right to play.



Devani, R. (2025). The Right to Read. Illustrated Watercolour. Courtesy of the artist.

61 R. van Daalen & S. Leenders, 'Ontlezing tegengaan: maak schoolbibliotheken wettelijk verplicht' ['Countering declining reading habits: make school libraries a legal requirement'], *Sociale Vraagstukken*, 15 maart 2024.

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