

The Revival of Reading is a Cultural Subject too

A White Paper by The Reading Coach

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore emphasized that true culture and learning should be boundless, when he wrote

"Let all the doors of my house be open on all sides, yet let not any be driven by the wind."

The story about our declining reading habits and their revival, tends to frame the problem educationally, in terms of falling literacy scores, phonics curricula and classroom engagement. Of course, all these are important.

However, there's another layer to this; something more fundamental: the revival of reading is being driven by forces that education systems did not engineer on their own, and cannot fully claim. The fondness for books and a familiarity with reading is also a cultural outcome, rooted in identity, community, belonging, and social meaning.

Lets examine the argument more closely.

1. The Sociology of Reading: Bourdieu's Framework

The theoretical foundation for understanding reading as a cultural rather than instructional act comes largely from Pierre Bourdieu's concept of '*cultural capital*', the idea that certain practices, including reading, are not simply skills but social assets that signal and reproduce class, identity, and belonging.

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Bourdieu argued that cultural capital can manifest in an embodied state (long-lasting dispositions), an objectified state (pictures and books), and an institutionalized state (educational qualifications) and that the process of socializing children into reading is a critical piece of elite societies.

This framework decouples reading from schooling: the *disposition* to read is formed at home, in communities, through habitus; not primarily in classrooms.

Research building on Bourdieu points to "classed effects of literate socialization practices" on *cognitive habitus* meaning the drive to read is absorbed through social environment long before formal instruction begins. Education systems may teach the mechanics of reading, but are they the only ones that instill the *desire* for it?

That desire is cultural in origin.

2. The One Book Theory

Simply having books in the home nearly doubles the odds of a child¹ achieving literacy and basic numeracy. The 'books at home' phenomenon is one of the strongest predictors of educational accomplishment, across countries at every income level. Growing up with books in the home is linked to children completing roughly three more years of education on average compared to children raised without books.

The message for parents is strikingly simple: physical books in the home DO matter. You don't need expensive tutoring programs or a medley of educational apps. A home library, however modest, is one of the most powerful educational investments you can make. And home is where the culture is set.

The correlation is undeniable.

¹ A landmark study published in the *Journal of Global Health* followed children across 42 nations.

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- Children who own their own books are six times more likely to read above the level expected for their age.
- They're also nearly three times more likely to enjoy reading.
- Conversely, children who don't have a book of their own at home are twice as likely to have low mental wellbeing.

This gets even better. Simply reading to your child everyday is a 'superpower pill' that reaps rich rewards. Reading for pleasure is the single biggest indicator² of a child's future success, more than their family circumstances, their parents' educational background, or their income.

So rich or poor, reading becomes a great equalizer! Reading for pleasure in a child's early years is vital to closing the attainment gap, as well as enhancing wellbeing and quality of life in the long-term. This is corroborated by longitudinal studies of children born in Britain.

Those with poor vocabulary skills at age 5 were

- Four times more likely to have reading difficulties in adulthood
- Three times as likely to have mental health problems
- Twice as likely to be unemployed as an adult

There is plenty of evidence in every culture to corroborate the above.

3. P N Panicker, The Library Man of India

²https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/reading-for-change-performance-and-engagement-across-countries_9789264099289-en.html#page1

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P. N. Panicker’s vision for reading was fundamentally cultural, not merely pedagogical. Rather than treating literacy as a classroom skill to be taught, he ignited a popular cultural movement that transformed reading into a way of life across Kerala. His slogan “Vayichu Valaruka” (“Read and Grow”) was a simple, powerful cultural message that resonated with ordinary villagers, not an academic curriculum.

Panicker traveled tirelessly to remote villages and tribal settlements, inspiring people to embrace reading as a communal value. The Kerala Grandhasala Sangham he founded made libraries the “nerve centers of all social and cultural activities,” embedding them at the heart of community life rather than treating them as educational institutions. Libraries became spaces for social interaction, political consciousness, and cultural awakening—connecting common people to knowledge as a collective heritage.

His approach challenged the oppressive caste system by making reading accessible to all, fostering a cosmopolitan outlook among Keralites. The movement’s success—Kerala achieving universal literacy in the 1990s—stemmed from this cultural transformation, not top-down pedagogical instruction. Every year, National Reading Day (June 19) honors his legacy of making reading a cultural practice, not just an educational achievement. Panicker’s enduring contribution was showing that a society that reads together grows together culturally.

4. Savitribai phule’s social imprint

Savitribai Phule (1831–1897), opened schools for sure. But history considers her work in 19th-century India, to be fundamentally social rather than pedagogical. Savitribai’s work transcended classroom instruction. She opened India’s first school for girls in Pune in 1848, defying severe social persecution and even having cow dung and urine thrown at her as she walked to school. Her mission was social liberation through literacy, not academic achievement.

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Reading became a tool for women and oppressed castes to challenge caste hierarchy, gain self-respect, and participate in public life. She established multiple schools across Maharashtra, transforming reading into a social movement for equity. Savitribai also founded the “Mukti Balbhavan” (home for destitute children) and ran orphanages, making reading part of

broader social welfare. Her poetry and writings promoted social reform, using literature as a vehicle for consciousness-raising among the oppressed. .

5. The Pandemic Data: Reading Revived as a Social Response

The quantitative evidence for the revival is striking, and its timing is telling. The average American read 20 minutes a day in 2020, up 21% from 2019 and the most since the early 2000s, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' American Time Use Survey. Print books had their best sales year of the decade in 2020, with sales climbing even higher in 2021.

Critically, this surge did not come from school reform or curriculum change! Schools were closed. It came from people, cut off from social life, reaching for books as a source of meaning, comfort, and community. Reading returned not because instruction improved, but because cultural conditions demanded it.

6. The Sociocultural Research on Reading Identity

A 2024 study in *ScienceDirect* on Finnish reading culture reinforces the point from a different angle. The social stratification of book reading activity that is prominent at the population level does not recur within the specific group of people who identify themselves as readers! This suggests that reading identity, once formed, cuts across demographic divisions and operates through cultural self-definition rather than class or education.

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Meanwhile, researchers working within the "Science of Reading" debate (which is genuinely educational) have noted its limits. No amount of educational research is going to solve a systemic, social issue. This admission from within the literacy research community itself is significant: those closest to the instructional side acknowledge that schooling alone cannot produce a reading culture.

Conclusion

The decline of reading must not be blamed on schools alone. It is not just because schools taught it poorly, that people read lesser. And it cannot be revived only because schools improved.

Yes, the education system is a vital part of it. But reading declines because the cultural context; community, identity and shared meaning around books has eroded in the age of broadcast media and then algorithmically optimized distraction.

It can be revived only when

- it becomes a culture in homes, in early childhood.
- young people rebuild the cultural context and social media communities, independent bookstores become gathering places.
- reading becomes a badge of identity and belonging.

The educational dimensions of reading such as phonics, fluency, comprehension will continue to be real and important. But they operate downstream of culture.

A child who grows up surrounded by people who *love* books, who sees reading as what interesting people do, who belongs to communities where books are

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talked about with passion, will become a reader independent of the quality of instruction. A child who does not, may learn the mechanics but never pick up a book again.

The revival of reading is, at its core, people choosing what kind of person they want to be; and that is always, first, a cultural question.