[**Reading culture**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1756157/reading-culture)

[Neda Mulji](https://www.dawn.com/authors/8398/neda-mulji) Published May 27, 2023

The writer is senior manager, professional development at Oxford University Press Pakistan, and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, UK.

Listen to article

THE love of reading isn’t something that develops in a vacuum. Avid readers or ‘bookworms’ are a product of their environmental influences. It is remarkable how much children can learn on their own once they acquire the ability to read fluently and are curious about learning new things. Many teachers try extremely hard to help children read. However, very few are successful in encouraging children to choose reading on their own. Learning to read is very different from becoming a reader.

When we cannot manage to encourage children to read voluntarily, we often choose to blame the widespread obsession with screens, with their many distractions. Whilst it’s true that screen time has taken away hours in the day that students previously spent poring over books, it is essential to incentivize reading to help students retain the skills of processing, evaluating and analysing information.

There’s also much benefit to reading fiction. ‘A flight of fancy’ in a chaotic world can help the imagination escape to new heights and provide many a coping mechanism. Reading also helps cultivate self-expression — from learning new words to encountering a variety of characters, children get to experience a world far removed from their own, providing them with much-needed exposure. Just like walking can do wonders as a physical exercise, reading exercises and develops the mind in fascinating ways. It trains the mind to focus and maintain concentration, retain information, form opinions and articulate thought.

If children have had an adult reading to them from an early age, they often learn to mirror reading habits. Those who haven’t had that exposure can be incentivized by reward and recognition for reading and responding to texts, senior students at schools can be sent to read to the younger classes or — in the spirit of healthy competition — students can quiz each other on the books they have read.

Books exercise and develop the mind in fascinating ways.

Schools can host reading festivals where parents and the wider community such as school alumni are invited to come and read to students, have panel discussions or present book reviews. Some schools foster a healthy reading environment by inviting students and teachers from other schools to a reading or poetry event. This becomes a community-wide celebration of reading and recognition for children who choose to focus time and effort on developing reading habits.

The love of reading is inculcated gradually but consistently. A short burst of effort is not sufficient to create a culture of reading in schools. There are schools where reading habits are integrated into the environment. Quiet rooms are provided for those students who wish to curl up on bean bags with a book during recess. Book exchange programmes ensure students have access to used books owned and read by their peers. Much like ‘sports days’, students can thrive on ‘reading days’ that involve competitive activities and celebrate achievement.

Some schools successfully run after-school book clubs in collaboration with a local organisation, university or the school parent body. This creates a culture of reading which is not just a skill in itself — it comes with the benefits of being able to understand, accept and develop new perspectives, question one’s own conclusions. There are many advantages to reading in groups.

Children also enjoy agency in the decision-making process. One of the biggest demotivators for a child is to have an adult pick the book for them. Rather than policing the titles and the number of chapters read, adults can provide access to books and show interest in the choices of the children.

With summer holidays coming around, schools can also leverage students’ interest in interactive digital activities and integrate reading into their screen time. Digital reading programmes provide readers with pronunciation help, visuals to stimulate imagination, games for competitive engagement, and comprehension questions to prompt critical and creative thinking. Digital reading can be an excellent tool to monitor how much time has been spent on reading and the progress made by each child.

Digital reading programmes make assessing and benchmarking easier so that no child falls through the cracks. Many of these programmes record reading achievement in the form of reward badges or certificates of completion, which motivate readers to continue the effort. With digital support, students learn to read and comprehend faster than ever before.

Reading habits are all the more essential today, in our demanding and fast-evolving world where reading is not only therapeutic, but also holds the promise of planting seeds of discovery, innovation and inspiration.

*The writer is senior manager, professional development at Oxford University Press Pakistan, and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, UK.*

[**neda.mulji@gmail.com**](https://mailto:neda.mulji@gmail.com)

**Twitter:** [**@nedamulji**](https://twitter.com/nedamulji)

*Published in Dawn, May 27th, 2023*