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Reading Habits Among School Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Survey

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Abstract

Reading is a crucial means of acquiring authentic knowledge and plays a significant role in the holistic development of individuals across all age groups. It not only enhances imagination but also improves writing, communication, and cognitive skills. During the COVID-19 pandemic, school-going children were particularly affected, as schools, the primary source of cultivating reading habits, were closed. This disruption may have impacted children's reading interests and practices. This article investigates the effects of the pandemic on children's reading habits, including their interest in reading, preferred mediums, and other related factors. A Google Forms questionnaire was used to collect data from 247 students. The paper explores how reading habits were affected across different age groups and examines the shift from print to electronic reading mediums. Additionally, it assesses general reading habits and offers suggestions for promoting reading among children.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced unprecedented challenges across various sectors, including business, manufacturing, governance, and education. The impact on education, particularly school education, has been profound, affecting children's futures and their development. Reading, which is a critical educational activity that supports language

development, writing skills, and imagination, has been significantly influenced by this disruption. Prior to the pandemic, school libraries played a key role in fostering reading habits among children, with regular academic activities and performance pressures serving as motivation. However, with the closure of schools and the shift to online learning, the situation changed dramatically. The pandemic brought more free time,

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reduced academic pressure, and fewer opportunities for outdoor activities and social gatherings. Consequently, schoolchildren found themselves with more opportunities to enhance their reading habits during this period.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To understand children's interest in reading, including the types of materials they prefer, their preferred language, the medium of reading, and the duration they spend reading
2. To investigate how children select books for reading
3. To explore the reasons that motivate children to read
4. To determine the amount of time children spent reading during the pandemic

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

An analysis of children's reading habits has been extensively explored in various research fields, including education, literature, psychology, sociology, pedagogy, and library science. Reading has been defined through different approaches, such as sequential reading, extensive reading, interactive reading, superficial reading, and in-depth reading, with a focus often placed on leisure reading.

Recent studies have contributed significantly to our understanding of reading habits during the pandemic and in the digital age. Priyani Vyas and Balvant Tandel (2020) investigated

the reading habits of faculty members at Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University, Ahmedabad, during the pandemic. Their study found that 83 per cent of respondents engaged in daily reading, utilising both print and non-print resources consistently during the lockdown.

Nor Shahriza Abdul Karim and Amelia Hasan (2007) explored the impact of technology on reading habits at the International Islamic University, Malaysia. They noted that technology facilitated more timely and somewhat non-linear reading experiences using devices like computers, PDAs, and wireless phones.

Shaheen and Venus (2007) examined the motivations behind reading and attitudes towards it among 440 upper-primary students. Their findings indicated that academic reasons were the primary motivation for reading, with reading being the third most preferred leisure activity.

Walia and Sinha (2014) surveyed 223 school-going children aged 12 to 18 years in Delhi, studying the evolving trends in reading habits due to changes in information technology. Their results showed that 53.8 per cent of teenagers identified as avid readers based on their self-perception.

Leonie Rutherford, Lisa Waller, Margeret K. Merga, et. al. (2017) investigated teenagers' reading practices in the context of a changing digital environment in Australia, exploring how teenagers define reading.

Ameyaw and Anto (2018)

conducted a case study on the reading habits and their impact on academic performance at East Bank Senior High School, Ghana. Their analysis, using SPSS software, revealed that 45.19 per cent of respondents recognised the importance of reading, with improved learning outcomes reported.

Alexandra Blomquist et al. (2020) examined the role of reading in developing emotional vocabulary among adolescents in Sweden. The study found that girls used more emotional words than boys and that frequent readers tended to generate a richer emotional vocabulary.

Gehlot and Al-Khalaf et al. (2020) evaluated traditional reading practices among Indian children from various socio-economic backgrounds. Their survey highlighted the importance of early language acquisition and reading aloud at the primary level.

These studies collectively contribute to understanding the impact of reading habits on academic performance, emotional development, and the influence of digital technology on reading practices.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a questionnaire-based survey method to assess the reading habits of school-going children aged 7 to 18 years, including students from Class III and above. The study population comprised randomly selected students from both government and private schools. Recognising that interest in reading

varies among individuals, the survey aimed to capture a broad range of perspectives influenced by factors such as parental support, teacher encouragement, and school libraries. The Google form questionnaire, 'Reading Habits among School children during COVID-19' was crafted to gather detailed information about students' reading habits during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was designed in simple language to make it accessible to all age groups and to maintain the interest of children. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: the first part collected general information about the respondents and their reading mediums, while the second part focused on their attitudes toward reading during the pandemic.

The questionnaire was pre-tested with 10 students to ensure clarity and usability. Based on their feedback, minor adjustments were made. The finalised Google Form was distributed through librarian colleagues and shared across various WhatsApp groups to reach a wider audience. In total, 247 responses were collected, providing a comprehensive overview of reading habits among school children during the pandemic.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data collection for this study was conducted from June to November 2020 using Google forms questionnaires. A total of 247 responses were received and analysed using MS-Excel software. The questionnaire was structured into two

sections: the first set of questions focused on general reading habits and students' interest in reading, while the second set addressed specific aspects of reading habits during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Demographic Data

Out of the 247 respondents, a majority were male (65.2 per cent), which might be attributed to a higher level of internet activity among boys. Of the total respondents, 86 were female, making up 34.8 per cent of the sample. The majority of participants were in the age group of 10–14 years, with 140 respondents (56.7 per cent). The remaining respondents were divided into two age groups: 57 (23.1 per cent) were aged 7–9 years, and 50 (20.2 per cent) were aged 15–18 years. Most respondents were from Class V, comprising about 21.5 per cent of the sample, which is typically an age where children are actively developing their reading interests. Other respondents were from Class IV (14.6 per cent), Class VIII (14.6 per cent), with the remainder from Classes III to XII, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1
Class-wise Responses on Reading Habits

School Class/ Standard	Number of Children	Respondents (%)
III	18	7.29
IV	36	14.57
V	53	21.46
VI	12	4.86
VII	22	8.91

VIII	36	14.57
IX	11	4.45
X	11	4.45
XI	23	9.31
XII	25	10.12
Total	247	100

Most of the respondents (140 or 56.7 per cent) were from private or public schools, followed by 103 respondents (41.7 per cent) from government schools. The third category of Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan was also included, with 4 children or 1.6 per cent out of the total population of the respondents.

Reading Habits

The study analysed children's reading habits in general to understand their reading interests under normal circumstances. It examined both the psychological and academic aspects related to children's reading interests, as well as the challenges they faced in maintaining their reading habits during the pandemic.

The majority of children responded positively when asked about their interest in reading, with 211 (85.4 per cent) indicating that they enjoy reading. Thirty-five children (14.2 per cent) reported reading occasionally, while only one child expressed a lack of interest in reading. When asked to categorise their reading habits, 92 children (37.2 per cent) identified themselves as frequent readers, 58 (23.5 per cent) as occasional readers, and 52 (21.2 per cent) as leisure or

holiday readers, who read during their free time. Forty-five respondents (18.2 per cent) described themselves as ‘new readers’, having recently developed an interest in reading. With schools typically encouraging reading activities, 60.9 per cent of respondents are accustomed to reading books and other literature either frequently or occasionally. This finding is supported by research from Chu, Li, and Yu (2020), which highlights that self-regulated learning significantly aids children in maintaining regular reading habits.

Types of Reading Materials

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of reading material preferences among

children, categorised into biography, fiction/non-fiction, science fiction, horror, mystery/suspense, spiritual publications, manuals, poetry, and newspapers. The responses indicate that children show the greatest interest in science fiction, with 77 respondents (31.2 per cent) preferring this genre, followed closely by mystery/suspense, favoured by 74 respondents (30 per cent). A significant number of students (66 responses) reported reading newspapers daily or at least a few times a week. Additionally, students expressed interest in a diverse range of materials, including biography, fiction, poetry, and magazines. Other popular reading materials mentioned by respondents included comics,

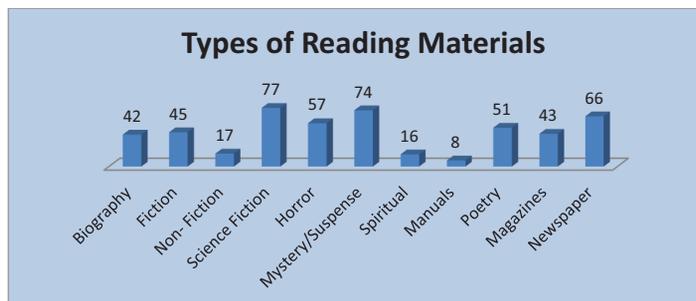


Figure 1: Types of Reading Materials

Reading Language

- English
- Hindi
- Regional Language
- Foreign Language
- Combination of Languages

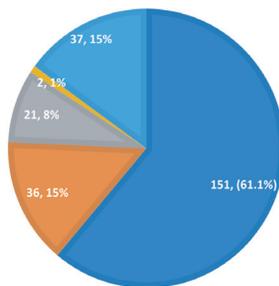


Figure 2: Reading Language

mythology stories, encyclopedias, adventure stories, fairy tales, general knowledge books, motivational books, and textbooks. This variety highlights the broad spectrum of reading interests among schoolchildren.

1. Reading Language: The children responded that they like to read in the English language, with 151 (61.1 per cent) responses. Thirty-six (36 or 14.5 per cent rounded off to 15 per cent) responded that they like to read in Hindi, and the rest (21 or 8.5 per cent rounded off to 9 per cent) like to read in their regional languages. Only 2 (0.8 per cent rounded off to 1 per cent) out of 247 respondents said they like to read foreign language literature, and 37 (14.9 per cent rounded off to 15 per cent) respondents like more than one language, as shown in Figure 2.

2. Time Spent on Reading: Figure 3 illustrates the amount of time school-going children spend on reading daily. The data reveals that a substantial portion of students engage in reading for significant periods. Specifically, 33.6 per cent of the students, or 83 out of 247, reported reading for at least

one hour each day. Additionally, 77 students (31.2 per cent) spend more than two hours daily on reading, while 34 students devote more than three hours to this activity. Furthermore, 26 students (10.5 per cent) dedicate more than four hours each day to reading, and 15 students (6 per cent) read for six or more hours a day. Only three students reported spending less than one hour daily on reading. This distribution underscores the considerable time many students allocate to reading during normal times.

3. Medium of Reading Material: The responses show that 77.7 per cent (192 out of 247) of the respondents still feel comfortable with and are reading printed material or paper books and 51 respondents are reading e-books (electronic books). A similar number, that is, 51 respondents like reading the video captions and watching the video while enjoying reading.

4. Selection of Reading Material: In response to the question of how they select the reading material, 64 per cent (158 out of 247) of the respondents said that they themselves select the

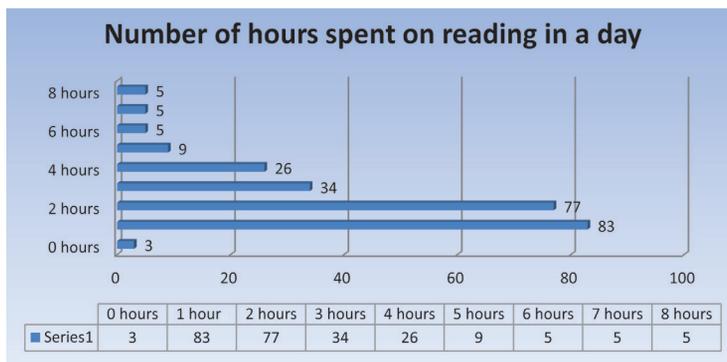


Figure 3: Number of Hours Spent on Reading in a Day

reading material, and read books of their own choice. Sixty-eight (27.5 per cent) of the respondents said that they select the material as per the guidance of their parents. Forty-nine (49) learners were guided by their teachers.

A study was done in the form of an empirical examination of parents’ role in promoting reading habits, which found that there is a positive relationship between parents’ reading with their child and educational attainment of their child. Zaheer Ahmad studied the role that reading with parents played in the development of children, studying in a Lahore-based private school in Grades 6–8, and found that “parents play an equal role in behavioural and communication development; however, mothers play a more active role in the academic development of the child as compared to fathers, siblings, and legal guardians” (Ahmad, Tariq, Chaudhry, & Ramzan, 2020).

Fewer responses were received for library and librarian guidance (20, that is 8.1 per cent). Twenty-one students said that they browse through the library catalogue to select the reading material. This is verified by a similar study on library use during COVID-19, which suggests that “...organisations need to focus on procuring more ebooks and exploring the setting-up of cloud-based digital library infrastructure, so that libraries will be prepared to offer better services to their users from anywhere”. The study suggested that libraries need to investigate the benefits of migrating to cloud for hosting their digital library infrastructure and services (Parikh & Vyas, 2020).

Other respondents said that they took the help of their sister or brother, or chose the material as per their own interest, also keeping in view usefulness of the reading in their future. The data is shown in Figure 4 below.

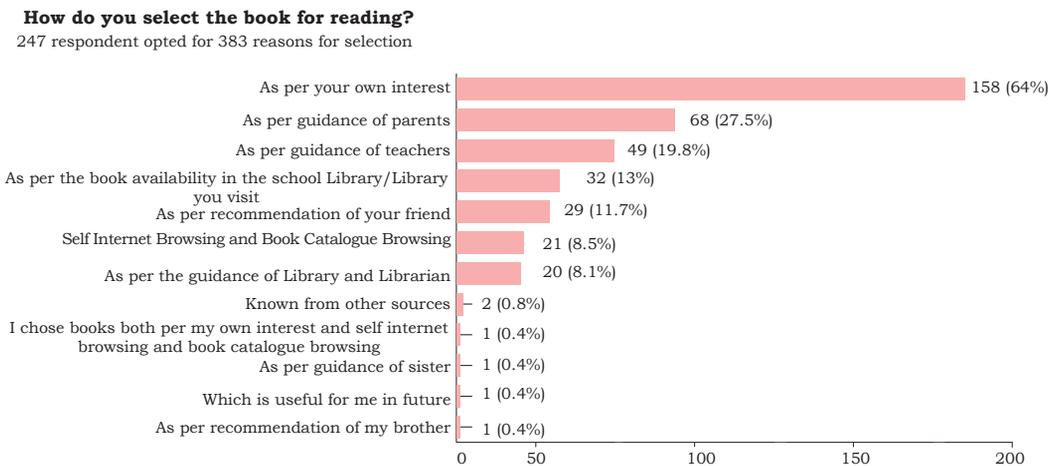


Figure 4: Selection of Books for Reading

5. Reading Attitude: The reading attitude was analysed through questions like level of satisfaction and reading motivation and finding out what students wish to do during their free time.

6. Satisfaction Level in Reading: Table 2 shows the level of satisfaction and pleasure the students find in reading. Forty-six (18.6 per cent) of the students find reading extremely pleasurable and 143 (57.9 per cent) of the respondents find it enjoyable. Forty respondents find reading satisfying, while 7.3 per cent, i.e., 18 respondents did not find it pleasurable or satisfying. So, the general level of satisfaction among the students was high and they enjoyed reading.

Table 2
Responses on Reading Satisfaction

Enjoy reading	Number of children	Percentage
Extremely Pleasurable	46	18.6
Enjoyable	143	57.9
Satisfying	40	16.2
Not Much	18	7.3
Total	247	100

7. Motivation for Reading: Figure 5 shows the reasons which motivate the student respondents to read. Ninety-six respondents (38.9 per cent) read to complete their school assignments and homework, while the same percentage of respondents read to enhance their knowledge.

Average time spent on reading during a day (hours) during the lockdown period
247 responses

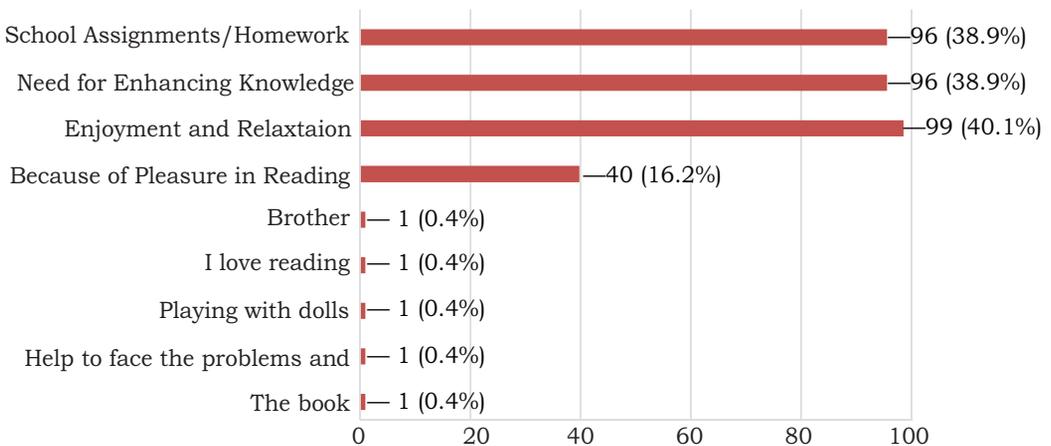


Figure 5: Motivation for Reading

A higher percentage of respondents, i.e. 40.1 per cent read for enjoyment and relaxation and 40 students (16.2 per cent) feel that reading gives them pleasure and their mind feels relaxed after reading. The other responses mentioned that their problems are solved after reading, which helps them to face the challenges of life, while some of them are motivated by their peers.

8. Reading in Free Time: To analyse if students liked to read during their free time, the question was put up to respondents and interestingly, 146 respondents (59.1 per cent) agreed that they like to read books and e-books during their free time, while 61 (24.7 per cent) of them like to browse social media and spend time reading online, as shown in Figure 6. Other responses which students gave (on what they did with their free time) included playing with friends, playing games, painting, making apps and videos, singing, dancing, drawing, watching television,

doing housework and others.

Changes in Reading Habits during Pandemic

Some specific questions were put to the students to identify the changes in reading habits during the COVID-19 period.

1. Reading During Lockdown: To find out if they have increased their reading time, students were asked if they are reading more, less or if there is no change. Fifty-one (51 per cent) of student respondents, i.e., 126 out of 247 said that they are reading more, 26.3 per cent (65 students) said there is no change in the amount of reading time. In fact, 56 (22.7 per cent) of them said they are reading less during the pandemic in comparison to normal times.

When asked the reasons for reading more during COVID-19 the responses included that the students are getting more free time, reading in lieu of playing with friends, to improve

What will you choose to do when you have free time?

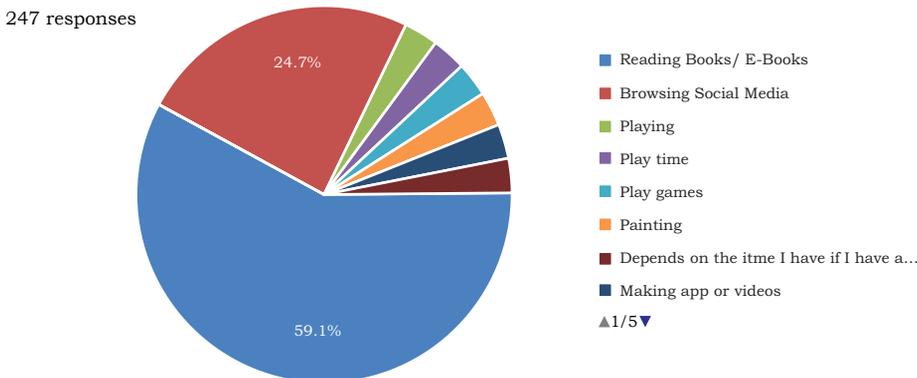


Figure 6: Free Time and Reading

their knowledge, and to complete their homework.

There has been no significant shift from physical to electronic formats; a small percentage (1 per cent) of students shifted from electronic to physical reading materials. There were 193 (78.1 per cent) respondents to preferred reading in physical format during the COVID-19 period, while 54 (21.9 per cent) preferred reading in electronic format.

There has been no major shift in reading habits and the time spent on reading during the COVID-19 period. The number of students spending more than one hour per day on reading decreased slightly from 83 to 81, as indicated earlier in Figure 3. The number of students spending more than two hours per day decreased from 77 to 72. However, the number of students spending four hours on reading increased from 26 to 33 (13.4 per cent), and the number of students

spending five hours increased from 9 to 13 (5.3 per cent). Overall, no major shift in reading habits during the COVID-19 pandemic has been identified.

2. Sources of Reading During Lockdown:

There has been a major shift from reading in a physical medium to reading in an electronic medium during the COVID-19 pandemic period. This result is somewhat expected as students were free during the pandemic period and they got sufficient time for reading online. Also, online classes also require more of digital reading and this confirms that students are reading more in the digital age. Furthermore, due to not attending school, the emphasis on physical reading seems to have decreased, as the number of students who preferred the physical medium during normal times has reduced from 192 to 174 (70.4 per cent), as shown by student

Average time spent on reading during a day (hours) during the lockdown period

247 responses

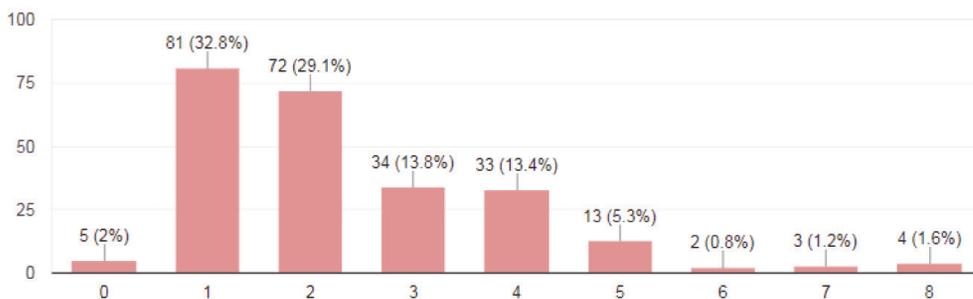


Figure 7: Average Time Spent on Reading during the Pandemic

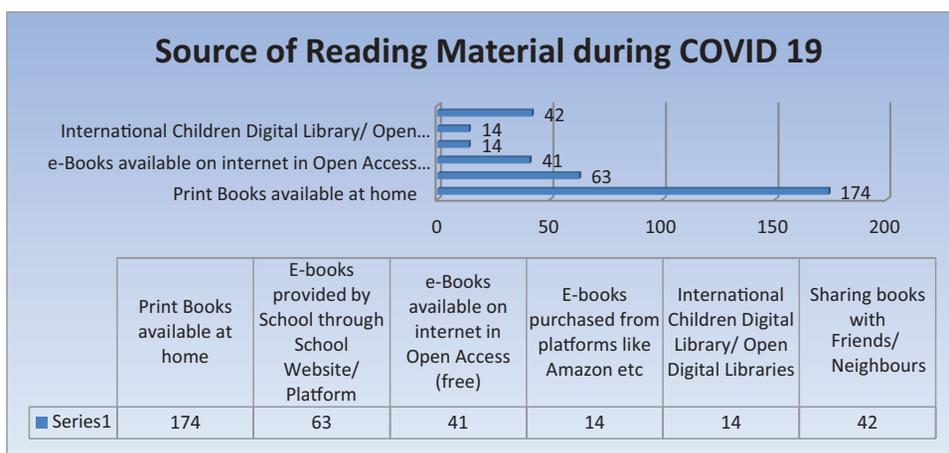


Figure 8: Source of Reading Material During Lockdown Period

responses. Students are now more inclined towards e-books provided by the school website (63 students) and 41 students reading e-books available through open access (Figure 8). Out of the students surveyed, 14 respondents had also purchased e-books from platforms like Amazon, etc., and a similar number, that is, 14 students have used the international digital library and open digital library to read e-books. Forty-two (42) out of 247 student respondents also shared their books with friends and neighbours during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

3. Number of Books Read During Lockdown: Table 3 shows the number of books students have read on an average during the pandemic period. Of the student respondents, 121 (49 per cent) had read one to three books during the lockdown period, while 71 (28.7 per cent) had read 4–6 books on an average. Twenty-two student

respondents had read 7–9 books and 20 had read 10–12 books.

**Table 3:
Number of Books Children Read
During the Lockdown**

No. of Books	No. of Children	Percentage
0	7	2.8
1–3	121	49.0
4–6	71	28.7
7–9	22	8.9
10–12	20	8.1
12 and above	16	6.5

Seven students said that they had not read a single book during the lockdown period, while 16 had read more than 12 books during this period. The responses show a significant interest in reading books during the lockdown period, albeit forced by the COVID-19

pandemic. On being asked which books the students read during the COVID-19 pandemic, the response included books like *The Old Man and the Sea*, space exploration and Marvel comics, *Panchatantra*, *Arabian Nights*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Brothers at War*, *Mahabharata*, *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, *Dork Diaries*, by Rachel Renee Russell, *Kingdom of Fantasy* by Geronimo Stilton, *Wings of Fire*, *Jathakaka hakal*, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, *Pathummayude Aadu*, *Lord Krishna*, and many more. Surprisingly, the respondents also read textbooks of other classes such as *Honeydew*, *Flamingo*, and *Vistas* for their stories and narratives.

4. School Reading During the Pandemic: On being asked if students were missing their school during the COVID-19 lockdown, 204 out of 247 respondents affirmed that they missed being in school. However, 43 students responded that they did not, as their homes provided a congenial reading atmosphere. Around 170 students (68.8 per cent) responded that they have made efforts to enhance their reading habit, which is a significant change, while 77 respondents (31.2 per cent) said that they have not made any major effort to enhance their reading habit during this period. The students were also asked if they were visiting the school library online and 52.2 per cent, i.e., 129 out of 247 said 'yes', while 118 (47.8 per cent) respondents said that 'either they don't have any school library period or they are not visiting the library online'.

SUGGESTIONS GIVEN BY STUDENT RESPONDENTS FOR MAINTAINING INTEREST IN READING

1. Students emphasised that they should be allowed to read according to their interests rather than being forced by teachers. Respondents believe that no one can make reading pleasurable if it is imposed.
2. Schoolchildren suggested that more public and open libraries, equipped with all necessary infrastructural facilities should be made available.
3. Young respondents mentioned that the physical appearance of books is important; they preferred thin books, those with large print, and books with more images to be included in libraries to attract their interest.
4. Respondents opined that schools should teach students how to save, store, and process PDF and HTML files to become more familiar with electronic reading.
5. Conducting national-level MCQ examinations on specific books, with cash prizes and certificates, could help attract students to reading.
6. School libraries should also purchase e-books, video books, and audio books on various subjects according to the curriculum, making these resources available 24/7 on the school portal.

7. Parents should read in the presence of their children to foster the reading habit and initiate daily newspaper reading. If possible, they should also buy books that align with their children's interests.
8. The government should fund advertisements for books and organise slogan-writing competitions to attract students.
9. Schools could implement micro-level reading activities such as quiz competitions, summary writing, and reading paragraphs in class to engage more children in reading activities.

and any other material that aligns with their interests. Maintaining this interest involves generating excitement and making reading an enjoyable and integral part of children's lives.

Even in the digital age with widespread access to ICT, reading remains a valuable leisure activity. During the COVID-19 lockdown, ICT played a crucial role in providing access to reading materials for all age groups of schoolchildren. Students utilised open-access literature available through platforms like Google, and schools compiled online libraries with the help of librarians and teachers for academic and educational support.

In normal times, students were motivated to read for academic reasons, such as improving language skills and achieving better exam results. However, during the lockdown, reduced academic pressure led to increased reading and sparked interest in continuous reading. Further studies on reading trends are necessary to analyse these trends and their implications for the quality of education.

CONCLUSION

Reading has a positive impact on people's lives, and many students have expressed a desire for schools to reopen soon and for online classes to end. To foster reading interest in children, it is essential to provide them with engaging books, such as comics, sports literature, biographies, short stories,

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