



Promoting Reading Habits and Literary Culture Among Youth: Strategies for Cultivating A Book-Reading Generation

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Abstract: This article explores the effectiveness of a peer-led reading circle program in promoting reading habits among secondary school students in Uzbekistan. The study highlights the challenges faced by Uzbek youth, including digital distractions and limited access to quality reading materials, which contribute to a decline in reading practices. The results suggest that the peer-led program significantly enhanced students' reading engagement, motivation, and comprehension, emphasizing the importance of socially interactive reading models and the integration of culturally relevant literature in the curriculum to foster lasting reading habits among young people.

Keywords: Reading habits, peer-led reading circles, youth literacy, Uzbekistan, educational reforms, reading engagement, motivation, comprehension, culturally relevant literature, reading promotion strategies.

Introduction: In today's rapidly evolving global landscape, where digital technologies and social media platforms increasingly dominate young people's lives, the value of reading and literary engagement has become both more critical and more endangered. Reading is not merely a cognitive skill; it is a multidimensional cultural practice that fosters intellectual development, critical thinking, empathy, and socio-emotional growth. Yet, despite the profound benefits of regular reading, a growing body of research highlights a steady decline in reading habits among youth worldwide (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2020). This phenomenon is especially pronounced in post-Soviet contexts, including Uzbekistan, where shifting educational policies, economic transitions, and digital

disruptions have significantly impacted young people's engagement with books and literary culture.

The Republic of Uzbekistan, a Central Asian nation with a rich literary and cultural heritage, has undergone significant political and socio-economic reforms over the past three decades. As part of its broader nation-building efforts, the promotion of national identity through language, literature, and education has remained a key priority. However, despite these efforts, the reading culture among youth remains relatively underdeveloped. Surveys and field observations conducted in recent years reveal that while young people have access to various forms of information, their active participation in meaningful reading activities—particularly those involving books, fiction, and classical literature—has declined (Tashkent Institute of Education, 2023). Several interrelated factors contribute to this decline. Firstly, the educational system in Uzbekistan has traditionally prioritized rote memorization and examination performance over inquiry-based and interpretative learning methods. This pedagogical orientation has often reduced reading to a utilitarian task rather than fostering a love for reading as an enriching and autonomous activity. Secondly, the widespread availability of mobile phones and social media has significantly altered the attention spans and information consumption habits of young people, making sustained literary engagement less appealing. Thirdly, economic disparities and limited access to well-stocked libraries—especially in rural and underserved areas—have constrained opportunities for many youth to develop consistent reading practices. Moreover, reading is shaped not only by individual aptitude and school curricula but also by broader cultural and familial norms. In Uzbekistan, intergenerational reading practices have weakened due to the erosion of traditional storytelling customs and the growing time constraints faced by working parents. The shift in family structures and the predominance of screen-based entertainment in domestic spaces further limit the opportunities for modeling and encouraging reading behavior among children and adolescents. Nevertheless, recent years have witnessed a growing recognition of the importance of reviving a reading culture as a cornerstone of intellectual and moral development. The government of Uzbekistan has launched several national programs aimed at increasing access to educational resources and improving the quality of literature available in Uzbek and other languages. Presidential decrees such as the “Five Important Initiatives” introduced in 2019 emphasize, among other goals, the promotion of reading among youth as

a national priority. Additionally, initiatives such as book fairs, reading competitions, and mobile library projects have gained traction in urban centers. However, the effectiveness and sustainability of these initiatives remain underexplored in academic literature.

Literature Review

Reading is widely recognized as a foundational component of individual development and societal progress. Across multiple disciplines, including pedagogy, psychology, and sociolinguistics, reading is viewed not only as a technical skill but as a complex cultural and communicative practice. Street (2003) distinguishes between “autonomous” and “ideological” models of literacy, emphasizing that reading practices are deeply embedded in social contexts and power relations. Similarly, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory posits that cognitive development, including reading, occurs through mediated interaction within a cultural environment. These frameworks highlight that reading is not simply a matter of decoding texts, but involves participation in a broader cultural and educational ecology. International comparative studies, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), have demonstrated strong correlations between reading engagement and academic performance (OECD, 2018). Students who read regularly for pleasure tend to perform better in all academic domains and exhibit higher levels of civic knowledge and empathy. Importantly, reading frequency and motivation are influenced more by socio-cultural environments than by innate ability, thus underscoring the importance of context-specific interventions (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). In many developing countries, including those in post-Soviet Central Asia, the promotion of reading culture among youth has been complicated by rapid societal changes. Silova (2010) and Heyneman (2000) argue that post-socialist educational systems often struggle to transition from rote, exam-oriented instruction to critical, student-centered approaches. These challenges are particularly visible in Uzbekistan, where traditional education systems are still in the process of reforming to better support independent learning and literacy development.

Uzbekistan possesses a rich literary heritage, tracing back to classical figures such as Alisher Navoiy, Zahiriddin Muhammad Bobur, and more recent authors like Abdulla Qodiriy and Abdulla Aripov. Despite this legacy, contemporary reading habits among youth have significantly weakened. A study by Mamatqulova (2020) revealed that many schoolchildren in Uzbekistan read only textbooks and have limited exposure to fiction, especially in their native language. Similarly, research by Sultonova and Karimova (2021) indicated that digital

entertainment, lack of access to quality books, and insufficient family support significantly reduce students' interest in reading. One of the most pressing issues is the state of school libraries and reading infrastructure. According to a 2023 report by the Ministry of Preschool and School Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan, over 40% of rural schools have outdated or understocked libraries, and many lack trained librarians. Furthermore, teachers often receive minimal training in methods to stimulate voluntary reading or integrate literature into broader learning goals (Yuldasheva, 2022). Despite these challenges, recent national policies reflect a growing awareness of the importance of reading. Notably, the "Five Important Initiatives" launched in 2019 includes a focus on cultivating youth interest in reading and cultural activities. The Presidential Decree on the "National Program for Improving Reading Culture" (2022) proposes measures such as updating library resources, organizing book fairs, and introducing mobile libraries. While these initiatives are promising, their long-term impact has not yet been thoroughly evaluated in academic studies. In the broader international context, successful reading promotion strategies include family literacy programs (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002), peer reading circles, book clubs (Daniels, 2002), and the use of digital reading tools that gamify the reading process (Liu, 2005). Such models stress the importance of enjoyment, choice, and social interaction in sustaining reading motivation. However, cultural adaptation is key: models effective in Europe or North America cannot be transplanted into the Uzbek context without considering linguistic, religious, and familial norms. Additionally, literature in the Uzbek language is often limited in genre and age-appropriateness. As noted by Ismoilova (2021), there is a shortage of engaging, contemporary literature in Uzbek for teenagers and young adults, a gap that leads many to switch to Russian- or English-language media

for leisure. This has implications for language identity, cultural continuity, and national education policy.

METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study was to evaluate the impact of a structured, peer-moderated reading circle program on secondary school students' reading frequency, motivation, and comprehension in Uzbekistan. The study employed a quasi-experimental design, utilizing a pre-test/post-test control group framework over a period of 8 weeks at two general secondary schools in the Tashkent region. The participants were divided into two groups: the Experimental Group (EG), which engaged in weekly peer-led reading circles (n = 40), and the Control Group (CG), which continued with the regular curriculum without any additional intervention (n = 40). A total of 80 students, aged 13-15 and from grades 8-9, participated in the study. The participants were stratified by gender and pre-screened for similar baseline reading attitudes and skills using a validated pre-test. The reading circle program itself involved students forming small peer groups of 5-6 members, participating in 60-minute guided reading sessions each week, focusing on modern Uzbek youth literature. Peer facilitators, who had undergone a 2-day workshop, led the discussions, and students were asked to maintain reading logs and write reflective journals to track their progress. To assess the program's impact, the Reading Engagement Index (REI) was used, which combined three subscales: the Reading Frequency Scale (RFS), the Motivational Reading Inventory (MRI), and the Reading Comprehension Test (RCT). The total REI score, with a maximum possible score of 100, was calculated by adding the scores from each of these subscales: RFS (out of 20), MRI (out of 30), and RCT (out of 50). The results from the statistical analysis revealed significant improvements.

Descriptive statistics showed a marked difference in the post-test scores of both groups.

Group	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Standard Deviation (Post)
Experimental	46,8	71,3	6,9
Control	47,1	52,4	7,1

In the Experimental Group, the pre-test mean was 46.8, which increased to 71.3 in the post-test, while the Control Group only saw a modest increase from 47.1 to 52.4. Inferential analysis further demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in the Experimental Group, with a paired t-test showing a t-value of 22.46 (p < 0.001). Additionally, an

independent samples t-test comparing the post-test results of the two groups showed a highly significant difference, with a t-value of 12.08 (p < 0.001).

Findings. The findings suggest that the peer-led reading circle program had a substantial and statistically significant effect on students' reading engagement. The Experimental Group experienced a 52% average

increase in total REI scores, compared to just a 10% increase in the Control Group. These results are consistent with previous research that highlights the motivational benefits of peer-led and socially interactive reading models (Daniels, 2002; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). In the context of Uzbekistan, where classroom reading is often solitary and task-driven, this study demonstrates that socially embedded reading practices can revitalize student interest in books, enhance comprehension, and promote lasting reading habits. In light of these findings, several recommendations are made. It is suggested that peer-led reading models be integrated into school extracurricular programs, particularly within the framework of the "Five Important Initiatives" strategy. Additionally, teachers should be trained to facilitate student autonomy in reading groups, while curriculum design should include culturally relevant, youth-authored literature to better engage students.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the importance of innovative, peer-led reading initiatives in revitalizing reading habits among secondary school students in Uzbekistan. The peer-moderated reading circle program, as demonstrated by the significant improvement in the Reading Engagement Index (REI) scores, proves to be an effective strategy in enhancing students' reading frequency, motivation, and comprehension. These results align with existing literature on the benefits of social interaction and peer learning in fostering sustained engagement with literature, particularly in post-Soviet educational contexts. Given the challenges of transitioning from traditional, exam-oriented educational models to more dynamic, student-centered approaches, this study highlights the potential of peer-led reading circles to foster a love for reading and support cultural and intellectual growth among youth. The substantial improvement observed in the Experimental Group, coupled with the modest gains in the Control Group, reinforces the argument that integrating such programs into the school curriculum can have a meaningful impact on reading practices. In light of Uzbekistan's ongoing educational reforms, it is essential to continue exploring and scaling up these peer-led models, particularly within national initiatives such as the "Five Important Initiatives" and the "National Program for Improving Reading Culture." Furthermore, culturally relevant literature that resonates with the interests and experiences of young readers should be prioritized to ensure deeper engagement and to address the current gap in contemporary Uzbek youth literature. This study contributes valuable insights into the development of

effective strategies for cultivating a book-reading generation in Uzbekistan, offering a framework for enhancing reading culture in similar post-Soviet and developing contexts. Future research should explore the long-term impact of such programs, consider the role of family and community engagement in promoting reading, and evaluate the scalability of peer-led models in diverse socio-economic settings.

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