

RISE
BOOKSELLING

READING PROMOTION TOOLKIT

REPORT



About RISE Bookselling

Resilience, Innovation and Sustainability for the Enhancement of Bookselling' (RISE Bookselling), is an EU co-funded programme run by the European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF) for its network members, aimed at upscaling, reinforcing and maximising the capacity and resilience of the European bookselling sector.

About EIBF

The European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF) is a non-commercial European and international umbrella organisation representing national booksellers associations and booksellers across Europe and worldwide. Our mission is to represent our members and their interests on a global platform, as well as to provide a forum for cooperation and foster the exchange of best practices.

About Creative Europe

Creative Europe is an EU programme that supports a wide range of cultural and creative sectors, as well as encouraging cooperation and exchanges among cultural organisations and artists within Europe and beyond.

About EDUCULT

EDUCULT is an independent, non-profit institute that connects research and practice. Their work provides evidence-based foundations for decision-making, promotes participation, and creates spaces for reflection. Together, they create momentum and make impact visible.

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FOREWORD

Reading is one of the most powerful tools we possess to help people understand themselves, understand others, and participate fully in society. Through books, we develop knowledge, imagination, empathy and critical thinking. Reading allows us to encounter perspectives beyond our own experiences and equips us to navigate an increasingly complex world.

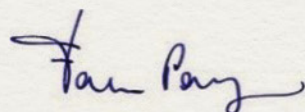
Yet readers do not emerge by chance. Reading proficiency, reading habits and a lifelong love of books are shaped by repeated encounters with stories, ideas and knowledge. People become readers when books are visible around them, when they are accessible, discoverable and embedded in everyday life.

This is where bookshops play an indispensable role. Across Europe, thousands of bookshops - large and small, general and specialised - ensure that books remain a visible and tangible part of our communities. They are places of discovery, cultural meeting points and gateways to reading. Every day, booksellers connect readers with stories, ideas and knowledge. They host author events, reading groups and literary festivals, collaborate with schools and libraries, and create welcoming environments where curiosity can flourish. Through these activities, they actively contribute to building strong reading cultures within their communities.

This report, commissioned by EIBF and conducted by the cultural research institute EDUCULT, explores the important contribution booksellers make to reading promotion across Europe. It demonstrates the many ways in which bookshops support literacy development and foster engagement with books, whether through dedicated children's bookshops or general bookstores serving readers of all ages.

While much attention is rightly focused on children, reading promotion is not only a matter of childhood. Young adults and adults also benefit from continued access to books, stories and reading communities. A thriving reading culture is sustained by society as a whole. The extraordinarily diverse network of European bookshops reflects the richness of Europe's cultures, languages and identities, making literature accessible in all its forms and helping readers discover not only the books they are looking for, but also the books they never expected to find.

For future generations to grow into curious, informed, resilient individuals capable of understanding perspectives beyond their own, books must remain visible, accessible and valued throughout society. Strengthening reading culture means strengthening the places where reading begins and grows: schools, libraries and, equally, the diverse network of bookshops that connects people with books every day.



Fabian Paagman

PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL
BOOKSELLERS FEDERATION (EIBF)

INTRODUCTION

This report is part of the RISE Reading Promotion Toolkit, a collection of research, practical resources and recommended policy actions to strengthen booksellers and reading culture across Europe and globally. The toolkit was developed by EDUCULT for the European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF) through its EU co-founded project, RISE Bookselling.

This report brings together existing research and expert insights on literacy, reading skills, and attitudes towards reading among children and young people aged 9 to 15. Rather than duplicating the wealth of studies already available on youth literacy, it draws on desk research to distil what is known about the issue and identify what matters most for booksellers and reading promotion practitioners.

The report synthesises findings from existing literature alongside interviews with relevant organisations, including reading promotion agencies, NGOs, and EIBF member associations across 20 countries. Together, these sources offer both an evidence base and a set of practical perspectives to inform the work of the RISE network.

While the primary focus is on the 9–15 age group, the report acknowledges that reading habits and attitudes are shaped well before this stage. Early intervention and reading promotion directed at young children and their caregivers lay the foundations on which later engagement with books and reading is built. Any meaningful account of reading among young people must therefore recognise the importance of what comes before.



METHODOLOGY

This study draws on four complementary sources of evidence: a review of existing literature and data, an online survey, structured interviews with a wide range of stakeholders, and qualitative analysis of the material gathered. Together, these inform four analytical pillars, each combining research evidence, practitioner experience from booksellers, and the perspectives of NGOs and policy actors.

Literature Review

The project began with a systematic review of existing reports, studies, and data on reading promotion and reading competences, with a focus on children and young people aged 9–15 and the role of bookshops. We drew on the most recent available evidence from European and international sources, identifying relevant reading interventions and their links to the bookshop sector.

Online Survey

A short digital survey was spread through the EIBF/RISE Bookselling network to identify practices and people who would contribute their experience through interviews or in written responses. The survey reached approx. 108 people.

Interviews across 20 countries

We conducted semi-structured interviews of approximately 45–60 minutes each, held online, with interview partners across book ecosystems, including

Independent bookshops and national and regional chains,
located in both urban centres and small towns or villages

Booksellers' associations

Publishers

National libraries

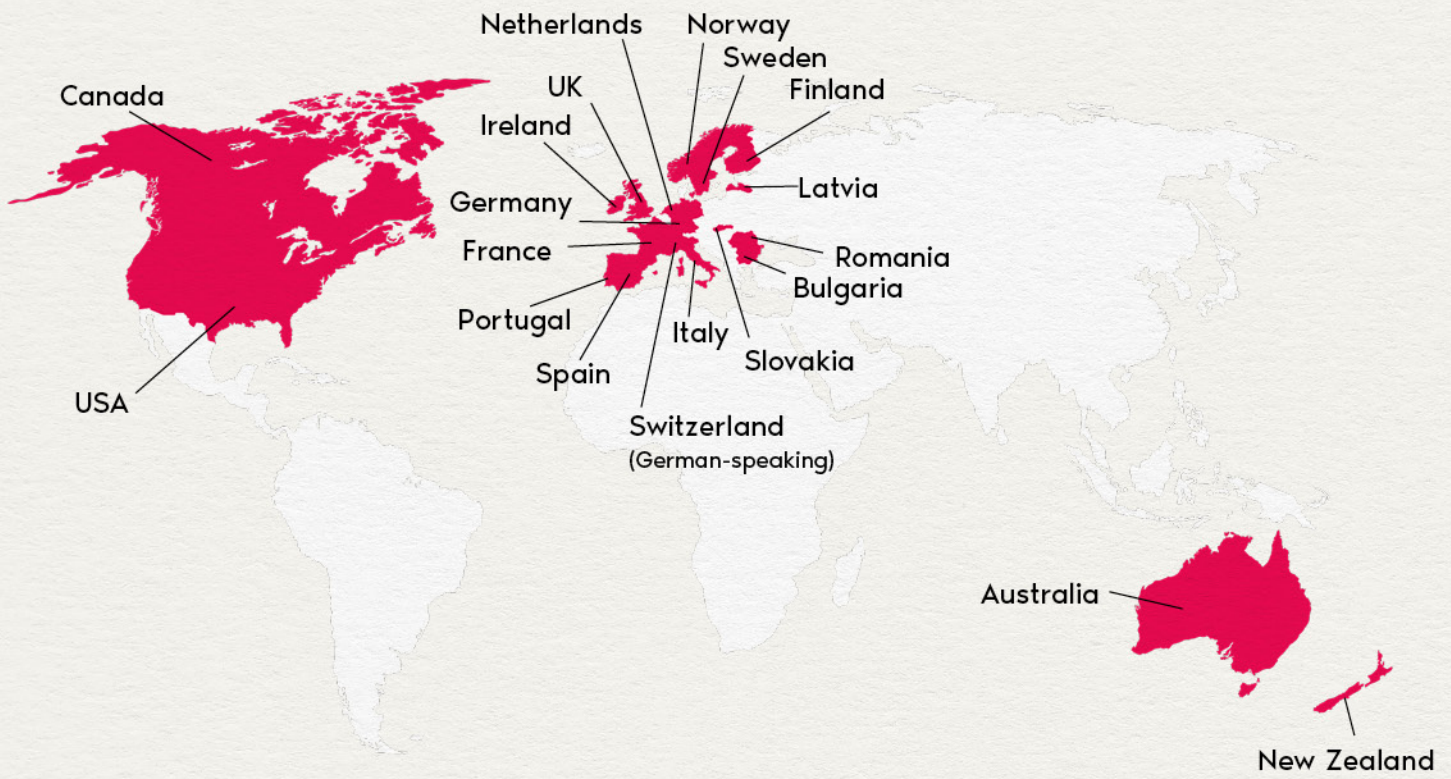
Foundations

NGOs and non-profit organisations focused on reading
promotion and literacy

Cultural offices and city
networks

National agencies for books
and culture

The project covers 20 countries across Europe, North America, and the Asia-Pacific region:



Analysis

Interview data was analysed using MAXQDA qualitative analysis software¹. All interviews were anonymised in the course of the report writing. Where relevant, interviewee group affiliation has been included.

Target Group: Children aged 9-15

The RISE Reading Promotion Toolkit focuses on children and young people aged 9-15, a group identified as particularly at risk of declining reading engagement. Special attention is given to boys, who are most likely to disengage from reading during this period. While the 9-15 age range is the primary focus, the report also acknowledges the importance of early intervention: reading promotion directed at younger children and their caregivers plays a significant role in building the habits and motivation that sustain reading into adolescence.

CHILDREN'S LITERACY & READING HABITS

Proficient literacy skills serve as a foundational tool, directly influencing academic success, mental wellbeing, and participation in democratic society. Globally, however, reading competence is in a state of significant decline. Across all EU education systems, primary-level reading performance (covering ages 9-11) declined or stagnated in the latest PIRLS and PISA studies. The proficiency crisis marks an alarming downward trend over the past decade; no EU education system improved its reading performance between PIRLS 2016 and PIRLS 2021, reading performance for primary-aged children worsened significantly².

Latest international assessments:

PIRLS* 2021, across 57 education systems (next: PIRLS 2026)

PISA** 2022, 81 education systems, across OECD countries (next: PISA 2025 cycle)

In PISA 2022:



of 15-year-olds in the European Union attain **high proficiency levels** in reading, signifying the lowest share of top performers among the three subjects.

of students across OECD countries, including the EU, fail to reach minimum reading proficiency, nearly double the EU's target to fall below 15% by 2030³.

STUDENTS ACHIEVING BELOW MINIMUM LEVEL OF READING PROFICIENCY



Minimum reading proficiency (Level 2) marks the threshold at which students can reliably understand and use written text in everyday life. At Level 2, readers can identify the main idea in moderately long text, make basic references where meaning is not immediately obvious and reflect on the purpose of a text and evaluate simple supporting arguments, when explicitly directed. Students who do not reach level 2 are considered at risk of long-term social and economic disadvantage⁴.

* The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), conducted every five years since 2001 for the IEA aims to measure and compare reading literacy achievement among fourth grade students (9-10 years old). Data was collected during or shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic.

** The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) assesses children aged 15, every three years across reading, mathematics and science.

20 countries in this report

Reading proficiency and reading engagement among children aged 9-15 are declining across most of the country contexts examined in this report, although the challenges differ considerably in scale and character. Several countries are particularly relevant for further consideration:

Canada scored above the OECD average in reading, with notable disparities such as geography, language and socioeconomic status.



Finland and **Sweden**, despite being historically associated with strong reading cultures, both report serious concerns. Finland's share of primary school pupils with poor reading levels had almost doubled between 2016 and 2021. In Sweden, the gap between high- and low-performing readers among 9-11-year-olds has reached its widest ever recorded level. In Sweden, it has been observed that many 14-year-olds can decode words but lack true reading comprehension (Interview).



Ireland stands as a notable exception within this report's group: In PISA 2022, Ireland's 15-year-olds were the highest performers in reading literacy among OECD and participating EU countries, with only Singapore scoring significantly higher globally.



Germany and the **Netherlands**

both scored below the OECD average in reading in PISA 2022, recording their lowest-ever results. In Germany, the decline between 2018 and 2022 is noted by the OECD to be equivalent in scale to an entire school year of learning. The Netherlands saw a similarly steep drop, with experts expressing their concerns regarding a particularly pronounced motivation deficit; one interview partner noted a perceived lack of motivation in students to participate in PISA as they will not be graded.



Bulgaria and **Romania**

face acute concerns within the group, ranking last and second-to-last respectively among EU countries in PISA 2022. In Bulgaria around 53% of 15-year-olds scored below the minimum Level 2 reading threshold. Romania is showing one of the strongest associations between socioeconomic background and reading performance.



“Secondary School Drop-off” (age 11-15)⁵

Reading frequency generally declines with age, often coinciding with the transition to secondary school, increased screen time and academic pressure. A significant and widespread development across multiple countries is the **decline in reading for pleasure**, especially as children get older. Many children view reading as an obligation rather than a pleasure.

“I think a lot of the kids may feel like they have to read, not necessarily for pleasure, but for obligation a lot of times. And so that can impact, how they connect and interact with the books.”

BOOKSELLER

Motivation to read is a critical factor and often linked to the perceived relevance and enjoyment of reading. Some experts note during interviews conducted in the context of this report, that this decline is not just about interest but also about decreasing reading ability and comprehension, making reading a more difficult and less enjoyable activity. This relationship is well established; motivation and enjoyment are closely linked to reading skill and frequency. The National Literacy Trust (NLT, UK) reports that children who enjoy reading are roughly eight times more likely to read daily than those who do not. Daily readers consistently achieve higher average reading scores⁶.

School and Curricula

The transition from primary to secondary school, typically around ages 10-12, frequently transforms reading from a ‘cosy’ or ‘playful’ activity into a task with measurable skills, leading to a decrease in intrinsic motivation.

Booksellers and literacy experts in several countries, including Ireland, France and Germany, noted that school curricula often continue to rely on the same canonical texts. Interviewees argued that the lack of engaging books in school curricula is a significant demotivator when they fail to reflect students’ lives, identities, or contemporary concerns.

“It’s really the school, it is the place where the kids detach from the pleasure of reading through the books.”

FOUNDATION

“And then when they start middle school and high school (...) around the age of 12 (...) they have to read books for school. And that’s usually, the time where they kind of don’t like to read anymore because they have to read books for school.”

FOUNDATION

 *I think schools should be focusing more on trying to get children/teenagers to read books that they are genuinely interested in, and not rehashing the same novels that they’re doing for the curriculum (...) because they’re reading stuff that isn’t relevant to them, that they don’t see themselves reflected back in (...) If they were to engage maybe with people like us to get recommendations (...) [they] have brilliant books on the list. But they’re not getting taught. They’re still doing ‘Of Mice and Men’. They’re still doing ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’. They’re good books, but there are problems with them. (...) That’s not going to help them if they’re the only books they’re reading (...) then you know that’s not going to bring them joy.*

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Lack of representation in books. Children often feel forced to read books for school that are not relevant to their lives, leading to a disconnect from the pleasure of reading.

Increased screentime. The availability of digital technologies presents a major competition for children's attention, consuming a significant portion of young people's time. Social media, streaming services, gaming, and smartphones constitute the most frequently cited competitors for children's reading time, drawing them away from reading.

“There's big competition going on between Netflix and the phone.”

LITERACY EXPERT

Children's reading time is also affected by extracurricular activities, such as sports or simply by the fact that they are “*busy being teenagers*” (Stakeholder). Also, during the COVID pandemic bookseller observed more children and teenagers as customers. However, there's an observed rising interest in books among young adults, starting around age 15, suggesting a potential return to reading (see Booktok on page 17).

“Drop-off” Age Earlier

Interviews suggest that the ‘reading slump’, ‘drop-off’ age or reading ‘crisis’, referring to the critical age of disengagement, may now begin earlier than previously recorded, often linked to the acquisition of a first smartphone, before children have fully established their reading competence.

These observations are consistent with the relevant literature, this ‘reading slump’ is not only increasingly pronounced during the transition to secondary school but also shows signs of beginning earlier in childhood than in previous decades⁷.





Disparities & Groups most at Risk

Significant disparities in reading proficiency, frequency, and motivation among children aged 9–15 are primarily driven by socioeconomic status, gender and the transition from primary to secondary school.

Socioeconomic Circumstances

Socioeconomic status^{*} is one of the strongest predictors of reading performance, with gaps often widening over time. Research has consistently shown a strong positive association between students' socioeconomic status and their educational achievement at all ages. Across the EU, children from high-SES (socioeconomic status) backgrounds score higher on PIRLS than those from low-SES backgrounds⁸.

Students with an 'immigrant background' as defined in PISA, or students who speak a language at home that differ from the language of assessment as captured in PIRLS, face a higher risk of underachievement in some countries. The performance gaps between 'immigrant' and 'non-immigrant' students are strongly shaped by socioeconomic and linguistic barriers⁹.

Geographical and structural factors

Structural factors, ranging from the immediate home environment to broad state policies, play a foundational role in determining a child's reading engagement. Geographical and structural factors also shape reading engagement. The physical and economic environment can create significant inequalities in access. Children in rural or remote areas may have less access to bookshops, libraries, author visits, book clubs, literary festivals, and informal browsing opportunities. In car-dependent contexts, such as local contexts in the USA, teenagers may lack autonomy to reach book-related contexts. They may also feel uncomfortable asking parents or caregivers to take them to a bookshop. These barriers show that reading engagement is also a question of infrastructure, affordability, mobility, and social belonging.

^{*} Socioeconomic status refers to a child's family resources and circumstances, including household income, parental education, available time and access to books.



Gender Reading Gap and Gender-specific Patterns

Persisting gender gap. Girls* consistently outperform boys in reading proficiency in international assessments. In PISA 2022, girls outperformed boys in reading by an average of 24 score points across OECD countries; girls scored above boys in reading in almost all participating countries. PIRLS 2021 also confirms a persistent gender gap in reading achievement at primary school level¹⁰. This gap points to the influence of gendered socialisation, reading cultures, role models, peer norms, book availability, and the cultural coding of reading.

When discussing ‘male’ or ‘female’ reading behaviour, it is important to acknowledge the influence of societal gender roles, norms, and codes. Societal gender stereotypes often act as barriers. Research indicates that the gender reading gap is furthered by reading being perceived as a female-coded activity. ‘Male’ or ‘female’ reading behaviours are not inherent, but shaped by sociocultural coding, meaning they are socially constructed¹¹. This is why, for example, the perception of specific genres can change; like Swedish crime fiction, that shifted from male-dominated to female-dominated over the course of a few decades.¹²

Disparities in early socialization and gendered exposure

Gender gaps in reading are shaped not only by school performance, but also by early socialisation. Children benefit from seeing adults and peers they identify with reading; for some boys, the relative lack of visible male reading role models may reinforce the perception that reading is not ‘for them’. Some children, particularly boys, internalize the idea that they are “not good readers” or that reading is not for them, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Boys receive far less encouragement from their parents, especially from their fathers, to read.¹³ The bookshop chain Akademibokhandeln (Sweden) identifies a discrepancy between parental effort and early literacy outcomes for boys and girls: Parents in their customer club estimated that they read aloud just as often and, on average, for the same amount of time per day to their children regardless of the child’s gender, suggesting that an “equal start” does not result in equal reading habits later in childhood.¹⁴

Lack of male reading role models. The role model deficit reinforces this pattern. Boys often encounter reading through female caregivers or teachers, which results in a lack of male reading mentors in the school environment as well. Boys receive statistically less encouragement to read from their parents, particularly their fathers. Reading Promotion should make male reading identities visible including fathers, older brothers, booksellers, teachers, coaches, artists, musicians, gamers, and local community figures can all help normalise reading¹⁵.

Screen time. Screen-based leisure also shapes the attention environment in which reading takes place. The clearest gendered pattern concerns gaming: On average, 70% of boys spent at least one hour playing video games on a typical school day before or after school, compared with 29% of girls across OECD countries. This does not mean that gaming directly causes lower reading proficiency, but it does suggest that reading competes with highly attractive screen-based activities, especially for some boys¹⁶. Booksellers also noted that gendered social media content can influence boy’s preferences (e.g. Horror, Thrillers, more mature content/not yet age appropriate).

* References to ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ in this report, reflect the demographic categories used in existing international literacy research and datasets, which are largely structured around a binary framework. While research increasingly recognizes self-identification beyond the gender binary, large-scale data remains limited.

“Just the lack of books that are there for them.”

FOUNDATION

Trends, peer-driven reading cultures and gendered reading pathways

Interviewees repeatedly emphasised that children and young people are more likely to read when books feel relevant to their lives, reflect their interests, peer cultures and feature characters they can identify with. This is particularly important for reluctant readers and for children who do not already see themselves as ‘readers’.

Observed preferences and trends

“I would say that predominantly they read in English.”

INTERVIEW LATVIA

“Whatever my friends are reading, that’s what I’m reading.”

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- **Young Adult genre**, with children often looking for their favourite authors
- **Popular English titles** (e.g. Influence of Booktok)
- **Peer-driven reading culture**, popular titles are influenced by contemporary trends and children’s social environment (e.g. friends, school, social media)
- **Illustrated and Visual reading formats** are highly popular among this age group. These formats, combining pictures and text, are perceived particularly as accessible and engaging reading experiences, that support reading motivation, comprehension and confidence.
 - Illustrated books, Picture books, which can be beneficial for those with lower reading confidence.
 - **Graphic Novels, Comics, graphic adaptations of classics:** rise of illustrated books, including graphic novel adaptations of classics like ‘War and Peace’; books of film adaptations.
- **Manga** (peer-driven reading culture)

There is an observed tendency for boys and young men* to gravitate towards:

- Non-fiction books (biographies, photography books, self-improvement books, and business-related titles)
- Books about football
- Excitement/thrill, action
- Comics, graphic novels, manga

Several interviewees observed that boys may need different or more varied entry points into reading. There’s a push to encourage graphic novels for boys, as they tend to read them repeatedly and find them engaging.

“Anything you’re reading is a good thing. And hopefully the skill translates to different books later in life, if that’s the direction you go in.”

BOOKSELLER



* These patterns should be treated as observed tendencies, not fixed gender rules.



“That’s what we lean into with boys: graphic novels. We say read a comic, read a comic ten times, because you get good value for that and it’s actually changing sometimes the parents’ perceptions and saying like, read a comic, it’s fine. You’re reading.”

STAKEHOLDER

“For the girls, it’s normally a fantasy or it’s a romance. It’s like a dark fantasy romance. Like the Lauren Roberts *Powerless* series is probably our best selling for that age group for girls, which is not my cup of tea.”

BOOKSELLER

“So I’d say that it’s maybe not that much about what’s inside the book, but more about how it looks like. I would say that it’s mostly girls.”

BOOKSELLER

At the same time, interviewees observed strong demand among many girls for young adult, romance and fantasy genres, including ‘dark fantasy romance’. As ‘dark fantasy romance’ can include very different levels of maturity or potentially triggering topics such as violence or abuse, young readers should be provided with age-sensitive guidance or personal recommendations.

Additionally, girls tend to be drawn to the ‘aesthetics of reading’: including collecting visually attractive books, such as special editions and aesthetically appealing covers; bookshelf display, and visually curated reading identities.

Booktok, Bookstagram, BookTube

Much of this trend has been sparked by cultural phenomena like BookTok/Bookstagram/BookTube*; online spaces on social media platforms that centre around books and reading. They have changed reading from a more solitary, private practice into a visible, fast, trend-driven social practice that focuses on peer-to-peer recommendations and engagement, as well as identity, materiality and aesthetics of books and reading (e.g. by showcasing bookshelves or reading rooms, special editions, decorated e-readers, etc.).¹⁷ These spaces have also played an important role in (re-)engaging young readers and are primary drivers for specific genres like Manga, Fantasy, Romance, and the newly coined merged term Romantasy.¹⁸

* Portmanteau of Book + the respective platform, i.e. TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, etc.

“What we’re seeing in the bookstagram world, is, they don’t feel [conventional literary spaces] are their world. They don’t feel any obligation to engage with books in the way that we have prescribed, whether consciously or unconsciously, we have set social constructs about how you behave in a bookshop. How you go into a bookshop. AM I allowed to be there? Is it welcoming? What do I do when I’m in there if I’m not normally here? I’ve only got €5 and can I be here? Just the etiquette is not known from a young person’s point of view if they’re not regular attendees. So it’s like, how do we lower those barriers to entry? And the social media for books has allowed young people to just have emotions, like just read a book and emote. It made me sad, angry, happy, I’m crying. And then they do like fashion shows of what clothes were in the book. They are having a deeply personal response that is not prescribed by an adult. And that’s a wonderful thing.

BOOKSELLER

While there are many challenges and aspects to that social and cultural phenomenon that are having ambiguous or detrimental effects (i.e. time spent on social media, over-consumption/focus on consumption over (critical) engagement, reading as purely aesthetic practice, dominance of very few authors/titles), BookTok and the like provide an easy access for young people to engage with books and are currently an integral part of understanding their reading habits.

Role of Caregivers and Early Engagement

Although this report focuses on children aged 9–15, early childhood reading experiences are essential for understanding the reading habits, confidence and motivation observed in this age group. By the time children reach late primary and lower secondary education, their relationship with books has often already been shaped.

The evidence is unambiguous: caregivers play a foundational role in shaping children’s long-term reading habits, the earlier this influence is established, the more lasting its effects. Across interviews and existing research, a consistent consensus emerged that interventions should begin as early as possible, ideally in infancy or even prenatally, and that the window for establishing a reading culture in the home narrows considerably as children grow older. As one stakeholder noted, fostering reading enjoyment becomes significantly harder to achieve at later stages, making early investment not only beneficial, but essential.

The first 1000 days and prenatal interventions

The first three years of life represent a critical period for neurodevelopment, during which a child's brain develops to approximately 80% of its adult size. Exposure to a semantically rich environment during this window, including language, stories, and shared reading, lays the neurological groundwork for functional literacy and advanced cognitive abilities in later life.

Some initiatives push the starting point even further, highlighting the potential value of prenatal engagement with language and reading. The 'Reading in the Womb' seminar, referenced by Greenwich Centre in Bulgaria, exemplifies efforts to bring caregivers into a reading culture before a child is born. While such initiatives remain relatively rare, they reflect a broader recognition that the attitudes and habits of caregivers are as important as the interventions themselves.

Bookgifting and universal early outreach

Among the most evidence-supported early intervention formats are universal bookgifting programmes, which aim to reach all families regardless of socioeconomic background and to begin establishing a home literacy environment from birth. In Finland, every baby born received a book bag from a family health clinic. The programme's impact has been significant, with 63% of families reading more frequently and daily after receiving the book bag. Crucially, the universal delivery model helps reduce the polarisation of reading habits between advantaged and disadvantaged families, rather than targeting only those already identified as at risk.

In the Netherlands, a complementary approach places literacy promotion directly within health settings, encouraging paediatricians to discuss reading aloud, singing and talking to babies during routine consultations. By embedding these messages at such contact points, the initiative normalises early literacy practices for families who might not otherwise encounter them.

In the UK, the Bookstart programme has demonstrated that for 72% of families on low incomes, the books provided are the first books a child has ever owned. This underlines both the scale of the access gap and the potential of book gifting to address it at its root.

Modelling reading in the home

Shared reading aloud, even after children have learned to read independently, remains a vital practice. It creates bonding experiences, models the value placed on learning, and sustains the habit through the critical transition years where children might otherwise disengage. Discussing books together, whether by reading the same title separately or sharing responses to a shared read-aloud, also builds the social dimension of reading, which many children find motivating.

Having books physically present and accessible in the home in itself is a significant factor. Therefore, normalising books as household objects, rather than special items, is therefore an important goal of early intervention work.

Supporting caregiver confidence and attitudes

A recurring finding across the research is that many parents lack confidence in how to read with their children. Research from the UK indicates that a majority of early years practitioners have reported working with families who are uncertain about how to engage their children with books effectively. Therefore, interventions need to address parental skills and attitudes as well.

This includes educating caregivers about what constitutes valuable reading. Many parents hold outdated views about what 'proper' reading, and many discourage children's interest in graphic novels, comics, audiobooks, or non-fiction. Allowing children to pick their own reading materials, even when it does not meet the expectations of adults, is consistently seen as an important factor in building motivation and interest in reading. In this regard, booksellers play an important role, advising parents on the value of diverse formats and genres.

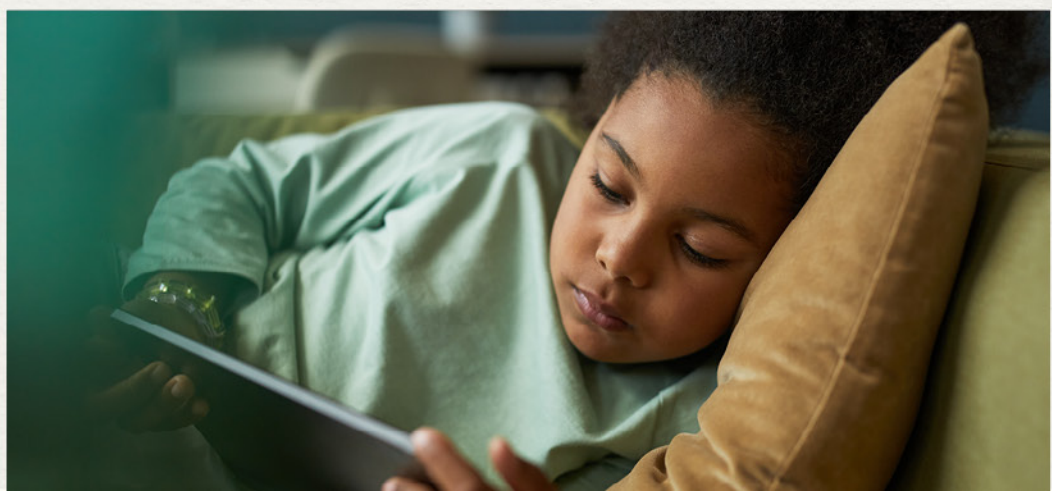
Time constraints present a further challenge. Modern family life often leaves limited space for sustained shared reading. It is seen as more effective to read together briefly, even five minutes before bed, to frame it as an achievable daily practice rather than a significant commitment.

Community engagement as support for early intervention

Bookshops and community organisations support early intervention work by creating shared spaces where reading is normalised, and modelled outside the home. Regular visits to bookshops and libraries, participation in story time sessions and reading events, and the availability of programmes where parents can engage alongside their children all contribute to building a wider reading culture. Some bookshops have developed formats specifically designed for caregivers and very young children together, recognising that these early visits invest in long-term relationships with both the child and the family. As one bookseller put it:

“We say we’re playing the very long game. They come to us when they’re babies, but we create a safe environment for grown-ups as well. So, we build that longer-term relationship with our people.”

BOOKSELLER



BOOKSHOPS' ROLE & EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

BOOKSELLERS' ROLE IN READING PROMOTION: STRENGTHS, POTENTIAL, AND CHALLENGES

Why Booksellers?

Booksellers (can) have an important role in reading promotion for children, that is at times overlooked. This is in part due to the manifold functions that booksellers take up, and that are not always acknowledged by policy stakeholders or other stakeholders within culture and education ecosystems (see also Policy Framework). Across all contexts, it became clear that booksellers are positioned somewhere between being a retailer, and cultural facilitators, educators and community builders. In most cases, booksellers do not only promote and sell books, but engage readers and the wider community in different ways – from hosting book clubs to reading festivals, partnering with schools and libraries or the café around the corner, to providing a space where people can come together and feel welcome, even if they can't afford a book at the time. This makes booksellers important stakeholders in reading promotion for children, a role that many of the interviewed bookstores explicitly take on and actively work towards. This is especially true of course for bookstores that specialize in children's literature, but there are similarly a lot of general bookstores who focus on promoting children's literacy in manifold ways.

"[Our role], it's vital [for promoting reading]. Because independent bookshops, we're doing it because we genuinely have a passion for reading, and for books. [...] It's that passion, and that interest that contributes to promoting literacy."

BOOKSELLER

"Booksellers are reading professionals. They usually have a huge knowledge of what's been published."

STAKEHOLDER

Strengths & Potentials

Why are booksellers great at promoting reading for young people?

- **A passion for reading:** it should come as no surprise that booksellers are very passionate about what they do and want to impart that passion to others.
- **"Professional readers"** with extensive knowledge: booksellers have extensive knowledge of books, trends, and new books being published, including often having read a wide variety of books themselves.
- **Personal recommendations:** based on their extensive knowledge, booksellers can give individualized recommendations tailored to a child's interest. Several best practices illustrate how valuable and important this role as a trusted recommender is.

"They have this knowledge to really find the book that will meet the right children at the right time."

STAKEHOLDER

- **Providing a welcoming space:** many booksellers are very intentional about creating spaces where kids, teenagers, and their families feel welcome, seen, and represented.

 *[For teenagers] I think it has to be a cool, hip place for them to feel like, hey, this is a place that I belong. And that's very intentional on our behalf, not just for the kids, but for the adults, too. We want them to feel like this is a place where you can be surrounded by culture, and we're not ashamed of that. From the music to the pictures on the wall to the books that are displayed, we want you to feel like this is your home. This feels like home for you. And for some kids, they may not have seen that many black authors on a bookshelf, ever. These are things that make kids feel like it's approachable, like it's their space.*

BOOKSELLER

- **Addressing different target groups:** booksellers can be great at engaging different people and connecting stories to different interests.

 *You have to be passionate about children's literature to sell children's literature to children – like, you can sell it to an adult [by saying] it's really good, it's going to teach your child to read, it's great for first readers. And the parent is sold. But if you say that to a child, they are not going to pick up the book. But if you tell them how exciting the story is, how the vampires in it are actually vegan and a healer, and how funny it is, and that you've actually read it – they are going to trust you.*

BOOKSELLER

- **Building bridges between parents, children, society, and stories:** booksellers can act as mediators, connecting people through stories. As shown in the best practices, this can take the form of gently guiding parents in encouraging their children's reading choices (e.g. by validating formats like Graphic Novels as "reading"); providing spaces that center on the stories of specific communities (e.g. Black stories, minority languages, LGBTQIA+ stories, diasporas, etc.); connecting schools to stories outside of their curriculum; building bridges between books and other areas of life (e.g. through cooperations or events in areas like food, sport, art, local culture, etc.)

"You need to create a community, or a place of trust. [...] The bookshop should be kind of a safety net [for teenagers]."

BOOKSELLER

"I see bookshops put so much time into creating book clubs."

STAKEHOLDER

- **Building community and offering third spaces/spaces of trust:** many examples show how bookstores are important community stakeholders, actively building community in their space and establishing third spaces (spaces outside of the home or work/school) where people are welcome.

Stakeholders especially pointed out booksellers' abilities to create community and interactive spaces around reading like book clubs:

- **Building partnerships:** while there are also limitations to this, booksellers are often great at building innovative partnerships: from partnerships with schools or local festivals, to community organizations and NGOs, cafés and restaurants to gaming giants like Minecraft, there are many examples where bookstores have creatively expanded their reach through building partnerships.
- **Making reading fun!** Joy of Reading threads through all the interviews in different contexts. Booksellers, unlike schools (and to differing degrees libraries*), are not tied to any kind of curriculum. This makes them an important stakeholder and mediator to promote the joy of reading, focusing on a child's interest rather than what they should be reading, accompanying them on their journey. In addition, many of the additional things that booksellers do focus on the joyful experience of books and reading and decreasing barriers. This can look like reading sleepovers at the bookstore, or events that counter assumptions of bookstores as places of quiet, serene contemplation.

“ We had a literary treasure hunt inside the bookshop so that the kids can see that the bookshop is a fun place to be, that they can touch books, they can take them in their hands and look at them. And then we'd always tell them that this is not a library. They can be loud, they can jump, they can dance, they can do whatever they want. They don't have to put the books from where they took them. The only condition was not to break them or leave them on the floor and step on them. So it was this idea of creating this free space for them to express themselves while they are browsing books.

BOOKSELLER



* While there are different legislations for libraries that go beyond the scope of this report, there are examples like book bans and other restrictive measures over specific content (especially LGBTQIA+ and Diversity, Equality & Inclusion related themes) that were mentioned to be affecting libraries.

Resources and Recognition as Challenges

“If I were in it for the money, I wouldn’t be selling books (for children).”

BOOKSELLER

- **Financial constraints:** Independent bookstores operate under significant financial constraints. These include low profit margins due to high (and increasing) overhead costs like increasing rent, high VAT, struggle to pay competitive wages, pricing competition through large retailers (“race to the bottom”), etc. In one example, an interviewed bookstore had to already close; many echoed an iteration of the opening quote, that selling (children’s) books is an oftentimes financially precarious business. This is further intensified by their split role as retailer, as well as community and cultural facilitators and educators, with limited acknowledgement for this role e.g. by funding parties. This puts an additional constraint on the financial possibilities like project funding booksellers can get for their wider activities, which can however vary from context to context.
- **Limited (time) resources:** Independent bookstores are usually run by only a small number of staff, some only by one person. This puts significant constraints on how much they can do outside of running the day-to-day business.

“ I see how much time they put into book clubs, the organizing, the prep for it, the recruitment of kids, the communications in between. And it’s not easy. Every shop has to be realistic with what they can do with the staff resources and skills they have. [...] So we have to be realistic that most Indies are small. There’s only so much they can do.

STAKEHOLDER





- In most contexts, **bookseller's role for the wider community is not sufficiently recognized and not structurally reflected**. Often times, they are only seen as commercial entities and cut off from funding opportunities in sectors for which they provide important services in terms of culture, education, literacy, and community building, which puts an additional (financial) burden on bookshops or forces them to limit what they can provide. This is discussed in depth in the chapter on Policy and Advocacy Needs.
- In the end, **booksellers are still retailers who have to make money from their business**, despite the many activities and events they offer.
- **These main challenges put further limitations on booksellers, who act in many different capacities** (bookseller, event manager, outreach, communications, education, facilitation, networking...)
- Limited ability to **keep up with fast-changing trends** and new skills (e.g. new social media platforms), as well as limited access to and opportunity for capacity buildings.
- Limited resources to **produce online content** (e.g. BookTok) that would help engage more younger readers.
- Challenges in terms of **outreach and networking ability**: in some instances, interviewees point out that booksellers can be limited in their outreach and the extent to which they actively try to engage with other stakeholders, something that is directly tied to constraints in resources (financial, time). Main examples include the limited extent to which some booksellers work with schools to bring in their expertise on books outside the curriculum, which however could also be fostered more strongly by the relevant stakeholders themselves (teachers, education stakeholders).
- **Being limited in what they can offer for free** (e.g. book clubs, events) further puts constraints on who can access these relevant resources for the promotion of reading for young people. If e.g. events like book clubs or author readings cannot be offered for free or low charge, reading/ book-related activities become increasingly inaccessible, putting the burden on already at-risk groups.

Existing practices on reading promotion

Bookshops across the countries covered by this research implement a wide and diverse range of reading promotion initiatives, adapting their approaches to local contexts, available resources, and the specific needs of their communities. What distinguishes bookshops from other actors in the reading promotion ecosystem is their particular orientation towards reading as a source of pleasure. Unlike formal education settings, bookshops are spaces in which reading for joy is often the explicit purpose. This freedom to prioritise enjoyment over obligation gives bookshops a distinct and underutilised role in a literacy landscape that too often frames reading as a skill to be developed, rather than a pleasure to be cultivated.

Among the most impactful structural interventions documented in this research are state-funded culture voucher schemes, which have demonstrated an exceptional ability to bring new and previously disengaged young people into contact with books and bookshops. Operating in France (Pass Culture), Germany (KulturPass), Italy (Bonus Cultura/18App), and Spain (Bono Cultural Joven), these schemes provide young people aged 15 to 18 with a fixed sum to spend on cultural goods, with physical bookshops explicitly prioritised as redemption points. Beyond their direct impact on reading habits, these schemes carry significant structural value for the bookselling sector and for local cultural ecosystems more broadly. By explicitly excluding large online retailers and requiring in-person collection, they direct young people into physical bookshops, generating footfall, relationships, and community connections that outlast the voucher itself.

While these schemes, bookgifting programmes, and structured school partnerships will also be discussed in the following sections, the following overview maps the broader landscape of practice as it emerges from the research.

In-store events and clubs

Book clubs remain one of the most widely used formats for sustained reading engagement, with many bookshops running separate groups for different age brackets, most commonly for 9-12 year olds and for teenagers. The most effective book clubs incorporate creative activities such as writing alternative endings, composing poems, or producing artwork inspired by the book, turning the reading experience into something that is participatory. Author, illustrator and translator events complement this by providing children with direct access to the people behind the books, thereby transforming reading into a social and cultural activity.

Storytelling sessions, particularly for younger children, are a staple of in-store programming across multiple countries, noted in Portugal, Spain, and the UK among others. Live storytelling creates an immersive, low-threshold entry point into narrative that does not require children to already identify as readers. Themed displays and reading lists, organised around seasons, curricular topics, or cultural moments, provide further touchpoints that keep books visible and relevant throughout the year.

School outreach and educational partnerships

Beyond the structured national programmes already discussed, many bookshops develop their own direct relationships with local schools. Inviting school classes for visits, offering story times, and allowing students to select books to take home are widely practised across Bulgaria, Canada, Portugal, Slovakia, and Spain. Some bookshops go further by offering behind-the-scenes tours of the bookselling process itself, giving children a more immersive understanding of how books are made and sold. In Latvia, the 'Classroom Bookshelf' initiative offers schools and individuals a 50% discount on books purchased for classroom libraries, with the explicit goal of ensuring every classroom has a small collection available for leisure reading during breaks.

Several organisations that work on the promotion of literacy also work directly with teachers and librarians, providing training on how to motivate reading and how to value diverse formats, including comic books and graphic novels, that educators have sometimes been trained to overlook or undervalue.

Community outreach and innovative formats

A number of bookshops and organisations have developed formats specifically designed to reach children and families who do not typically engage with reading promotion activities. In Bulgaria, the Children's Book Foundation, working to promote reading and improve literacy among children and teenagers, runs a 'non-readers club', which invites people who do not identify as readers to explore books through the lens of their existing interests, including biographies, photography books, and non-fiction, demonstrating that reading can take many forms. The same organisation has developed the "Book Walker" challenge, a one-month initiative in which teachers and students collectively count pages read and convert them into 'book metres', with teams working towards reaching a collective distance, such as to the moon. The format emphasises teamwork, collective achievement, and the accumulation of small reading habits over time.

In Portugal, a mobile bookshop van attends community events and brings books and activities directly to neighbourhoods that might not otherwise have easy access to a bookshop. This kind of outreach is particularly significant in contexts where geography or socioeconomic conditions create barriers to participation. In Canada, Book Bank Canada addresses the access gap directly by providing free books and programming to children from low-income families.

'Pay it forward' schemes, noted in France and the UK, allow customers to donate towards books for those who cannot afford them, embedding a community solidarity ethos directly into the retail experience. Charitable campaigns during holidays, in which a proportion of sales is directed towards books for school or kindergarten libraries, serve a similar redistributive function and have been noted in Slovakia.

Gamification and reading challenges

Competitive and challenge-based formats have proven particularly effective at motivating reluctant readers, especially in the 9 to 15 age group where engagement most commonly declines. In Sweden, 'the great reading challenge', organised by the bookshop Adilibris together with the publishers Bonnier Carlsen, Natur & Kultur, Rabén & Sjögren and the Bonnier Family Foundation, invites fourth graders to compete to read the most minutes over several months, with

book-related prizes and recorded author talks provided as supporting material for teachers. Reading challenges that log progress visually, set collective goals, or incorporate team-based elements appear consistently across the research as formats that children respond to positively, particularly those who would not describe themselves as enthusiastic readers.

Genre diversity and broadening the definition of reading

Across multiple countries, a key strand of current practice involves actively challenging narrow definitions of what counts as reading. Promoting comics, graphic novels, poetry and non-fiction alongside prose fiction is now well established among the more innovative approaches to promoting reading. Curated reading lists compiled by organisations in Bulgaria and the USA explicitly include diverse genres and are shared with teachers, librarians, and booksellers as tools for expanding their own selection and recommendations. This reflects a growing recognition, supported by the data on reading motivation discussed earlier in this report, that genre flexibility is a necessary condition for reaching the broadest possible range of young readers.

Effective Practices

Across the countries covered by this research, a set of underlying principles that distinguish successful initiatives from less effective ones can be established. These prioritise enjoyment over obligation, meet children in environments and formats they already find comfortable, reduce financial and social barriers to participation, and build sustained relationships rather than one-off encounters. The following thematic analysis identifies the formats that most consistently demonstrate these qualities.

Redefining reading

Perhaps the most significant cross-cutting finding is that formats succeeding in engaging reluctant or disengaged readers share a deliberate shift away from the analytical, performance-oriented relationship with reading, that many children associate with school. As one Norwegian stakeholder describes it, encouraging children to articulate their reading experience fundamentally changes how reading feels. In Ireland, Children's Books Ireland emphasises making reading "celebratory and inclusive", explicitly removing the pressure of literacy as a future-success metric. Germany's Stiftung Lesen speaks of the "Lustgewinn", the pleasure principle, as the central driver of reading motivation.

This reframing has direct implications for designing formats. Pressure-free social book clubs, in which the emphasis falls on conversation and personal response rather than testing, consistently shows strong results with reluctant readers. UK research found that 84% of participants in such clubs found the experience worthwhile. 'Leseclubs' in Germany, operating in over 600 schools as separate spaces where children can read for pleasure and choose their own materials, including books, magazines, and digital content, without any connection to schoolwork, operate on the same principle, that encouraging or rekindling the joy of reading first involves removing the obligation attached to it.

Ensuring access and getting books to children

A recurring insight across the interviews is that the effectiveness of reading promotion is often proportional to how naturally and unexpectedly books enter a child's life. Distributing books through Happy Meals at McDonald's, in bakeries, or in doctors' offices are cited as examples of embedding books into everyday non-reading contexts, reaching children and families who would not seek out a bookshop or library.

This principle of unexpected access extends to rural and underserved urban areas. In Romania, the bookshop Carturesti has developed a 'Street Delivery' project and ongoing partnerships with NGOs to donate books to libraries in villages and underserved city neighbourhoods, often without publicising the effort on social media. This is important, as it shows the efforts of the initiative to be a quiet structural intervention rather than a branded campaign. Mobile bookshops vans in Portugal also operate on a similar logic, bringing books and activities directly to communities.

Addressing the holiday reading gap

Research consistently documents what is known as the 'summer reading gap', where children lose reading skills and momentum during extended school holidays, with the effect particularly pronounced in countries with long summer breaks. Formats that specifically target holiday periods, by providing structured but enjoyable reading activities during breaks from school, address a gap that standard term-time programming cannot reach.

In Switzerland, the Chinderbuechlade bookshop runs a spring holiday reading programme in which children are invited into the shop to read and engage with books during the summer break, with each participant taking a book home to read. The programme has been running for over ten years and now sells out almost immediately when the March newsletter goes out, having become what the bookseller describes as "self-sustaining." Book subscription schemes have similarly been popular during holiday periods and around birthdays and Christmas, functioning simultaneously as reading promotion and as a meaningful gift, a combination that gives bookshops reach beyond the already-engaged reading community.

Relatable role models and ambassadors

The effectiveness of formats is consistently improved when the people advocating for reading are credible and relatable to the target audience. Stiftung Lesen in Germany works with approximately 150 prominent "reading ambassadors" belonging to the fields of sport and entertainment and from public life, where young people already invest their attention. These ambassadors make reading feel relevant and cool in a way that traditional literary figures cannot always achieve for this age group.

At a more immediate level, teenagers reading aloud to younger children has been identified as a highly effective format, precisely because younger children can "mirror themselves in teenagers reading" in a way they cannot with adults. This peer-modelling effect suggests that formats which create intergenerational reading relationships within communities, whether through mentoring schemes, reading buddy programmes, or multi-age book events, carry a particular power for children who do not have reading role models at home.



Gamification

Formats that transform reading into a structured challenge or social achievement consistently show high participation rates, particularly among children between 9-15 years of age.

Sweden's 'Great Reading Challenge' invites fourth graders to compete on reading minutes; Finland's 'Lukuboot' invites young people to collectively log reading quarters; Bulgaria's Book Walker challenge converts pages read into collective distances. What these formats share is a combination of individual motivation and collective or competitive social stakes, removing the isolation that reluctant readers often associate with reading.

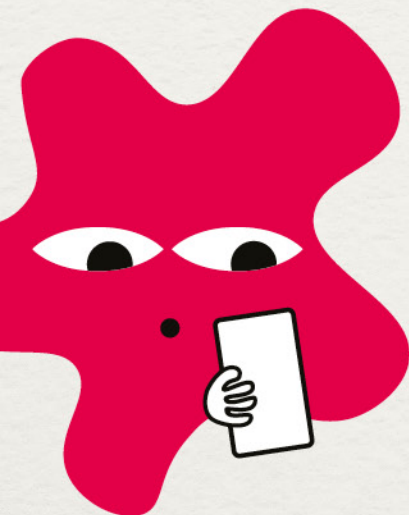
Importantly, gamification works best when it preserves choice. The freedom to count graphic novels, magazines, or non-fiction towards a reading challenge is an important feature.

Curated recommendations and the value of human advice

Despite the dominance of digital platforms, personal and human-curated recommendations remain among the most trusted and effective routes to new reading. Word-of-mouth from friends and family is consistently cited as the most important factor in choosing books across all age groups. Curated reading lists, compiled by organisations such as the Children's Book Council (USA) and the Children's Book Foundation (Bulgaria) equip teachers and librarians to recommend a wider range of books.

Financial access

As one French bookseller notes, books are increasingly unaffordable for young people who do not yet earn their own money. State voucher schemes, book gifting programmes, pay-it-forward schemes in bookshops, and holiday charitable campaigns all address this from different angles, and the analysis shows that removing the cost barrier is often the single most effective intervention for reading new audiences.



Engaging Boys & Target Groups most at Risk

Boys aged between the ages of 9 and 15 represent one of the most consistently identified at-risk groups in reading promotion. The gender gap in reading enjoyment and frequency is well documented, and it widens significantly during the secondary school years. Understanding what works for this group requires looking beyond content preferences to address the structural, social, and attitudinal barriers that shape how boys relate to reading in the first place.

A foundational challenge, noted consistently across the interviews, is simply getting boys through the bookshop's door. As one Irish bookseller puts it:

 *I think the challenge is to get people, our kids and particularly boys into the bookshop to get them through the door, because when they're here, it's great. And they all find something that they like... It's the ones who think they don't like to read or think it's maybe like schoolwork or it's an extra challenge that they have to do or, you know, it's a chore. This is the big challenge to overcome.*

BOOKSELLER

The strategies that follow address this challenge from several angles.

Dismantling the stereotype that reading is a feminine activity

A significant structural barrier is the persistent cultural association of reading with femininity. The research revealed that boys are less encouraged to read by their parents, and fathers especially are rarely seen modelling reading behaviour for their sons.

Effective interventions address this at the level of role models and visibility. Poland's 'Reading Dad' campaign, which places book promotion stands in football clubs and supermarkets rather than cultural venues, operates on the logic of reaching fathers in the spaces they already inhabit and normalising reading as a paternal activity. Moving away from gender-stereotyped 'boys' books' or 'girls' books' in display and recommendation is equally important. Several interviewees emphasise the need to offer diverse stories that do not categorise reading by gender, allowing boys to encounter a wider range of characters and experiences without the implicit message that certain books are not for them.

Entry gate formats and flexibility in genres

The evidence across multiple countries consistently shows that boys who say they do not enjoy reading still engage often with comics, graphic novels, non-fiction and manga. These genres function as entry gate supporting the beginning of a relationship with reading that can diversify over time. In France, data from the Pass Culture voucher scheme shows that while 75% of new young readers initially purchased manga, 49% of those users subsequently diversified into other genres including poetry and humanities. The same pattern is observed with non-fiction - books about sport, science, gaming, and environmental issues consistently draw in boys who resist prose fiction.

Popular culture connections are a further effective entry point. Books related to Pokémon, Minecraft, Stranger Things, or Five Nights at Freddy's attract boys precisely because they extend an existing interest rather than asking them to develop a new one. In Germany, a Pokémon trading day held in a bookshop attracted an audience that was roughly 80% boys. While the event was not primarily about reading, literacy was embedded in it; participants needed to read names, rules, and card descriptions to participate. This principle, that literacy can be practised within activities not framed as reading, is a powerful one for reaching boys who actively resist the label of 'reader'.

Easy-to-read books that are age-appropriate in content but less demanding in language are also highlighted across several countries as an important factor. The challenge of maintaining age-appropriate content at accessible reading levels is a practical one, and one that booksellers and publishers are continuing to navigate.

Linking reading to existing interests

Engagement among boys increases significantly when reading feels connected to their existing lives. For boys aged between 9-15, books connected to gaming, superheroes, sports, and popular brands have particular traction. Visual design is also important for this group, with research participants noting that the cover and title are among the most important criteria for 9-15 year olds.

The increasing influence of social media on reading choices is also relevant. YouTube and TikTok are the primary platforms for discovery for this age group, with boys using them for book inspiration and short summaries. Booksellers who engage with these platforms, or who create in-store displays that reflect what is popular online, position themselves as relevant to the existing cultural landscape.

Social, competitive, and gamified formats

Boys who resist individual, quiet reading often respond well to formats that introduce a social or competitive dimension. Reading competitions based on time spent reading rather than volume or difficulty level are particularly effective, as they create a level playing field and appeal to boys' competitive instincts without penalising slower or less experienced readers. In New Zealand, an online reading challenge linked to cricket teams demonstrated that attaching reading to a sport boys already care about can generate engagement that would be difficult to achieve through book-centric programming alone.

Pressure-free book clubs that emphasise conversation and personal response over testing or analysis have also shown strong results with reluctant boy readers. The key design principle, as discussed earlier, is removing the association between reading and academic performance. Boys who would not voluntarily describe themselves as readers are often willing to talk about a story they have encountered, particularly when the conversation is informal and self-directed.

Some booksellers have also found that boys who are reluctant to speak publicly about books are more willing to express themselves in writing, for instance through written recommendations displayed in the shop. This offers a lower-threshold form of engagement that does not require boys to perform enthusiasm for reading in front of peers.

"It's play, it's dreaming, it's fantasy. It's all the things that give me goosebumps when I talk about why we are so passionate about this. But that switch happens when it becomes something that you are measured in your skills. And that is why it's so important that we keep this playfulness (...) that is how you create the reader. You can create someone who is good at reading through teaching them the alphabet or teaching them grammar, but it's not necessarily the same as creating a reader."

FOUNDATION

Welcoming spaces

The physical and social environment of the bookshop itself is a factor in whether boys feel that reading is something for them. As one UK bookseller reflects:

“ We wanted to create a space that felt like it belonged to everyone, whether they read one book a year or... we wanted them to feel safe and comfortable.

BOOKSELLER

Spaces that are not coded as exclusively feminine or bookish, that stock a genuinely broad range of formats including gaming guides, sports books, and graphic novels, and that allow children to browse without pressure or expectation, tend to be more successful in drawing in boys who do not already identify as readers.

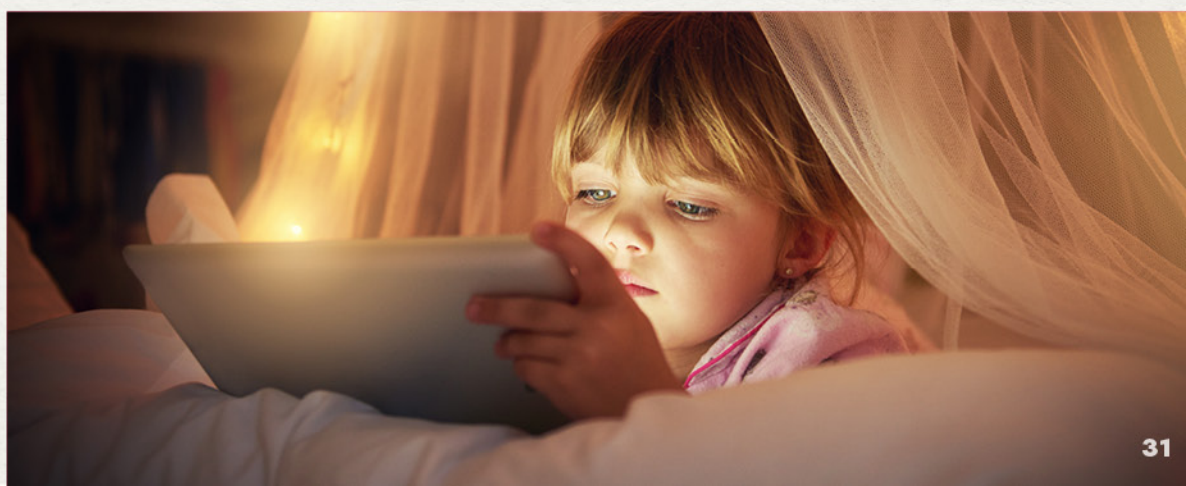
New audiences/non-reading Households

Engaging children from non-reading households presents a distinct challenge from engaging reluctant readers in general. The barrier is huge, as these are children who may never have seen an adult read for pleasure, who do not own books, and for whom a bookshop may feel like a space that belongs to someone else. As one UK bookseller reflects:

“ [We] both came from backgrounds whereby bookshops weren't necessarily accessible to us. Bookshops were exclusionary, where people had money. So when we created this space, we wanted to create a space that felt like it belonged to everyone. We wanted them to feel safe and comfortable.

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This perspective, that exclusion from reading culture is often experienced as a spatial and social phenomenon before it is an individual one, shapes the most effective approaches to this group.



Taking the bookshop outside

One of the most consistent findings across the interviews is that waiting for non-reading families to come to the bookshop is an ineffective strategy. The families least likely to visit are precisely those whose children most need the intervention. Several booksellers and stakeholders describe actively going into communities rather than expecting communities to come to them. This includes, for example, visiting schools in lower socioeconomic areas, attending church basements and boys' clubs, and embedding themselves in community spaces where non-reading families already spend time.

As one US stakeholder puts it:

 *It can be daunting. You walk into a bookshop and it's not your native terrain. And I think we need to do more to make it people's native terrain. And that's why I think getting outside of the bookshop and going to the church basement or going to the boys' clubs and stuff like that, and pushing their way in friendly, positive ways. And then, you know, this is how brands get built. This is when the kids grow up and they're like, oh, I remember them. They came in once a month. They're part of the community.*

FOUNDATION

An Australian bookseller takes a lower-threshold approach by placing tables with books and educational toys outside the shop entrance, allowing passers-by to interact with a book without having to step inside at all. This small spatial gesture addresses the intimidation factor directly, making an initial encounter with books possible for people who would not voluntarily cross the threshold of a traditional bookshop. In Norway, the state reinforces this logic at a structural level by purchasing all published books and distributing them to libraries, including small part-time community libraries, ensuring that even in areas with no nearby bookshop, a relevant and current book selection is available.

Making the bookshop feel like their space

For children from non-reading households, the first task is often making the bookshop feel accessible and non-intimidating. This extends to the social atmosphere, whether staff acknowledge all children equally, whether the stock reflects a range of backgrounds and experiences, and whether children are given genuine freedom to explore without pressure to buy or show interest.

A Romanian bookseller's approach to school visits, described in detail in the previous section, illustrates this principle at its most vivid. By telling children that the bookshop is not a library, that they can be loud, jump, dance, and pick up any book they like, the bookseller fundamentally reframes what the space is. The result is that children who come with their class in that context later return with their parents, grandparents, and friends: "while we made them feel safe in the bookshop coming with their class, it was easy for them to say, yeah, I can talk about books in front of people now." The initial school visit functions as a trust-building exercise that converts the bookshop from an alien environment into a more familiar and enjoyable one.

Several booksellers also describe consciously designing events to feel “safe and cool” for children who might otherwise be embarrassed to be seen in a bookshop. Neurodivergent-inclusive design, such as softer lighting and quieter environments, has similarly widened the range of children who feel comfortable, including those from households where books have never been part of daily life.

Representation as a condition of engagement

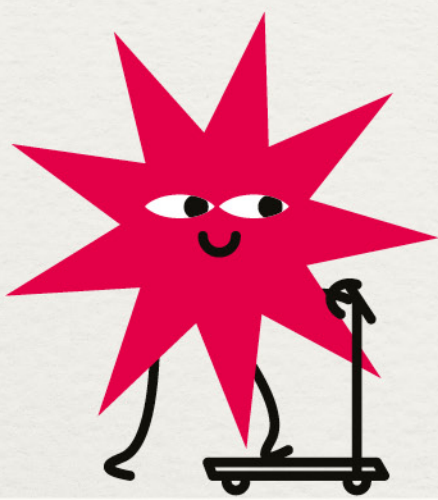
Children from underrepresented backgrounds are significantly less likely to engage with reading if they cannot see themselves reflected in the books available to them. Stocking books that feature diverse characters, LGBTQIA+ themes, plural ethnicities, and contemporary experiences is a practical precondition for engagement among children whose lives are not frequently reflected in the literary world. Dyslexia-friendly editions, bilingual books, and texts written in registers that reflect how young people actually speak all lower the entry threshold further. Publishers are increasingly being encouraged by booksellers to produce shorter, more visually engaging titles that acknowledge the realities of children’s attention spans and media environments.

Connecting reading to other interests

For children from non-reading households, an invitation to a book event is often insufficient as an entry point. More effective are events that combine reading with activities these children already value, for example sports, music, art, or craft. In Finland, one initiative has experimented with connecting reading promotion to rap music analysis, recognising that close engagement with lyrics involves many of the same cognitive skills as reading prose. Flexible book club formats that allow children to discuss a film adaptation rather than the original text, or to bring in a magazine or non-fiction title of their own choosing, similarly lower the threshold for initial engagement.

Free access as a structural intervention

For families where books are unaffordable, motivational programming alone is insufficient. One US bookshop maintains a free bookshelf stocked with damaged publisher copies and advance reading copies that cannot be sold commercially, allowing any child to take a book home regardless of whether their family can pay. This quiet, low-cost intervention ensures that a visit to the bookshop can always result in a child leaving with something, removing the anxiety of browsing without buying that can make non-reading families feel unwelcome. Several other bookshops work with NGOs to donate books to families, schools, and community libraries in low-income or rural areas (e.g. Pay It Forward UK; Donnez à lire, France). The goal in all these cases is the same: building a long-term relationship with people and communities rather than focusing on immediate sales and investing in future readers who may not yet know that is what they are becoming.



Transferability & professional requirements

Effective reading promotion does not happen by chance. It depends on booksellers who are knowledgeable, confident, and well-connected: professionals who can listen to a child, recommend the right book, organise a meaningful event, and navigate partnerships with schools, libraries, and NGOs. This chapter examines the training pathways and capacity-building opportunities currently available to booksellers, and identifies where significant gaps remain.

Existing European and national initiatives

At the European level, the most recent professional development framework for booksellers is the RISE Bookselling network. A three-year EU co-funded initiative run by the European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF), RISE aims to upscale, reinforce, and strengthen the capacity and resilience of the European bookselling sector. Its Industry Insights series provides booksellers with research and tools to engage with political stakeholders and cultural sector professionals, ensuring that booksellers' priorities are represented in policy discussions.

At national level, bookseller associations play a vital role as training hubs. Bodies such as the Börsenverein (Germany), ALI (Italy), SLF (France), and CEGAL (Spain) provide resources, share best practices, and advise members on curating dedicated book selections for children and young adults. In Switzerland, the Swiss Institute for Children's and Youth Media (SIKJM) functions as a national competence centre, offering orientation and continuing education to strengthen the expertise of those mediating literature, including booksellers.

In Australia, the Australia Reads initiative takes a research-driven approach, investing in behavioural science to shape future marketing and training programmes aimed at increasing national reading rates.

Training through practice

Some of the most significant shifts in bookseller capacity have come not through formal programmes but through the practical demands of new policy frameworks. The introduction of national culture voucher schemes, such as in France, Italy, Spain, and Germany, has required booksellers to update their practices, engage with younger demographics, and navigate new administrative and technical procedures. As one bookseller put it:

 *This innovative scheme allows us booksellers to question our own practices, and to bring ourselves up to date with a younger clientele.*

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National associations have stepped in to support this transition. CEGAL in Spain, for example, has taken on an intermediary role, helping bookshops manage the technical requirements set by the Ministry of Culture. This kind of hands-on association support, bridging the gap between policy design and on-the-ground implementation, is itself a form of capacity-building, and an increasingly important one.

Challenges that remain

Geographical disparity is perhaps the most structural gap. Support and training opportunities are concentrated in urban areas and among established businesses. In rural and remote regions, where few cultural actors are present, current provision is often passive, helping existing bookshops rather than investing in the creation of new cultural infrastructure in underserved communities.¹⁹

Technical and digital shortfalls present a further challenge. Booksellers have reported weaknesses in digital platforms, including search engines not adapted to the volume of book references and unreliable stock feedback systems. These technical gaps limit booksellers' ability to serve customers effectively and to participate in the digital dimensions of reading promotion.²⁰

The literacy mediator gap is perhaps the most pressing for the purposes of this report. There is a growing expectation, reflected in European-level policy thinking, (including the Draghi report²¹) that librarians should act as *literacy mediators and community connectors*. The same would apply to booksellers whose role goes beyond mere retailing. Yet many practitioners currently lack the tools, training, and confidence to fulfil this role effectively, particularly in diverse or disadvantaged settings. Investing in a trained workforce of reading promoters is increasingly seen as a cost-effective intervention with measurable impact on reading motivation, comprehension, and educational attainment.

Time and administrative burden are also significant barriers, especially for small and independent bookshops. Applying for funding, managing partnerships, and developing programmes all require time that many booksellers simply do not have. As one bookseller described:

 *It takes an enormous amount of time. We try to manage without financial resources wherever possible – applying for funding is just so laborious and time-consuming. And of course you also need staff.*

BOOKSELLER

Time and resource constraints are also underlined by a stakeholder – also pointing out at needs-based training getting higher participation rates:

“ We are well aware of the enormous workload and the scarcity of resources. But yes, we do have between 60 and 100 participants at our webinars. I think even more would take part if time allowed. We also always try to schedule them at a convenient time. But what we have actually noticed – and perhaps this is worth mentioning – is that the potential is of course greater. When we run training offers like these with nurseries and early years settings, we see an even stronger level of participation. So there is clearly a particularly high demand for knowledge in that area.

STAKEHOLDER

Sustainability is a related concern. Culture vouchers and project-based grants are valuable but inherently unstable sources of income, subject to political shifts and funding cycles.²² This makes it difficult for booksellers to build long-term strategies or invest in staff development on this basis alone.

Addressing gaps requires coordinated action

The capacity of booksellers to engage meaningfully in reading promotion depends on sustained investment in training, support structures, and professional development – at both national and European levels. Existing frameworks, from RISE to national association programmes, provide a valuable foundation. But gaps remain significant: in geographic reach, in digital infrastructure, in preparation for the literacy mediator role, and in the practical conditions, particularly time, staffing, and stable funding, that make sustained engagement possible.

Addressing these gaps requires coordinated action. Booksellers’ associations, policymakers, and funders all have a role to play in ensuring that the professionals best placed to build reading cultures among young people have the skills and support to do so.





COLLABORATION AND OUTREACH ECOSYSTEMS

Bookshops do not operate in isolation. As community spaces with a direct relationship to readers of all ages, they are natural partners in local and national efforts to promote reading and literacy. This chapter explores how bookshops are embedded in these wider ecosystems and what shapes the quality of those connections.

The chapter draws on two sets of perspectives. Booksellers share their practical experiences of working with other organisations: what partnerships look like on the ground, what they make possible, and where the difficulties lie. NGOs and associations offer a complementary view, reflecting on what it means to collaborate with bookshops and identifying the systemic factors (both enabling and obstructive) that influence how well these partnerships can function.

Together, these perspectives build a picture of the conditions under which bookshops can play an active and sustained role in literacy promotion beyond their own four walls.

Collection of existing networks and partnership frameworks

Partners and networks

Bookshops collaborate with a wide range of actors: schools, libraries, NGOs, municipalities, and - less obviously - sports clubs, cultural organisations, and youth groups. These partnerships take different forms, from structured national programmes to informal local arrangements, and serve a shared goal: embedding reading into everyday life and reaching audiences who might not find their way to a bookshop on their own. As this stakeholder describes, it is all about outreach and connections:

“When schools cooperate with libraries, or with bookshops, or with family centres and youth centres, there is a greater chance of reaching more people. Intercultural contexts also call for thinking about where children and young people actually are – if they are not in the library, if they are not at school, where else might they be?”

STAKEHOLDER

Schools

Schools are the most common and consequential partners for bookshops working with children. In Germany, booksellers actively approach primary schools to provide every new school starter with a decorated bag containing a book, a project known as the 'Lesetüte'. Older pupils colour the bags for incoming children, while booksellers use the opportunity to write to parents about the importance of reading aloud. The German Reading Competition (Vorlesewettbewerb) goes further, bringing schools, libraries, and bookshops together around a structured annual event: teachers organise school-level rounds, while booksellers often host the regional finals.

In France, the Pass Culture provides schools with grants for class visits to cultural venues, including bookshops, giving many children their first experience of browsing in a physical shop. Access is also a concern in Slovakia, where the initiative 'Krajina čitateľov' (Country of Readers) works with schools and teachers to place carefully selected books in classrooms, enabling children to read during breaks. As one bookseller involved with the project explained:

 *We built the theory on research that tells us that in order to become a reader, you need two factors: an adult who reads and sets an example, and books within your reach.*

BOOKSELLER

The financial dimension matters too. As a French bookseller noted, books are often simply out of reach for young people without their own income, school-financed access changes that.

Libraries and industry bodies

Bookshops frequently join forces with libraries and national book sector organisations to amplify their promotional reach. In Australia, the Australia Reads initiative brings together booksellers, libraries, publishers, and authors to invest in research and advocacy aimed at increasing national reading rates, sharing assets and messaging across store and school networks. In Switzerland, the Swiss Children's and Youth Book Prize is co-organised by the Swiss Booksellers' Association (SBVV) and the Swiss Institute for Children's and Youth Media (SIKJM), whose competence centre maintains ongoing contact with bookshops and libraries to provide guidance and professional development for literature mediators.

NGOs and foundations

NGOs and foundations often rely on bookshops as the physical infrastructure through which literacy missions reach communities. In the UK, the National Literacy Trust works with bookshops, charities, and businesses to make reading for pleasure a political priority. BookTrust, also in the UK, partners with early years organisations and bookshops to deliver Bookstart packs to families on low incomes, ensuring that children own their first books.

Non-traditional spaces and community actors

Some of the most innovative outreach moves beyond the bookshop entirely. In Poland, the Universal Reading Foundation places reading promotion stands in football clubs as part of its Reading Dad campaign, targeting fathers in environments where they already spend time. In Austria, municipalities appoint local Ambassadors for Literacy to serve as connectors between communities and reading promotion initiatives.

These approaches reflect a broader insight: to reach households where reading is not yet a habit, it is often necessary to go where people already are, as this stakeholder puts it:

 We are looking to reach out to other networks. So the sports networks, the vision impairment charity, associations, health organisations. We do a lot of work with or have done in the past with shopping centres and with transport networks. The train and the buses, because we're all about how do we get these messages to other groups so we can only we can't get them to them from bookish spaces.

STAKEHOLDER

State voucher schemes as structural platforms

National culture voucher schemes have emerged as an important structural mechanism connecting bookshops with the wider arts and youth ecosystem. In Spain, bookshops register on a national app as cultural spaces alongside theatres, museums, and concert halls, becoming visible to 18-year-olds through a geo-localised map. In France and Germany, voucher schemes explicitly exclude large online retailers, directing young people towards local brick-and-mortar bookshops and requiring integration between state IT systems and physical stores. National associations such as CEGAL in Spain play an important intermediary role, supporting bookshops through the technical procedures required to participate.

In interviews with booksellers, also smaller scale, **local voucher schemes** were referred to as activities to lower the threshold:

 Once a year, because we are this international book town, the book town organisers give \$20 vouchers to every school child in this area and they have to spend it, but they have a choice of shops. They don't all come to my shop, but in the area they can go to several shops. They have found that a lot of children, who wouldn't normally buy a book are getting a free book. And that has been helpful.

BOOKSELLER

Cooperation models

Partnerships between bookshops and other actors take several forms:

- **Regular partnerships** involve ongoing, structured collaboration, such as a bookshop that hosts a reading club in partnership with a local school throughout the academic year.
- **Project-based collaboration** centres on specific, time-limited initiatives, a reading competition, a book gifting scheme, or a joint event.
- **Informal local networks** are perhaps the most widespread, relying on personal relationships (e.g. between teachers and booksellers) and local, personal initiative rather than formal agreements or institutional backing.

Each model has its strengths. Regular partnerships build sustained relationships and trust; project-based work allows for focused impact and measurable outcomes; informal networks are flexible and low-barrier, though they can be fragile and dependent on individual commitment.

Collaborations and partnerships in practice

Working with schools

Schools are the most consistent and far-reaching partners for bookshops engaged in reading promotion. The relationship takes many forms (e.g. author visits, reading competitions, class trips to bookshops, school procurement arrangements, and longer-term collaborative programmes) and its impact is greatest when built on sustained, trust-based partnerships rather than one-off events.

Beyond individual activities, some organisations engage at a systemic level: working with school boards, contributing to national reading strategies, or building regional networks that connect teachers, librarians, and booksellers. Targeted programmes reach those who are hardest to engage, including young men and vocational school students, sometimes through creative approaches such as analysing rap lyrics as a gateway to reading:

The UK's National Literacy Trust (NLT) 2025 survey points out that reading song lyrics are a dominant format in digital reading, 60.7% of children and young people read them on screen.²³ Together with fiction, news articles, fan fiction and comics, this might be a way for both schools and booksellers to re-engage young people with reading.

Yet **challenges remain**. Limited school budgets mean booksellers often work pro bono or seek external funding. Teacher workload leaves little room for additional engagement. Logistical barriers (like transporting pupils to shops, or bringing sufficient stock into schools) add further friction. In some contexts, restrictive curricula or policies around commercial partnerships limit what is possible, and in parts of the United States, book banning efforts create a climate of caution that makes school-bookshop collaboration particularly difficult, as this NGO representative from a Scandinavian country mentions:

“At the moment, the pressure in schools for many things is high.”

NGO REPRESENTATIVE

“Going through teachers has been like the main success factor.”

BOOKSELLER, CHAIN

“Readings and workshops with authors and illustrators are enormously popular in Schools.”

NGO REPRESENTATIVE

“Engage with your local schools because the teachers, they know the children that are slipping through the cracks.”

BOOKSELLER

“I try and get authors into as many schools as possible. And that is such an impactful thing, I think in terms of promoting reading for pleasure.”

BOOKSELLER

Despite these obstacles, school collaborations are widely seen as essential to building a reading culture among young people. This view is broadly shared among the people interviewed, across groups, and regarded as a major success factor in reaching the 9–15-year-olds, as the quotes on the left highlight.

Eventually, it is about spreading the joy of reading, as this NGO representative highlights:

“*If you bring someone into a school who’s enthusiastic and informed and give them a really varied selection of books that are diverse and that are exciting and that are actually fun to read, and you let them pick like it’s amazing what can happen.*

NGO REPRESENTATIVE

The Börsenverein’s support for local bookshop school procurement, Germany

The German Publishers and Booksellers Association (Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels) offers a strong example of how a national trade association can actively intervene to protect local bookshops in school procurement processes. Recognising that open calls for tenders for price-controlled textbooks are largely counterproductive (since fixed book prices eliminate price competition, making most offers identical) the Börsenverein’s legal department provides practical guidance to schools, school authorities, municipalities, and booksellers alike. This awareness-raising work addresses a significant knowledge gap on all sides.²⁴

At the structural level, the Börsenverein advocates for two concrete approaches. First, where possible, schools should be able to place textbook orders directly with their local bookshop using their own acquisition budget, a model that fosters genuine partnerships, with booksellers advising teachers and parents and actively supporting reading culture. Second, where individual contracts are not feasible, tenders should be broken into smaller, well-designed lots that smaller bookshops can realistically compete for.

A tangible outcome of this advocacy is the city of Munich which, in consultation with the Bavarian book trade association, restructured its tender lots after evidence showed that 60–80% of local bookshops had been excluded due to the scale of requirements. This stands as a replicable model for other municipalities across Germany and beyond.

Working with authors and role models

One of the most powerful tools in reading promotion is the author, or more precisely, the right author for the right audience. Booksellers and NGOs consistently point to the importance of representation: children are far more likely to engage with reading when they can see themselves in the books they are offered, and in the people who talk to them about those books.

A striking example comes from Sweden, where a small NGO working in a Stockholm neighbourhood with a high proportion of immigrant families launched a writing competition for local schools. The initiative was galvanised by the success of Nora Khalil, a Swedish author born in that same neighbourhood, whose debut novel, written in the vernacular of the area, had become a significant success. As one bookseller involved reflected:

“Those kids were really inspired by her. They could see themselves in her. A lot of these kids said: I never thought I could write something that other people would find interesting. And they did.

NGO REPRESENTATIVE

The lesson here is not simply that authors inspire children, but that **proximity, cultural, linguistic, and lived, matters enormously**. Spokespersons and role models who share children's backgrounds and speak in ways that feel familiar can reach audiences that more conventional approaches cannot.



Training and professional development

Effective collaboration with schools, NGOs, and communities depends in large part on the skills of the people involved. Across the countries studied, professional development for booksellers and educators emerges as a key enabler - and a persistent gap.

Training needs range from the practical (how to talk to children about books, how to organise events, how to animate a graphic novel club) to the more specialised (reading pedagogy, literature pedagogy, working with reluctant readers). In the UK and Ireland, national booksellers' associations provide resources and guidance on their websites. In Germany, the Börsenverein runs webinar formats such as 'Buchfreunde' to help booksellers share successful strategies with one another in a low-threshold way. Across countries, booksellers emphasise the importance of staying current on new titles, on social media, on what young people are actually interested in, as a precondition for meaningful engagement.

Several interviewees stressed that training should extend beyond booksellers to include volunteers involved in reading promotion. Even well-intentioned volunteer programmes can inadvertently frame reading as remedial rather than pleasurable if participants lack guidance on how to engage children effectively.

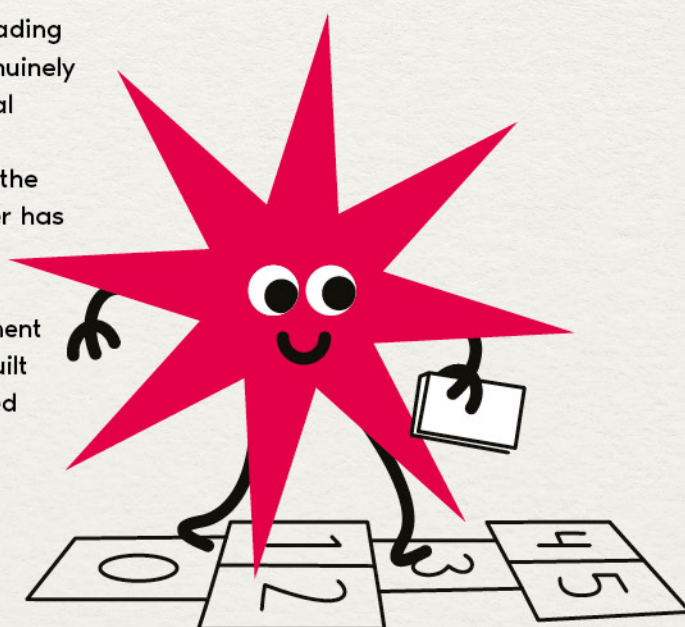
The underlying principle, raised by multiple stakeholders, is that recommending books to young people is a skill: it requires listening to what a child is drawn to, rather than projecting one's own preferences. As one French stakeholder put it, booksellers need to be trained "to spend time understanding young people's interests rather than just promoting their own favourites."

Booksellers' associations have a significant role to play here, both in providing training directly and in creating platforms for peer exchange where good practice can spread across the sector - expanding the individual capacities and reach:

"I usually say that collaboration is a way to grow the operation."

NGO REPRESENTATIVE

Bookshops are most effective as reading promotion actors when they are genuinely embedded in their local and national ecosystems, connected to schools, libraries, NGOs, municipalities, and the communities they serve. This chapter has shown that such connections take many forms, from structured national programmes and procurement frameworks to informal networks built on personal relationships and shared commitment.



“Yes, collaboration is a key element of our work in promoting reading among young people.”

BOOKSELLER

“What works well in these collaborations is the ability to combine different types of expertise, networks, and communication channels.”

BOOKSELLER

Making a difference through collaboration

Several conditions consistently support successful collaboration. Sustained partnerships, grounded in trust and mutual understanding rather than one-off transactions, produce the deepest impact. Representative voices and role models make reading feel relevant and attainable for children who might otherwise disengage. Well-trained booksellers and educators, equipped with the skills to listen to young readers and respond to their interests, are more effective partners for schools and NGOs alike. And at the structural level, supportive policy frameworks, whether through voucher schemes, procurement guidance, or association-led advocacy, can make the difference between collaboration that is possible in principle and collaboration that actually happens in practice – in order to become impactful.

Persistent barriers remain: budget pressures, teacher workload, logistical constraints, and in some contexts, an actively difficult political climate. These are not problems that individual bookshops can solve alone. Addressing them requires coordinated action across the ecosystem (by associations, policymakers, and funders) to reduce friction and create the conditions in which bookshops can fulfil their potential as partners in building a reading culture for young people.



POLICY FRAMEWORK AND ADVOCACY NEEDS

This chapter analyses the current policy gaps and needs at national and EU levels that participants discussed in the research, as well as public support that benefits booksellers, including best practices like zero VAT, culture cards, or public funding schemes that are open to bookshops. One main theme that will be discussed is the role of booksellers beyond retail, and the urgent need for recognition and adequate integration of this role in wider policies, frameworks, and funding schemes. In order to highlight the contribution booksellers are providing in a many EU-priority areas, the alignment of booksellers with various EU-Frameworks will be discussed. And finally, strategic synergies for reading promotion are examined to scale impact.

POLICY GAPS & STRUCTURAL DEFICIENCIES AT EU & NATIONAL LEVELS

Inadequate Recognition of the Role of Booksellers for Communities and Reading Promotion for Children

One of the main issues that came up during interviews with booksellers and stakeholders is the dual role that (independent) bookstores hold between different sectors, which is insufficiently recognized and reflected in existing policies and structural frameworks. Most, if not all, bookstores in the 20 countries covered by the research operate as dual actors that combine commercial retail with cultural, educational, and community-based functions, with some of them engaging in cultural or educational projects that blur the line between retailer and civil society organization (CSO).

“ Bookshops are more than just businesses [...] I think bookshops should be seen as a cultural entity in their town, like, they do provide a lot of free events. [...] Yes, we do have to sell books and we do have to pay the bills. But if you wanted to just have a business that made a huge profit, you wouldn't sell books. You're doing it because you want to provide something to your community and especially your children. [... But] I found when lobbying that if you lobbied as a cultural entity, you were told, no, you're a retailer. And if you tried the retail side, they said, well, no, you're not really. You should ask the Department of Arts and Culture. So you are pushed from side to side. You're not seen as either. You know, you're not properly a retailer and you're not properly a cultural entity either. That's something that needs to be worked on.

BOOKSELLER

Despite their important role in promoting reading for pleasure, research participants point out how booksellers are often left out of the conversation:

“ On the level of policy makers, I feel like [we need to make] sure that representatives from bookshops and bookselling are in the room when they’re having these conversations [on policy]. So often when you see some kind of high-profile event that’s supposedly about promoting reading for pleasure, [...] And there are no booksellers in the room [you wonder] Why not? You’re missing a voice. [...] Why are you not bringing in the expertise of booksellers when you’re making policies?

BOOKSELLER

Existing policy frameworks struggle to accommodate the dual commercial and public-interest function of independent booksellers, both to the detriment of bookstores who are struggling to continue to offer a broad range of events and services to promote reading for children; and to children and their families themselves.

“ We didn’t have funding of these activities [reading promotion events] because we don’t have any funding for bookshops, we only have funding for NGOs. So everything we did, we did with our own resources. There’s no funding system from institutions for private bookshops to help them develop literacy [activities]. [...] So at one point, you have to decide. If you are doing projects, if you become an NGO, if you’re closing the bookshop, or if you’re keeping the bookshop.

BOOKSELLER

Overall Lack or Insufficiency of Funding in the Culture and Education Sectors

Even if bookstores are recognized as cultural and education stakeholders or are part of project consortia, the issue of insufficient or complete lack of (governmental) funding opportunities remain. This is specifically mentioned for schools, school libraries, libraries, and the cultural sector in general.

Fragmented Policies and Frameworks

The research points to a rather fragmented landscape in terms of policies and frameworks.²⁵ Reading promotion often falls under the responsibility of different stakeholders and policy makers, like Cultural Ministries and Education Ministries, with often times isolated strategies being implemented that are limited in scale and sustainability. The Network EUREads for example identified the sectors of education, culture, health, social affairs, employment, innovation, and finance as relevant stakeholders in reading promotion, with only limited synergies.²⁶ Furthermore, the dispersion of responsibilities between international, transnational, national, sub-national (county/province/ federal state, etc., for example in Germany) and municipal levels lead to further fragmentation and cases in which booksellers describe scenarios, in which no one feels responsible or accountability is shifted from stakeholder to stakeholder, as several interviews with booksellers and stakeholders highlight.

One specific example that was brought up repeatedly in the research are culture cards (or culture passes/vouchers) that were on one hand highlighted as a relevant scheme with the potential of supporting bookshops, and on the other, showcase the fragmented landscape. Culture cards/passes/vouchers are only implemented in a few countries (France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Germany, with plans to introduce the scheme in Ireland) and follow different terms regarding the eligibility of books. In the example of Ireland, a culture voucher is planned to be introduced but does explicitly not cover books, according to a bookseller interviewed.

In Germany, the culture pass that was introduced in 2023 was discontinued at the end of 2025 after the Federal High Court had ruled that the financing on the national level was unconstitutional, as the competency for culture lies with the federal states in Germany. Furthermore, Minister of State and Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media Wolfram Weimer (who had only taken over the post after the introduction of the culture pass by the previous government) justified his support for the discontinuation of the culture pass by stating that the intention of the pass had not been fulfilled, as some young people had only used the pass to “go to the movies or buy comics,”²⁷ highlighting the need to consolidate cultural and reading promotion strategies.

In other instances, policies and frameworks in other fields (e.g. education) not only don’t consider bookstores as cultural stakeholders but directly harm them (see ‘Issues arising from Education Policies’).

Legal and Tax Frameworks directly relating to Bookstores

Overall, low profit margins and high costs, including disproportionally increasing rents, utilities and other overhead costs, are posing significant challenges for bookstores, as well as independent businesses overall.

“The feeling I have at least is that the bookshops are in survival mode.”

NGO REPRESENTATIVE

Book prices & VAT (Value Added Tax)

The two main challenges that were described by research participants relate to book prices and VAT, with differences in contexts due to different national regulations.

Book Prices are regulated differently across international markets, primarily falling into two categories: fixed book-price systems and free price systems. In fixed-price systems (e.g. Germany, Netherlands, France, Spain), laws require books to be sold at the same price regardless of the retailer. In free-price systems (e.g. Ireland, Finland, the UK, USA), retailers set their own prices and discounts. Both systems come with their own advantages and challenges, although it was especially research participants from countries with free price systems who brought up related challenges. For fixed-price systems, challenges include lack of knowledge and visibility around the system with customers still assuming that large retailers and online giants are cheaper; no pathways to competitive procurement of retail contracts (e.g. with schools), which results in randomization or attempts to bypass the system by offering ancillary services (e.g. binding, labelling, etc.). In free price systems, the main challenge is a “race to the bottom” in which small and independent retailers can hardly compete.²⁸

Value Added Tax (VAT) is a critical policy tool for the bookselling sector, but the specific application varies by country. While some countries have introduced reduced rates or even zero VAT as part of broader policy approaches (see next chapter), booksellers from countries that still apply full VAT name the taxing system as a significant challenge and policy gap.

Procurement policies

Furthermore, procurement policies are creating challenges especially for smaller bookshops. While public procurement frameworks are intended to promote transparency and competition, the shift from local purchasing arrangements to centralized, large-scale tendering processes often disadvantages independent booksellers. EU and national procurement thresholds frequently require contracts to be opened to wider competition, while municipalities and public institutions increasingly bundle purchases into large contracts that exceed the capacity of most local retailers. As a result, smaller bookshops face significant legal, administrative, and logistical barriers to participation. This can reduce opportunities for local businesses to supply schools, libraries, and other public institutions. Here, the threshold above which tenders must be advertised can vary significantly between national contexts.²⁹

Issues arising from related policies (Education)

Lack of reading strategies that involve bookstores

As detailed in the first chapter, there is a sharp decline in reading habits for children, often associated with the transition to secondary school (depending on the education system, mostly associated with children between 10-12) that is reflected across all contexts. However, research participants point out that there are still insufficient policies and frameworks in place to address these issues, with some differences. And yet, even if there are policies in place that address reading strategies, the important role of independent bookstores remains insufficiently recognized and reflected, as detailed before. The following insight

highlights the current gap, underlining the need to better integrate bookstores into wider educational and reading strategies to promote literacy on a broader scale:

“ I think first of all, the politicians need to understand that we have a reading crisis and that is going to have a catastrophic effect on the country in the next 20 years if we don't address it. They don't know that. So step one is that we have to show that. Then we have to show them that we have the solutions. We're showing them the vision of what a reading country looks like. It is more socially connected. It's healthier. It is better educated. Children have a better chance in life. So this is the vision of what's possible. [...] How do we solve it? Well, there's already a network [...] working towards this, and bookshops are a critical part of that within a local community. So there is your local cultural infrastructure in place there. They're already doing that work. They're often doing it for free on razor thin margins, free or close to it. When they do book events, they do it through passion. Booksellers see their role as a vocation. And so, they are a critical part of the community infrastructure. So we need the government to understand there's a problem and we're able to do something about it. They need to back us to support that cultural infrastructure, to have a national reading strategy and to roll out campaigns that are going to shift behaviour. So that we can keep doing that work for them.

STAKEHOLDER



Education frameworks that can economically harm bookstores

In the example of Ireland, a Free Schoolbook Scheme was introduced which provided funding for schoolbooks directly to schools, so that families wouldn't have to buy schoolbooks themselves. While in general a "great idea [...] they didn't consider bookstores" (Interview bookseller). For them, it meant that an important entry point for families who might otherwise not come to bookshops at all and opportunity to expose children and their families to reading environments was eliminated. This comes back to the point of excluding bookstores from conversations around reading promotion and not considering their role in education. One research participant summarizes the effect:

“It actually reduced footfall into bookshops where normally families would go in, they would buy their books, they might go, oh, there's a new comic book, we'll buy that. They build that relationship. That interaction was taken away with the free school book scheme, and some shops have either had to rethink their business model or close branches because of that.

STAKEHOLDER

This example highlights the need to include bookstores in conversations around policies and frameworks for reading promotion also in educational settings.



Censorship and political agendas detrimental to promotion of reading

Last but not least, censorship policies are actively harming the promotion of reading and posing risks to bookshops and booksellers personally. In the US, the banning of books so far mainly affects schools and public libraries, with books relating to themes of race/racism, LGBTQIA+, gender, sexuality, or social justice being challenged or removed from shelves entirely (sometimes even preemptively before legislation takes effect). Legislation to also restrict the sale of books affected by the bans in schools and blacklist bookstores who don't comply have so far failed, highlighting the joint lobbying efforts by booksellers and book associations in the US.³⁰ While the US is seeing the most systematic and broad censorship of books in the form of book bans, similar attempts have increasingly occurred in Europe as well. In the UK, "anecdotal evidence suggests a rise in requests to take books off shelves, particularly LGBTQIA+ titles"³¹.

In Hungary, legislation linked to the so-called "child protection" framework similarly restricted books relating to LGBTQIA+, directly affecting bookstores (in one example, a bookstore was penalized for selling the teen book 'Heartstopper' to under 18-year-olds)³². In Germany, a parliamentary inquiry was launched after three bookstores were excluded from the German Bookstore Prize (Deutscher Buchhandlungspreis) following investigations by domestic intelligence services that were reportedly based on assumptions about the stores' political affiliations. The inquiry revealed that nearly 400 bookstores that had applied for funding had been subjected to similar scrutiny, sparking a nationwide debate about censorship, surveillance, and freedom of expression.³⁴ These examples highlight the urgent need for joint advocacy action across countries and sectors to raise awareness on the national, European and international level of how bookshops are being targeted and attacked through increasingly authoritarian policies and measures.

Public support available

Public support that directly supports or benefits bookstores is mainly available through cultural funding schemes that include bookstores (culture pass, culture vouchers); book gifting schemes; legal and tax frameworks; and few funding opportunities that include bookstores.

Reduced or zero VAT (Value Added Taxes)

An important policy approach that supports bookstores directly are reduced or zero VAT. Some European countries apply reduced VAT rates to books in recognition of their cultural and educational value (e.g. Spain, Italy, Germany, France, Poland, Sweden), while some have cut the VAT to zero (e.g. UK, Ireland, Norway, Czechia) as part of broader cultural policy approaches. Lower VAT can either benefit booksellers by having higher margins with more room for (free) events etc., or be passed on to customers to ensure better accessibility of books to promote reading.

Culture Card/Pass/Voucher Schemes & Book Gifting Programs

Culture Cards (or Culture Pass, Culture Voucher) have been introduced in several European countries to incentivise and support young people in accessing cultural events, activities and products. They usually provide their target group (young people of varying ages) with a voucher/credit (e.g. via an app or platform) that they can then spend in participating institutions and retailers. Culture Cards were mentioned across contexts as important or desirable options that benefit bookshops and can strengthen their role as cultural stakeholders, as well as foster relationships with more young people by incentivising them to visit their local independent bookstore. Countries who have these passes that include the purchase of books are Italy, France, Spain, and Germany. Their models are repeatedly mentioned as desirable by stakeholders and booksellers from the other contexts. Especially for countries who do have similar culture passes, but that do not include the purchase of books, this change in policy poses a low threshold pathway to better support.

Several countries also have book gifting schemes, some centring around World Book Day. Examples include Finland's scheme for providing new parents with essentials, including a book bag for newborns; 'Lesetüte' (Book box) in Germany, where first-graders receive gifted books; Bookstart in the UK; or preselected free books or vouchers around World Book Day (e.g. Ireland). Some are also on the municipal level. However, while the research highlighted many different book-gifting schemes across contexts, many are not publicly funded but have to rely on sponsoring, publishers, partnerships with NGOs, etc.

"We are lucky in France to have lots of bookstores everywhere on the territory. So, we really want to use them to connect with the French population and to promote this pleasure of reading by giving them money for projects in which they will [for example] make the authors come in the bookstore [for events]."

STAKEHOLDER

Funding Schemes aiming at Bookstores

As previously described, there is a significant gap in funding opportunities for bookstores to support their events and community, cultural and educational work.

In some countries, public grants are available for bookstores (e.g. Canada Book Fund), while in many instances, funding primarily goes to NGOs working towards reading promotion, who in turn offer grants to bookstores or support through various partnerships.





Many funding opportunities are however only available through partnerships with other entities (schools, libraries, NGOs), which however means that the role that bookstores can play beyond retail first needs to be recognized by other stakeholders. Furthermore, bookstores need the knowledge, skills and time to navigate funding opportunities.

Some schemes include bookstores as small businesses and provide support in digitalization, energy-efficiency, recovery (mainly during/after Covid-19) and resilience, or innovation (e.g. the Recovery and Resilience Facility by the European Union, from 2021-2026).

Furthermore, bookstores can participate in European funding schemes through partnerships, which however puts additional project management work on them and comes back to issues with resources and retail responsibilities/limitations to what degree bookstores can act as civil society organizations. Funding programmes include Creative Europe, Erasmus +, European Social Fund +, or Regional development funds. The RISE project, funded through Creative Europe, is distinctive by linking bookselling, reading promotion and the cultural role of bookstores, thus addressing the significant gap.

Overall, more support is needed, first and foremost in recognition of the important role bookstores play in their communities and to assure that they will be able to continue to provide services for children and their families and promote reading. As one bookseller put it:

“ You need so little to tell someone and to show how reading is magic, you need so little. But if there will be support, there will be more magic.

BOOKSELLER

Alignment with EU frameworks and strategic synergies

This section highlights how the reading-promotion activities of booksellers contribute to wider European policy objectives. By showing the wide range of EU frameworks that booksellers align with, this section demonstrates how booksellers are contributing to broader public policy objectives rather than operating solely as commercial actors. Furthermore, it helps to identify the fields of action which are prioritized by policy makers in which bookshops are already providing important services. These range from literacy and foundational skills development as part of education targets to local cultural infrastructure and cultural participation; youth participation, equality and social cohesion; and underpin active and informed democratic citizenship.

When booksellers can demonstrate their contribution to relevant European frameworks and agendas, it can support the case for public recognition as cultural, educational, and community stakeholders, including adequate funding and policy support. In this sense, this section provides possible avenues for joint advocacy, the strengthening of cross-sector networks, or possible funding opportunities.

Frameworks with direct funding pathways:

Creative Europe

Creative Europe is the most direct funding-relevant framework (RISE is funded by Creative Europe). The framework supports the cultural and creative sectors, including literature and publishing. Bookstores align as part of the literary ecosystem, connecting publishers, authors, and readers. Youth-oriented literary events, cross-border reading promotion projects, or partnerships with publishers and schools are the kinds of activities Creative Europe funds or supports as project partners.

Citizens, Equality, Rights, and Values Programme (CERV)

CERV is also a direct funding opportunity. It funds projects promoting European values, civic engagement, and inclusion. Bookstores can align through reading promotion that fosters empathy, democratic values, and intercultural understanding in young people (particularly through diverse and inclusive book selections). Community-based programs in bookstores that engage families and children from minority or vulnerable backgrounds are well-aligned with their inclusion strand.

Strategic and Thematic Alignment

From a policy perspective it would make sense to foster strategic alliances that apply to the following fields:

Union of Skills

The framework sets a target that underachievement in literacy should be below 15%, and top performance in literacy should reach at least 15%.

Bookstores align as non-formal literacy environments that contribute to these targets – particularly for young people who are not reached through school alone. The framework promotes lifelong learning and empowering individuals to adapt and grow, which reading habits established in childhood directly support.

European Youth Strategy

The strategy focuses on participation, inclusion, and empowerment of young people across education, employment, and civic life.

Bookstores align as safe and non-institutional spaces (third spaces) where young people engage voluntarily with reading and ideas, which is supporting the strategy's goals around non-formal learning, well-being, and social inclusion outside formal education systems.

European Education Area

Explicitly targets literacy improvement as a 2030 benchmark and recognizes that learning happens beyond school walls.

Bookstores align as informal learning environments that complement formal education, especially in terms of early reading development, pleasure of reading, multilingual literacy, and reaching children from disadvantaged backgrounds who may have less access to books at home (especially through book gifting schemes).

Union of Equality

The Union of Equality encompasses the Gender Equality Strategy, LGBTIQ+ Strategy, Roma Strategy, and Disability Strategy.

Bookstores can align by curating and promoting diverse, representative literature for young people, therefore ensuring children from all backgrounds see themselves in stories. Reading promotion in bookstores can be explicitly designed to reach underrepresented groups and counter exclusion through cultural access.

New European Agenda for Culture

The Agenda positions culture as a driver of social cohesion, well-being, and European identity.

Bookstores align directly as cultural infrastructure, i.e. places that make literature accessible, build reading culture in communities, and support local authors. Events that promote reading for young people like events, clubs, author visits represent the kind of participatory cultural engagement this agenda supports.

European Democracy Action Plan

The Democracy Action Plan focuses on media literacy, critical thinking, and informed civic participation.

Bookstores align through reading promotion, as well as offering safe spaces for debate for young people, where they can engage in person and outside formal institutional settings like schools.

Council of Europe – Cultural Democracy Framework

The framework positions access to culture as a right, not a privilege, and emphasizes local cultural actors as essential infrastructure.

Bookstores again align as local cultural spaces that bring literature and events directly to local communities. Youth reading promotion here is framed as democratic participation in cultural life.

For Advocacy: Open Method of Coordination on Culture

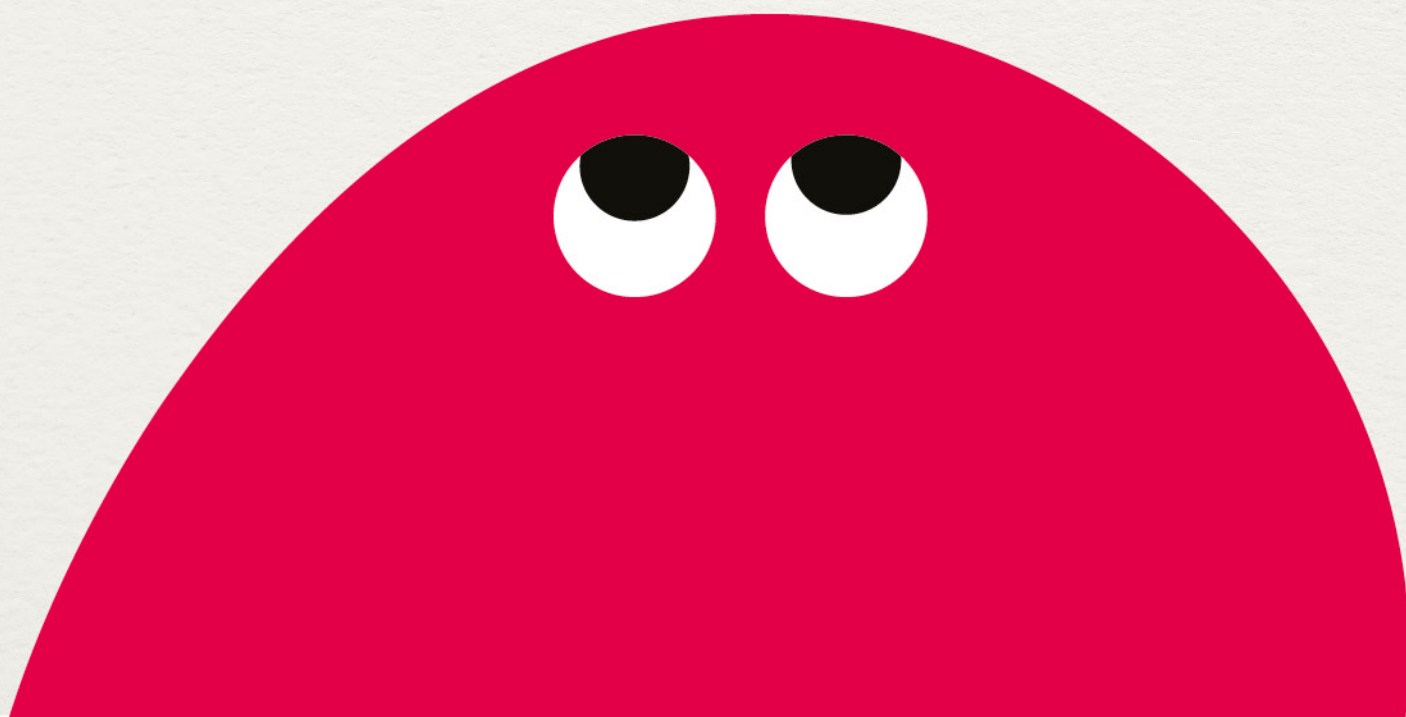
The OMC is a peer-learning and policy coordination mechanism. While not relevant directly as a framework or funding opportunity, this is where national reading strategies and best practices get shared across member states.

It's a useful mechanism to position the dual role of bookstores/ highlight their community, cultural and educational role to influence national policy and create downstream opportunities.

International: UNESCO's framework on cultural diversity

The 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions recognizes local cultural actors as essential to maintaining diverse cultural ecosystems.

Bookstores align by promoting multilingual, local, and minority-language literature for children, which counters cultural homogenization. This framework is useful for international advocacy and strengthening the cultural role of bookstores.



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