

Reading Culture in Compulsory Education: Between Institutional Transmission and Vital Meaning

Cultura lectora en la escuela obligatoria: entre la transmisión institucional y la significación vital

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Abstract

This article presents a qualitative systematic review of the scientific literature to analyze the role of compulsory education in fostering a critical, equitable, and community-based reading culture. The study adopts an interpretive and comparative approach, structured through thematic analysis of 261 articles published between 2000 and 2025 in databases such as ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, and Dialnet.

The findings reveal that reading culture is a complex, dynamic, and context-dependent phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a mere technical skill. Within this framework, the school emerges as an irreplaceable agent in ensuring universal access to diverse, meaningful, and empowering reading practices—especially when it embraces critical and context-aware

pedagogies.

The article also examines the complementary role of other social actors—families, libraries, and digital environments—and highlights cultural and institutional contrasts across territories. It concludes that promoting an inclusive reading culture requires a collective and systemic commitment that recognizes reading as a cultural right, a social practice, and a tool for democratic transformation.

Keywords: reading culture, pedagogical role of schools, educational equity, reading practices, reading agency.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta una revisión sistemática cualitativa de la literatura científica para analizar el papel que desempeña la escuela obligatoria en la construcción de una cultura lectora crítica, equitativa y comunitaria. El estudio parte de un enfoque interpretativo y comparativo, y se estructura a partir del análisis temático de 261 artículos publicados entre los años 2000 y 2025 en bases de datos como ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science y Dialnet.

Los resultados evidencian que la cultura lectora es un fenómeno complejo, dinámico y contextualizado, que no puede reducirse a una mera habilidad técnica. En este marco, la escuela se configura como un agente insustituible para garantizar el acceso universal a prácticas lectoras diversas, significativas y emancipadoras, especialmente cuando articula pedagogías críticas y contextualizadas.

De este modo, se analiza el papel complementario de otros agentes sociales —familias, bibliotecas y entornos digitales— y se destacan los contrastes culturales e institucionales entre territorios. El artículo concluye que la promoción de una cultura lectora inclusiva requiere una apuesta colectiva y sistémica que reconozca la lectura como un derecho cultural, una práctica social y una herramienta de transformación democrática.

Palabras clave: cultura lectora, función pedagógica de la escuela, equidad educativa, prácticas lectoras, agencia lectora.

1. Introduction

The transmission of reading culture has never truly been regarded as a responsibility to be shared among different social agents. On the contrary, throughout the history of modern education, this task has been attributed almost exclusively to the school, which has been considered the central institution in shaping students, both culturally and linguistically. This institutionalized

perspective granted the school an undeservedly leading role, to the detriment of other potential sources of transmission, such as families, libraries, or the media.

In recent decades, however, this unilateral view has been challenged. Within a more ecosystemic approach, greater emphasis has been placed on how reading culture emerges through multiple contextual interactions between formal and informal settings. Nevertheless, even within this broadened framework, the school's responsibility remains—and should remain—specific and non-transferable: to provide equal opportunities for access to written culture, to ensure systematic support in reading processes, and to contribute to the formation of a critical citizenry through reading.

Despite this plurality of actors, the school stands out as a privileged space from social, institutional, normative, and pedagogical perspectives. Within this framework, the article sets out from a central aim: to identify and delineate the distinctive value of schooling in shaping readers and granting access to written culture, with the capacity to comprehend, interpret, and transform the world.

Recent research questions the prevailing (Paredes, 2024) and reductionist conception of reading culture, one centered exclusively on the acquisition of technical skills. In contrast, an increasing number of studies emphasize that reading is a socially and culturally situated practice, one that encompasses values, attitudes, symbolic uses, and processes of identification and meaning-making (Morse, Ngwato & Huston, 2024; Simşek, 2021).

To address the proposed research question, this study is structured around four interrelated analytical axes. First, the concept of reading culture is examined from a critical and sociocultural perspective, with definitions that go beyond a functionalist approach and understand reading as a meaningful, collective, and contextual practice (Morse, Ngwato & Huston, 2024). Second, the specific role of the school is analyzed as an institution capable of providing structured and sustained reading pathways aimed at fostering critical thinking and educational inclusion (Karadag Yilmaz, Horzum & Koyuncu, 2024).

The third axis explores the contribution—often complementary but unequal—of other social agents such as families, libraries, or digital environments (Chaka & Govender, 2017). While these may facilitate access

to reading, they largely depend on the socioeconomic and cultural background of readers. Finally, the fourth axis adopts a comparative and contextualized perspective, analyzing the cultural and institutional contrasts identified in international literature. This last section reveals how political frameworks, curricular approaches, and community dynamics profoundly shape both reading practices and the ways reading is taught in different educational contexts (Rozaimie, 2024).

2. Approach and Methodology

A thematic analysis was conducted, guided by four interrelated analytical variables: (1) the concept of reading culture, (2) the role of the school, (3) the role of other social agents, and (4) cultural and institutional contrasts.

To ensure transparency and methodological reliability, the review was structured following the qualitative adaptation of the PRISMA protocol (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) proposed by Page et al. (2021), tailored to the requirements of a critical, educational, and interpretive review.

2.1. Selection Criteria

To guarantee thematic relevance, analytical coherence, and scientific quality in the documentary corpus included in this review, a set of eligibility criteria was established. Defining these criteria precisely was essential to ensure that the selected studies aligned closely with the research objectives and enabled a solid and meaningful comparative analysis (Kamalova & Koletvinova, 2016).

Specifically, the selection of publications was aimed at identifying research that critically addressed the function of the school as an active agent in the construction and transmission of reading culture, particularly in contexts where this role is confronted with or complemented by other social spaces of reading formation, such as families, libraries, or digital environments (Chaka & Govender, 2017).

First, only peer-reviewed publications were included, as a guarantee of methodological rigor and of the validity of theoretical and empirical contributions. This filter ensured that all analyzed sources met the academic standards required in a scientific review.

Second, the time frame was restricted to studies published between 2000 and 2025, in order to focus the review on current research contextualized within the social, cultural, and educational changes of the 21st century, particularly those linked to digitalization and transformations in school reading practices.

Third, only publications available in full text were considered, a requirement for conducting a critical reading and detailed thematic analysis of content. Any document without full access was discarded. Fourth, only texts written in Catalan, Spanish, or English were included, both to ensure comprehension and direct analysis of the documents and to integrate a diversity of perspectives from different cultural and educational contexts.

Fifth, the selection was restricted to studies focused on primary education (ISCED-1), as this is the stage where the foundations of the relationship between childhood, schooling, and reading culture are established, and where reading policies and practices with long-term impact are most clearly deployed. Sixth, the publications had to explicitly address the role of the school in the transmission of reading culture, providing comparisons or contrasts with other non-formal learning environments such as families, libraries, or digital platforms.

Finally, only studies that allowed for the analysis of pedagogical, cultural, and structural dimensions involved in the development of a school-based reading culture were selected. Priority was given to works incorporating robust conceptual frameworks, critical approaches, and qualitative analyses that supported the interpretation of educational and institutional processes related to reading.

This set of inclusion and exclusion criteria made it possible to build a coherent, well-grounded, and methodologically sound sample that meets the quality standards expected of a qualitative systematic review. Moreover, the combined application of thematic, temporal, linguistic, and epistemological filters helped delimit a balanced set of sources, integrating both empirically

grounded research and theoretical works with a strong interpretive component (Simsek, 2021).

2.2. Sources of Information and Search Strategy

The identification and selection of literature were carried out through a systematic search strategy, specifically designed to ensure the breadth, quality, and relevance of the studies included. This strategy was based on the consultation of four key international and national academic databases, all widely recognized for their scientific rigor and thematic coverage in the field of education and the social sciences: ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, and Dialnet.

To optimize the retrieval of relevant studies, the search was designed to be structured and replicable, while adapting to the specific features and functionalities of each database. Combinations of keywords and Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to generate sets of results that addressed both the research question and the study's analytical variables.

Descriptors were formulated in English, Catalan, and Spanish in order to capture the widest possible range of contextually diverse scientific production. Among the terms used were: *“school AND reading culture”*, *“school literacy practices”*, *“educational transmission AND reading”*, *“cultural literacy AND schools”*, as well as *“escola i cultura lectora”*, *“escuela y cultura lectora”*, *“pràctiques de cultura lectora”*, *“transmissió educativa i lectura”*, and *“alfabetització cultural i escola”*, among others.

2.3. Selection and Data Extraction Process

The selection of studies included in this review was organized into several successive phases, with the aim of rigorously applying the eligibility criteria and ensuring the quality, relevance, and coherence of the final corpus. This process combined bibliographic management techniques, documentary analysis, and critical reading, following the principles of the PRISMA protocol

(Page et al., 2021) while adapting them to a qualitative and interpretive approach.

- Identification of records: In the first phase, an exploratory search without filters was conducted across the four databases. This initial approach yielded a total of 61,831 preliminary records, which constituted the potentially relevant set for the study.
- Removal of duplicates: The results were imported into a reference management tool, where duplicate documents appearing in more than one database were eliminated.
- Initial screening: In this third phase, a preliminary review of the titles and abstracts of each record was conducted to determine their alignment with the inclusion criteria.
- Full-text reading: Studies that passed the previous stage were subjected to a complete and detailed reading to confirm their conceptual relevance, methodological rigor, and empirical or theoretical significance.
- Final selection: As a result of this systematic and progressive process, a final sample of 261 articles was identified as fully meeting the defined eligibility criteria.

To facilitate an overall understanding of the analyzed corpus and to ensure transparency in the review process, a classification table is presented below, summarizing the main characteristics of the 261 selected articles.

Table 1. Distribution of the study corpus by database, geographic scope, and social agents analyzed (Author’s own elaboration).

Classification Criteria	Categories	N
Source database	ERIC	74
	Scopus	65
	WoS	58
	Dialnet	64
Geographic scope of the study	Europe	103
	America	59
	Africa	24
	Asia	42
	Oceania	33
Agents compared with the school	Family	91
	Libraries	56
	Digital enviroments	48
	More than one agent	66

This classification provides an overview of the sample and helps reinforce the transparency of the methodological procedure. It shows that the corpus is composed of a diverse, multidisciplinary, and international sample that reflects the plurality of approaches in the study of reading culture. The significant presence of qualitative and conceptual studies aligns with the interpretive orientation of the review, while the variety of geographic contexts and languages strengthens its comparative and intercultural dimension.

2.4. Thematic Analysis and Study Variables

Once the selection process was completed, a qualitative thematic analysis was carried out, aimed at identifying recurring patterns, conceptual tensions, and significant contributions within the corpus of 261 articles. This analysis was structured around five central variables, previously defined according to the objectives and research questions of this study. The four interrelated analytical dimensions made it possible to establish a transversal and critical reading of the body of literature reviewed: the concept of reading culture, the role of the school, the role of other social agents, and cultural and institutional

contrasts.

The analysis followed an inductive approach that considered recurrences, divergences, and emerging relationships across the different studies. This process enabled the generation of open and flexible thematic codes, while also facilitating an understanding of the institutional, pedagogical, and sociocultural dynamics that shape reading culture in school contexts.

3. Results

The findings of this qualitative review are organized around four central thematic axes, defined on the basis of the analytical variables established during the methodological phase. This structure is intended to present the corpus in a systematic way, facilitating critical and comparative interpretation. Each analytical axis reflects a fundamental dimension of the phenomenon under study—from the conceptual framework underpinning the term “reading culture,” to the school’s specific functions, the interaction with other social agents, and the differences detected across institutional and cultural contexts. Thus, the presentation of results goes beyond a mere description of studies to propose an integrative, problematizing reading—one capable of accounting for the complexity of the school’s role in transmitting reading culture in the contemporary world.

3.1. Variable 1 – The Concept of Reading Culture

The axes analyzed in this review make it possible to address the multiple facets of the phenomenon under investigation. From the theoretical understanding of the concept of “reading culture” to the concrete practices schools employ to promote it, the discussion also encompasses the pedagogical, symbolic, and institutional role of formal education, its connection with other social actors, and the variations observed across cultural, political, or territorial contexts.

The adopted thematic organization has served not only to order and synthesize the knowledge extracted from the corpus, but also to offer a critical

reading that better illuminates the growing complexity of the school's role in building and transmitting a reading culture that is critical, equitable, and community-oriented. In this regard, various studies concur on the need to move beyond reductionist views of reading focused solely on technical skills, and instead advocate approaches that acknowledge its affective, participatory, and culturally situated dimensions (Türkel, Özdemir & Akbulut, 2019).

One of the most salient outcomes of this review is the consolidation of an expanded, complex vision of the concept of reading culture—one that departs from a merely technical or instrumental approach. Recent studies by Morse, Ngwato and Huston (2024), and Olasehinde et al. (2015) have helped establish a well-founded critique of reductionist conceptions of reading that equate it with mechanical decoding processes and a purely functional purpose within the school curriculum.

Reading is not just a skill; it is a way of being in the world—a way of inhabiting thought, connecting with collective memory, constructing identity, and articulating symbolic resistance. As authors such as Simşek (2021) have noted, reading can be understood as a philosophy of life: an ongoing, meaningful activity that accompanies people throughout their development, shaping how they understand reality, connect with others, and envision the future.

From this perspective, reading involves far more than accessing information: it is a way of making meaning, exploring the world, and naming lived experience. This implies recognizing that reading cannot be separated from the sociocultural context or the personal imaginaries that sustain it, and that reading culture is constructed day by day through meaningful relationships, shared experiences, and the possibility of reading oneself and others in texts.

Simşek (2021) and Staples (2013) both emphasize that for a reading culture to be truly meaningful, it must be deeply connected to readers' lived experience—their identity, language, origin, and social position. From this perspective, reading becomes a process of identity formation and cultural integration within concrete social contexts. In the same vein, Çigdemir (2024) highlights the inclusive potential of reading, especially in diverse educational settings, where it can function as a tool for recognition, empowerment, and

cultural representation.

In the Spanish context, Moreno Oliver (2018) underscores the fundamental role of the school as an institution that mediates cultural rights, particularly in promoting reading practices rooted in students' sociolinguistic and symbolic diversity. This richer, more contextualized understanding of reading makes it possible to question education policies focused exclusively on standardized indicators and homogenizing assessment models, which tend to displace the symbolic, subjective, and emancipatory dimensions of school-based reading (Rozaimie, 2024).

Within this framework, the notion of a critical reading culture gains traction, incorporating discourse analysis, active interpretive capacity, and reading as a tool for questioning and transforming the world. This orientation is reflected in contributions such as those of Türkel, Özdemir and Akbulut (2019), which show how critical reading—when articulated with participatory methodologies and culturally relevant texts—can become a space for personal growth and democratic participation. In this sense, the school stands out as a space of cultural mediation and democratization of reading, and as a key institution for ensuring equitable access to meaningful reading practices.

3.2. Variable 2 – The Role of the School

The second axis centers on the role the school plays as a pedagogical, normative, and cultural space in building a reading culture that is critical, inclusive, and relevant. While reading practices can take root in multiple settings—such as the home, libraries, community organizations, or digital environments—the studies reviewed consistently highlight the school's unique status as an institution capable of providing structured and universal access to written culture (Karadag Yilmaz, Horzum & Koyuncu, 2024).

What distinguishes the school is its status as a compulsory, regulated educational space that reaches all children regardless of social background. This gives it decisive potential to guarantee equity and reduce cultural gaps, especially among children who grow up in environments with scarce reading resources or discontinuous educational trajectories. Unlike

other contexts, where access to reading largely depends on family capital or personal initiative, the school has the institutional mandate to ensure that learning to read—and reading with meaning—is a right, not a privilege.

For this function to be truly transformative, however, the school must go beyond technical instruction in reading. Staples (2013) and Olasehinde et al. (2015) argue that the school's reading mission must embrace a political and cultural dimension aimed at creating conditions for deep, critical, and situated literacy. This conception implies understanding the school as the place where one learns to read and to be a reader; where certain forms of reading are legitimized or marginalized; and where imaginaries about the meaning of reading are constructed.

The review also shows that the school can play a clearly democratizing role, helping to break the patterns of reproducing reading inequalities that arise in other spaces—such as the family or digital environments—often conditioned by socioeconomic origin. In this sense, the school becomes an institution that mediates cultural rights, capable of offering diverse reading models, fostering exchange among heterogeneous reading experiences, and creating environments where reading is not only learned but also valued and shared.

Nevertheless, this democratizing potential does not activate automatically. For the school to fully deploy its cultural and emancipatory role, an explicit and sustained institutional commitment is required. This entails embracing a comprehensive, critical reading model that goes beyond meeting minimum standards to promote reading autonomy, critical thinking, curiosity, and the capacity to engage with texts both emotionally and intellectually. Such a commitment calls for a profound review of school practices—from materials to the time and spaces devoted to reading, including teacher training in didactic approaches sensitive to students' cultural, linguistic, and cognitive diversity.

Finally, the literature reviewed affirms the school's dual role with respect to reading: on the one hand, to guarantee universal access to written culture; on the other, to acknowledge that the school is where reading culture is institutionalized. This means the school is responsible for establishing symbolic, normative, and curricular frameworks that determine what counts

as valid reading, which texts are worthy of study, and which reading practices are promoted or silenced. The school's strength, in this respect, lies both in its capacity to bring reading to the entire child and youth population and in its normative and socializing function, which helps shape collective imaginaries around reading.

This dual function—both democratizing and regulatory—makes the school a central agent in the production, reproduction, or transformation of cultural hierarchies. It can broaden students' reading horizons by embracing diverse voices, heterogeneous genres, and multiple identities; but it can also restrict them if based on rigid, canonical criteria disconnected from readers' lived contexts (Spiering, 2019; Daniels & Steres, 2011).

3.3. Variable 3 – The Role of Other Social Agents

While the school holds a central place in reading formation, the specialized literature also highlights the role played by other social agents in this process. Although they lack the compulsory, systematic, and universal nature of the school context, spaces such as the home, libraries, or digital environments can significantly—and often complementarily—influence the acquisition of habits, values, and experiences related to reading (Smith, 2021).

The family environment, for instance, offers key symbolic and affective potential in the early stages of reading development. However, its impact is conditioned by social inequalities: the cultural, economic, and linguistic capital of each household largely determines the kinds of bonds established with reading. Libraries, by contrast, represent open and accessible spaces which, when articulated with community or educational projects, can become sites of encounter, inclusion, and cultural participation (Zepke, 2011). Even so, their effectiveness depends on factors such as territorial presence, the institutional support they receive, and the degree of connection with schools.

As for digital environments, these have transformed ways of reading and sharing meaning by introducing more visual, fragmented, and interactive reading practices. Although they offer new opportunities, they also pose challenges: unequal access to technology and limited pedagogical mediation

constrain their potential as vehicles for equity in reading learning (Saravia-Shore & Arvizu, 2017).

Within this landscape, the family remains the first point of contact with reading. As Neuman and Celano (2006) note, it is there that children have their first experiences with texts and where values, attitudes, and expectations are transmitted that will shape their reading trajectories. Practices such as shared reading, storytelling, having books at home, or recognizing reading as a valuable activity decisively foster interest and reading competence (Anderson, et al. 2011).

Even so, these opportunities are not equally distributed. The structural conditions families face create profound differences in the quality and frequency of interactions around reading (Zepke, 2011), revealing a twofold challenge: on the one hand, to recognize the value of family mediation at the start of reading pathways; on the other, to avoid reproducing narratives that normalize inequalities among households and place exclusive responsibility on families for situations stemming from unequal socioeconomic contexts (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005).

Alongside families' essential role, the reviewed literature presents libraries as fundamental spaces for guaranteeing free, public, and equitable access to reading. In contexts marked by educational inequality or material precariousness, these spaces offer a real alternative for accessing quality resources: books in multiple languages, materials adapted to different ages and levels, and environments that support both shared and individual reading. Beyond serving as textual repositories, libraries can become intergenerational meeting points that promote multilingualism and actively recognize cultural diversity (López Melero, 2012), while also acting as cultural institutions with a transformational mission (Cobos Flores, 2009).

However, their real capacity for impact depends on structural conditions that are not always guaranteed. Problems such as scarce funding, staff instability, weak integration with schools, or limited alignment with public policies hinder sustained development (López Yáñez & Sánchez Moreno, 2021). Without strong connections to schools or an institutional strategy that systematically promotes reading, libraries risk being relegated to a residual or merely symbolic role. The literature therefore stresses that their potential

as active agents of reading culture depends not only on infrastructure and programming, but also on their insertion into living networks of collaboration with schools, families, and local communities.

Digital environments, for their part, emerge as new arenas that broaden opportunities for participation in written culture (García-Rodríguez & Gómez-Díaz, 2016). Blogs, social networks, interactive e-books, forums, and mobile apps enable multimodal, hypertextual, and often collaborative forms of reading that are especially appealing to young people (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). In contexts where access to print materials is limited or where minoritized languages exist, these environments can even provide alternative channels for reading and cultural expression (Pegrum, Oakley & Faulkner, 2013).

Yet the digitization of reading practices also introduces new tensions. As Carr (2010) warns, digital consumption does not always foster deep or critical reading; it may encourage fragmentary, distracted habits shaped by the logic of commercial algorithms. Added to this is unequal access to technology and digital literacy, which generates new forms of cultural exclusion (Selwyn, 2016; García-Peñalvo et al., 2020). For this reason, integrating the digital as a reading agent requires intentional, critical pedagogical mediation, as well as policies that guarantee the development of digital competencies across the population, especially among school-age children and youth.

3.4. Variable 4 – Cultural and Institutional Contrasts

The review's findings show that the promotion of reading culture is profoundly shaped by the political, curricular, linguistic, and cultural frameworks that structure each education system. This structural influence translates into a wide variety of approaches and strategies, strongly rooted in the realities of each territory. Far from any pretense of homogeneity, the literature makes clear that reading policies cannot be understood outside their concrete contexts (Viafara González & Aleida Ariza, 2015; Cekiso, 2024).

This plurality allows us to identify a broad spectrum of educational practices and institutional interventions, molded by local histories,

sociocultural dynamics, and diverse conceptions of what it means to read and what place reading occupies in collective life. Thus, reading culture can be understood both as a tool for basic literacy and as a space for critical thinking, democratic participation, and the construction of community bonds. This dual condition—technical and political—reveals the complex, multivocal character of reading, which can only fully develop if the education system recognizes the diversity of trajectories, languages, and ways of reading that coexist in each social reality. As Morse, Ngwato and Huston (2024) emphasize, reading is a situated practice, laden with cultural and emotional meaning, that articulates identities and generates shared sense.

It is therefore essential to analyze reading policies from a territorial perspective. The review makes visible both regional trends and significant contrasts between countries, showing how different conceptions of reading translate into highly disparate institutional strategies. Education systems, far from operating as neutral entities, act as shapers of specific reading ecosystems defined by their pedagogical priorities, regulatory frameworks, and modes of engagement with the social agents involved.

At the continental scale, this diversity becomes especially visible. In Latin America, for example, many reading-promotion initiatives display a strong community-based, critical orientation. Often driven by popular libraries, social movements, or rural projects, these practices understand reading as a cultural right and a tool for social transformation. In this scenario, the school becomes a key actor in reversing historical inequalities and democratizing access to the written word (Viafara González, 2015). However, the continuity of these initiatives frequently depends on unstable resources and fragile institutional support, which jeopardizes their sustainability (González, 2021).

In the African continent—particularly in countries such as South Africa or Nigeria—reading takes on a dimension of linguistic justice. Education policies seek to integrate Indigenous languages as legitimate vehicles for learning and expression in a context marked by colonial legacies and sociolinguistic fragmentation. These efforts, however, are constrained by a lack of materials, insufficient infrastructure, and weak teacher training (Cekiso, 2024; Chukwuemeka, 2025). In the face of such constraints, community initiatives and reading activism gain importance as ways to uphold

the right to read under conditions of significant adversity (Rozaimie, 2024).

Across Asia, several countries have adopted extensive reading models, especially in foreign-language teaching. Thailand, Japan, and South Korea, for instance, have developed extensive reading proposals aimed at fostering reading autonomy and communicative competence (Thongsan & Waring; Pegrum et al., 2013). Yet these approaches are often disconnected from the official curriculum and lack the critical mediation needed to promote deep, contextualized, and meaningful reading. Moreover, inequalities in access to digital devices and the technology divide limit the transformative reach of such practices (Simşek, 2021).

The European context likewise shows clear internal differences. Nordic countries such as Finland and Sweden have consolidated robust public policies aimed at ensuring universal access to reading, integrating school libraries, specialized teacher training, and sustained resources over time (Mølsted & Karseth, 2016). By contrast, in the Mediterranean region there is a tension between innovative pedagogical proposals and a dominant trend to reduce reading to a set of measurable competencies, often tied to standardized tests.

In North America—particularly in the United States and Canada—two opposing logics coexist. On one hand, official education policies prioritize academic performance, standardized evaluation, and intensive reading intervention programs. On the other, there are critical pedagogical proposals—often driven by racialized communities or minority groups—that defend reading as a practice of empowerment, identity construction, and cultural resistance (Staples, 2013). This tension reveals that reading culture cannot be separated from the ideological and social disputes that traverse each education system.

4. Discussion

The findings of this review clearly highlight the unique role that schools play in fostering a reading culture. Their systematic presence within the education system, along with their normative and institutional function, gives them an ability to intervene that few other social actors can match. Whereas families, libraries, or digital spaces often operate unevenly and are shaped by socioeconomic factors, schools provide a structured and universal environment through which access to reading can be guaranteed, sustained practices can be supported, and shared frameworks of cultural meaning can be generated (Karadag Yilmaz et al., 2024).

This potential, however, is not activated by default, nor simply by incorporating reading into the curriculum. As the studies reviewed demonstrate, the impact of school-based reading practices largely depends on the pedagogical approach underpinning them. Schools that connect reading to everyday life, work with culturally relevant texts, and promote critical reflection achieve higher levels of student engagement and foster processes of reader identification and meaning-making (Türkel et al., 2019; Staples, 2013; Simşek, 2023).

The compensatory role of schools becomes even more visible in contexts of deep structural inequality, where other resources—such as public libraries or family support—are scarce or absent. In these scenarios, schools not only provide access to written culture but also legitimize different ways of reading and open the doors to the symbolic universe of texts. For this to happen, however, education systems must commit to an inclusive and plural vision—one that recognizes students' linguistic, cultural, and affective diversity and understands reading not as a functional skill but as a common good (Sánchez Ortiz, 2018).

The review also reveals that links between schools and other social agents—families, libraries, and digital environments—are fundamental for enriching reading experiences. These spaces contribute knowledge, languages, and perspectives which, if articulated coherently and collaboratively, can strengthen the educational work carried out in classrooms (Chaka & Govender, 2017; Shine Edizer & Akçay-Duff, 2019). Yet this networked work does not

occur spontaneously: it requires schools to take an active role in building partnerships and creating shared reading environments.

International examples show that the most effective policies are those that combine a clear orientation with scope for local adaptation, sustained investment in resources, and robust teacher training in critical, intercultural, and emotional reading pedagogy (Mølstad & Karseth, 2016; Viafara González, 2015). Within this framework, school-based reading can become a lever for educational justice and social transformation if it is grounded in a broad and situated conception of what it means to read.

This pedagogical horizon, however, demands a profound rethinking of teacher training practices. Many teachers lack the tools to act as cultural mediators or reading role models—not due to disinterest, but because of gaps in their initial training (Elche & Yubero, 2018; Elche et al., 2019). The responsibility lies not only with schools but also with higher education institutions, which for years have relegated the reading dimension to a secondary place in teacher education (Paredes et al., 2024). This omission seriously limits schools' ability to promote a critical, transformative reading culture that is meaningfully engaged with its environment.

Rethinking reading from this perspective also entails re-examining school policies. Overcoming technocratic approaches and performance standards as the sole measure of educational success is essential. As Olasehinde et al. (2015) argue, moving toward a pedagogy of reading centered on critical thinking, cultural diversity, and the dialogue of knowledges requires spaces for experimentation, listening, and multiple forms of expression. Only in this way can the school consolidate itself as a democratic and emancipatory space, capable of articulating an inclusive, meaningful, and shared reading culture.

5. Conclusions

The results of this qualitative systematic review show that reading culture cannot be reduced to a technical skill or to a set of school procedures aimed exclusively at decoding. On the contrary, it emerges as a complex phenomenon, deeply rooted in educational, cultural, and social dimensions, shaped through the constant interaction between individuals, institutions, and the imaginaries that structure their environments.

The analysis of the corpus points toward a growing consensus in the specialized literature: it is necessary to reconceptualize reading culture as a central dimension of human development, closely linked to identity construction, civic participation, and the pursuit of social justice. Authors such as Simşek (2021), Staples (2013), and Morse, Ngwato & Huston (2024) agree that reading goes beyond mastering a code: it is about inhabiting symbolic worlds, making meaning, and taking part in interpretive communities.

From this perspective, reading culture must be understood as a shared social construction, shaped by the historical, institutional, and pedagogical conditions of each territory. Adopting this lens also entails questioning the traditional conceptions of reading that have long dominated school discourse. In a context saturated with images, screens, and digital languages, it becomes urgent to broaden what we mean by reading, recognizing forms of meaning-making that go beyond the linear written text. Documentaries, video games, series, social media, or interactive visual art are reshaping the ways in which people—especially the young—engage with written and symbolic culture.

This transformation should not be seen as a threat but as an opportunity to build a more plural, multimodal, and situated reading culture. Recognizing that an image or a scene can be the object of critical reading with the same depth as a printed text allows for the democratization of access to knowledge and for connection with students' real cultural universes. Rethinking school practices, public policies, and pedagogical approaches therefore implies not only guaranteeing the right to read, but also updating its formats, languages, and mediations. It is within this conceptual openness that an educational project capable of strengthening the meaning, relevance, and critical function of reading in contemporary societies can be articulated.

In this broadened framework, the school emerges as an irreplaceable actor in promoting a critical, inclusive, and socially transformative reading culture. Its compulsory nature, universal reach, and institutional legitimacy make it a privileged space for ensuring equitable access to texts and for generating conditions of shared symbolic participation. Beyond teaching how to read, the school establishes frameworks of meaning, legitimizes certain reading practices, and ultimately defines what it means to read well, meaningfully, or deeply.

This normative dimension can become a powerful tool for access to multiple forms of knowledge—provided it is grounded in a plural, critical, and culturally situated pedagogy. In this way, the school positions itself as a key space for reversing inequalities, making marginalized reader voices visible, and opening pathways for symbolic appropriation of the world. Promoting a reading culture from within the school, in this sense, also means fostering inclusion—understood as fair and real access to the cultural codes that structure democratic life.

The review also highlights the indispensable—though complementary—role of other social actors such as families, libraries, and digital environments. Although these spaces do not carry the same level of institutionalization as schools, their contribution to reading trajectories is fundamental, as they bring in affective, community-based, and technological dimensions that are often less present in the school sphere. In light of this, there is an urgent need for governments to implement policies that foster articulation between schools and surrounding educational agents, in order to build more integrated, inclusive, and sustainable reading ecosystems.

Families, for example, represent children's first point of contact with reading. They are spaces where habits, attitudes, and emotional bonds toward texts are formed. The presence of books at home, shared reading practices, and the affective recognition of reading as a meaningful activity are all factors that directly influence the development of a strong reader identity (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Anderson et al., 2012). Nevertheless, this potential is deeply conditioned by households' economic, cultural, and linguistic capital, which can reproduce structural inequalities if there are no educational policies capable of compensating for and redistributing opportunities.

Libraries—whether school-based, public, or community-run—also play a decisive role. Beyond holding books, they are spaces for cultural encounter, the promotion of linguistic diversity, and free access to a wide range of textual resources. To the extent that they connect with educational and community projects, they can become hubs of symbolic transformation and active participation (Cobos Flores, 2009). Their effectiveness, however, depends on public investment, territorial presence, and links with schools.

Digital environments, for their part, are an increasingly influential arena in the construction of new reading practices. Blogs, interactive platforms, narrative video games, or social networks foster collaborative, fragmented, and visual readings that can stimulate critical and creative skills when accompanied by appropriate pedagogical mediation (García-Rodríguez & Gómez-Díaz, 2016). At the same time, these spaces also introduce risks: fragmented attention, unequal access, and a lack of media literacy can widen existing cultural gaps (Selwyn, 2016; Carr, 2010).

Within this diverse ecosystem, schools remain the only space with real capacity to articulate efforts, generate shared meaning, and guarantee a common foundation of access to reading. But this role cannot—and should not—be exercised in isolation. Active collaboration with families, libraries, and communities is key to building stronger, more rooted reading projects. As long as this work is carried out from a critical, relational, and situated perspective, schools can fulfill their role as agents of transformation and symbolic equity.

In sum, building a critical, equitable, and community-based reading culture requires sustained collective commitment. Educational institutions, policymakers, teachers, and society as a whole must recognize that reading—as a right, as a pleasure, and as a form of resistance—must be a real possibility for everyone, regardless of social background, mother tongue, or economic circumstances.

It is worth noting, however, an important limitation: this review focused exclusively on publications accessible online. This may have excluded relevant contributions—particularly books, non-digitized documents, or ongoing research—thus partially restricting the scope of the analysis. This limitation invites future work to expand the evidence base, incorporating new

sources and methodologies to deepen our understanding of a phenomenon as decisive as reading culture.

6. References

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