

Something is fracturing within modern society, and it isn't the kind of rift you can read in stock market trends or opinion polls. It is a fracture in our ability to hold a thought, to follow a text, to let language carry an argument from beginning to end. Children and young people are reading less each year. Lecturers at universities describe watching students lose the thread after only a few pages of academic prose, as if their attention could no longer sustain a sustained line of reasoning. Meanwhile, the education system has drifted into a kind of administrative evasion: rather than insisting that pupils overcome their weaknesses, it simply moves them on, year after year, until the demands of life after school finally require what the classroom never did.

This didn't emerge from nowhere. It's the cumulative result of several long-term trends now converging.

One factor is demographic, and it's rarely discussed with the weight it deserves. For decades, Western nations have welcomed people from regions where illiteracy, or very limited formal schooling, is common. Children growing up in homes without a culture of reading, where parents don't or can't read to them, miss the linguistic head start that schools have long assumed. This isn't about assigning blame. It's a structural reality, one about the conditions that exist at home, and about how schools need to adapt as those conditions change.

Cultural patterns compound the problem. In certain honour-based communities, there is active resistance to education, particularly for girls and women. Illiteracy persists there not simply from a lack of resources but because social norms actively restrict people's freedom and prospects. Its effects reach well beyond the classroom.

So what does it actually mean to be literate? Far more than being able to decipher an instruction manual or a short notice. Literacy is a foundational democratic function. People who cannot read deeply cannot scrutinise power, cannot tell reasoned argument from propaganda, cannot navigate complicated social questions. Strip away the written word and citizens lose their primary tool for understanding the world around them.

Higher education, too, rests on reading. Nobody who struggles with advanced texts can train as an engineer, a doctor, or a teacher. In a knowledge economy, people without command of language are shut out of the job market, out of culture, out of public life. And this exclusion stays largely invisible in official statistics until long after the damage is done.

Ignoring this will cost us for decades. As literacy erodes, so do the structures that sustain welfare and democracy. This isn't an abstract risk. It's a real, measurable



decline in society's capacity to pass on knowledge, competence, and the ability to think critically.

Schools need the courage to set high standards again, and the resources to help pupils actually meet them. This isn't nostalgia for some imagined golden age of education. It's about restoring what schooling is meant to do: give every pupil a solid grounding in language. Society more broadly needs to question the digital and cultural habits that keep people trapped in that same silence. The cost of not doing so will be far greater than we can afford.