



Working Paper Series

How many books make a library? The question of quantity in a library for emerging readers

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LIBRARY FOR ALL

How many books make a library? The question of quantity in a library for emerging readers

Access to a well-curated library, with plenty of books, is a key facet of improved literacy, particularly in low-income or remote environments where the absence of bookstores or books in homes may mean a school or community library is the only available source of age-appropriate reading material.¹

Supporting children on an education journey that goes beyond the mechanics of literacy towards a holistic ability to learn and be interested in learning is best facilitated by providing a rich supply of reading and education resources.

Funding limitations, however, along with considerations such as storage and transportation of books and educational resources, mean that large, well-resourced, varied libraries are extremely challenging to deliver and maintain in low-income communities. Furthermore, if books are available, they are often unsuitable for readers' ages, or culturally irrelevant (discussed further in [LFA WP 2/21](#)). This leads government or INGO education programs to focus on providing smaller collections of books strongly tied to reading acquisition, such as curriculum-aligned levelled reader series for beginners.

These interventions are valuable, particularly if well-supported by teacher training, but do little to enliven a 'reading culture' in the community. If new readers are expected to push beyond early literacy towards a long-term interest in learning, they need access to literacy fundamentals as well as material that inspires a desire to read. Enjoyment of reading was the best predictor of reading achievement in a cross-country comparison of OECD literacy assessments (PISA).² These readers need more than mere books — they need libraries.

This Working Paper surveys academic and NGO research activities in support of Library For All's approach to library development. It interrogates current thinking on necessary quantities of reading materials for literacy improvement as well as longer term interest in reading, then overlays the considerations of remote and low-income communities. If an LFA library is potentially the only opportunity a new reader will have to access books and educational resources, how can we deliver maximum impact within financial and logistic constraints, whilst prioritising diversity and relevance, and instilling a love of reading?

How many books make a library?

Any collection of books can be referred to as a library. In an affluent region, we might encounter lending libraries, research libraries, specialist libraries and even street libraries, where small stacks of donated items are exchanged by neighbourhood passers-by. For some years, the British Library (London, UK) and the Library of Congress (Washington, DC, USA) have competed for the title of the world's largest library, each holding some 160 million catalogued items.³ From manuscripts to music, patents to photographs, and books across the spectrum of languages and formats, these

¹ Stephen Krashen, *The Power Of Reading* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire.: Heinemann, 2004).

² Kym Simoncini, Hilary Smith, and Lara Cain Gray, "Culturally Relevant Reading Books for Papua New Guinean Children: Their Reading Rights and Preferences," *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 45, no. 4 (December 2020): 348–61, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1836939120966091>.

³ "Largest Libraries In The World," 2018, <https://largest.org/culture/libraries/>.

libraries serve as repositories for the history of knowledge itself.

At the other extreme, there are many communities for whom poverty, history or remoteness means access to a library of any kind is unimaginable. In these environments, at best, pockets of donated material or education-focused reading resources created by iNGO programs will come and go from community access. Books may be discarded at the end of a given funding intervention or may suffer the ravages of poor storage in harsh climates. If books are lost or damaged, they are unlikely to be replaced. Increasingly, eBook libraries are offering some crucial alternatives (see [LFA WP 2/21](#)) but such desperation for supply of reading materials rarely allow leads communities, or program developers, to consider establishing a curated, cross-disciplinary library of the kind found in affluent countries.

We know, however, that the world is experiencing a global literacy crisis.⁴ People must learn to read. But research recognises that new readers learn best when exposed to texts they are excited to read.⁵ This means providing access to quality reading material, and plenty of it. A large, well-curated, varied, age-appropriate library means more reading material is available, but also desirable. So how do organisations, with limited funding, decide how many books makes a library with sufficient reader alignment?

How many books make a literacy-focused library?

The obvious answer to the question of 'how many books' might be 'the more the better', but in terms of minimal viable collections, there are varied opinions on the optimal number of books required to successfully guarantee reading improvement. The frequency of reading experiences, support from teachers and parents, and access to environmental text (such as signage and packaging) are all at play.

The American Library Association, for example, recommends a lower limit of 15-20 books per child as the makeup of a successful school library.⁶ This number is the baseline for ensuring there are opportunities for a child to progress through levels, in terms of both skill and interest. At first glance, this seems like a surprisingly low number as in affluent environments, school libraries may be substantially larger than this, with reading also supplemented by other home and school resources. This recommendation, however, guides smaller or low-income schools. For example, if a school has only 100 students, it is still recommended the library holds approximately 2000 books. Even for a small remote school of 25 students, 500 books would be a minimum recommended amount for adequate literacy development.

A significant research study across 27 nationalities showed that growing up in a home with 500 or more books correlates to an additional 3.2 years of education, regardless of the family's income or the

⁴ "World Bank Report Warns of 'Learning Crisis,'" SDG Knowledge Hub, 2017, <http://sdg.iisd.org/news/world-bank-report-warns-of-learning-crisis>.

⁵ Kathryn H. Au, "Promoting Ownership of Literacy," *Reading Today* 26, no. 6 (2009).

⁶ "Highly Effective School Libraries Have A Common Set Of Characteristics," n.d., <http://www.ala.org/tools/research/librariesmatter/highly-effective-school-libraries-have-common-set-characteristics>.

education levels of parents or carers.⁷ The study also found that the presence of books in the home had twice as much effect on a child's perseverance in attending school than the education level of their parents. The mere availability of a library has a positive impact on education.

Considerable research has also supported a 'book flood' approach to literacy improvement in remote communities. This means supplying school libraries with large quantities of curated books – in the region of 100 books per class – to be used in conjunction with curriculum-based materials to drive up reader engagement. Evidence in this space suggests it is possible to double the rate of reading acquisition in low-income, primary school aged readers with a book flood approach, particularly if books are of high interest to readers.⁸

So, exposure and access to high numbers of books has a positive impact on literacy, but high-quality and age-appropriate materials⁹ lead to better literacy outcomes than large-scale book donations of uncurated printed matter. With this research in mind, Library For All recommends a library of at least 500 high-interest, relevant books as the baseline to support learning interventions in a low-literacy region or language community, securing opportunities for literacy acquisition as well as longer term reading engagement.

A good library needs at least 500 books — but not just any books

While the research suggests any education or literacy program should strive towards a 500-book-minimum library, this does not mean that 'any books will do'. As outlined across LFA's research, there are both academic and developmental reasons why libraries should be diverse and engaging, particularly in terms of inclusivity. But the 'quantity over quality' assumption has other social and financial implications.

One approach, sometimes called the 'container policy', involves shipping large quantities of books discarded from affluent communities into low-income environments to supplement resource scarcity. Such donated material may arrive in languages, or at reading levels, unsupported in the community; it may be culturally offensive; or it may contain outdated information, such as inappropriate health advice. If well-managed, it can of course deliver exposure to print materials, but it also creates storage and/or waste management dilemmas for communities and discourages support for local publishing initiatives.¹⁰ Its existence as a perceived solution also exacerbates the multi-million-dollar financial

⁷ M.D.R. Evans et al., "Family Scholarly Culture and Educational Success: Books and Schooling in 27 Nations," *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 28, no. 2 (June 2010): 171–97, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2010.01.002>.

⁸ Warwick B. Elley, "The Potential of Book Floods for Raising Literacy Levels," *International Review of Education/ Internationale Zeitschrift Fr Erziehungswissenschaft/ Revue Inter* 46, no. 3/4 (2000): 233–55, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1004086618679>.

⁹ J.J. Lindsey and Learning Point Associates, "Children's Access to Print Material and Education Related Outcomes: Finds from a Meta-Analytic Review. Technical Report." (Reading Is Fundamental, 2010).

¹⁰ UNESCO, *Book Donations for Development*. (New York: UNESCO, 2005).

burden faced by charities globally who must manage book dumping at collection centres.¹¹

The most productive and ethical interventions therefore prioritise providing large quantities of tailored material. UNESCO recommends¹² conducting a preliminary survey ahead of any book donation program to identify the subjects, the languages and the cultural approach that is likely to pique the interests of emerging readers. Working alongside local partners for cultural guidance, as well as for storage, dissemination, and engagement processes, is vital, as is assisting to nurture, not compete with, local publishing. Library For All proudly supports this approach in each of its program communities.

Conclusion

The establishment of libraries, including reading intervention programs and classroom book sets, is informed by persistent re-examination of education more generally, and the regular adjustment of global policies and frameworks around approaches to literacy. Importantly, limited funding always forces concessions to be made. But if new learners are to view reading as an adventure worth pursuing beyond the basic obligations of an education program, it is crucial to provide a runway of levels and interest areas to sustain engagement.

While large book donations have their merits, a better alternative is a curated library including both instructional texts and more complex or imaginative texts, across a range of levels and thematic areas. Crucially, as outlined in [LFA WP 21/2](#), these books must also be culturally accessible, including a majority of books that reflect the lived experiences of new readers.

An ideal library in an environment experiencing resource scarcity, therefore, should include a quantity of books (500 or more) sufficient to permit readers to enter at an engaging level and advance as their skills and interests evolve.

¹¹ Nancy Grevis-James et al., "Does Your Donation Count or Cost? Understanding Donating and Dumping Behaviours and Their Impacts for Queensland Charities." (Uniting Care, Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage Protection, 2016), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306316272_Does_your_donation_count_or_cost_Understanding_donating_and_dumping_behaviours_and_their_impacts_for_Queensland_charities.

¹² UNESCO, Book Donations for Development.

About the Working Paper Series

This Working Paper was published by Library For All as part of our evidence-based approach to the design and delivery of educational resources. Papers in this series showcase the quantitative, qualitative, and speculative research activities that inform our operations, from product development to program delivery. Read more from this series at libraryforall.org.

About the Author



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Dr Cain Gray is an authority on cross-cultural library collection management. She brings specialist knowledge of translation and adaptation methodologies, and culturally specific publishing agendas, to her curatorial oversight of LFA's publishing operations.

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child can learn, does learn
and enjoys learning.

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