



Is Four the Magic Number?

Number of books read in a month and young people's wider reading behaviour

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Transforming Lives

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Introduction

Earlier this year Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, announced that British children were not reading enough and should, he believed, read 50 books a year. This idea had come from a charter school he had visited in the US and was met with some degree of scepticism by authors and professionals who questioned whether a focus on quantity rather than engagement with books, especially at a time when libraries were being closed across the country, was the best approach to take.

Putting aside the politics of this proposition, what is the evidence that reading four books a month instead of say one or ten has an impact on reading attainment and other reading variables? It is the purpose of this short paper to explore the relationship between the number of books young people read in a month and other reading variables, such as reading enjoyment, attitudes towards reading, reading frequency and reading length as well as reading attainment.

Please note from the outset that we do not claim any causal relationships in this paper and we therefore make no statements about the direction of influence between number of books read a month and the other reading variables that are explored here.

Data to explore these relationships come from a survey of over 18,000 8 to 17-year-olds that we conducted in November/December 2010. For more information about our Omnibus survey see [Appendix A](#).

Methodology

An invitation to participate in this online survey was sent out in National Literacy Trust newsletters at the beginning of September. Schools were invited to express their interest to participate in one of three surveys:

- 1) A simple Omnibus survey (without attainment data or name field)
- 2) An amended Omnibus survey with two attainment questions for pupils to fill in
- 3) An amended Omnibus survey with a name field; schools were asked to send us the reading and writing attainment data for participating pupils

The basic online survey consisted of 33 questions exploring young people's background, reading and writing enjoyment, behaviour and attitudes, attitudes towards communication skills and technology use. Due to the complexity of the questions and some concepts, the decision was made to restrict the age range of participating pupils to upper KS2 (9 to 11 years) and older.

148 schools expressed an interest in taking part in one of the three surveys. A link to the online survey alongside guidance notes for teachers was emailed to the schools at the beginning of November. The survey was online between 15 November and 10 December. It took an average of 25 minutes for young people to complete the survey. Schools were offered a school-specific summary report as an incentive to take part.

Participation rate

Overall, 18,141 pupils from 111 schools participated in our online survey, of which 100 were schools from England, three from Wales, three from Scotland and three from Northern Ireland. Two international English-speaking schools with a UK curriculum also took part. However, data from these schools are not included in the analyses in this report.

Sample characteristics: Demography and attainment

Overall, 18,141 young people participated in this survey in November/December 2010. There was an almost equal gender split in the sample, with 48.2% of boys (N = 8,680) and 51.8% of girls (N = 9,320) participating in the survey.

Table 1 shows that the majority of pupils were 11, 12 and 13 years old. To investigate the impact of age, three broad categories were identified according to key stages: KS2, KS3 and KS4. The KS2 category (22%, N = 3,704) refers to pupils aged 7 to 11, KS3 (63%, N = 10,842) refers to pupils aged 11 to 14, while KS4 (15%, N = 2,543) applies to pupils aged 14 to 16.

Table 1. Sample age

	%	N		%	N
8	5.1	911	13	18.1	3,258
9	6.9	1,247	14	9.5	1,717
10	8.0	1,430	15	6.3	1,134
11	21.3	3,846	16	2.0	361
12	22.2	4,007	17	0.5	86

(based on N = 18,017)

The percentage of pupils who receive free school meals (FSM), which is frequently used in educational research as a crude indicator of socio-economic background, was 13.8%. The percentages of FSM uptake in this study are lower than the national average for primary and secondary pupils (17% and 14%, respectively; DCSF, 2010).

Using additional help at school as a crude indicator of educational needs, the percentage of young people who say that they receive help at school was 25.7%, which is slightly higher than the national average. According to DfE figures from 2010, 20.9% of young people have a SEN (2.7% with statement; 18.2% without statement).

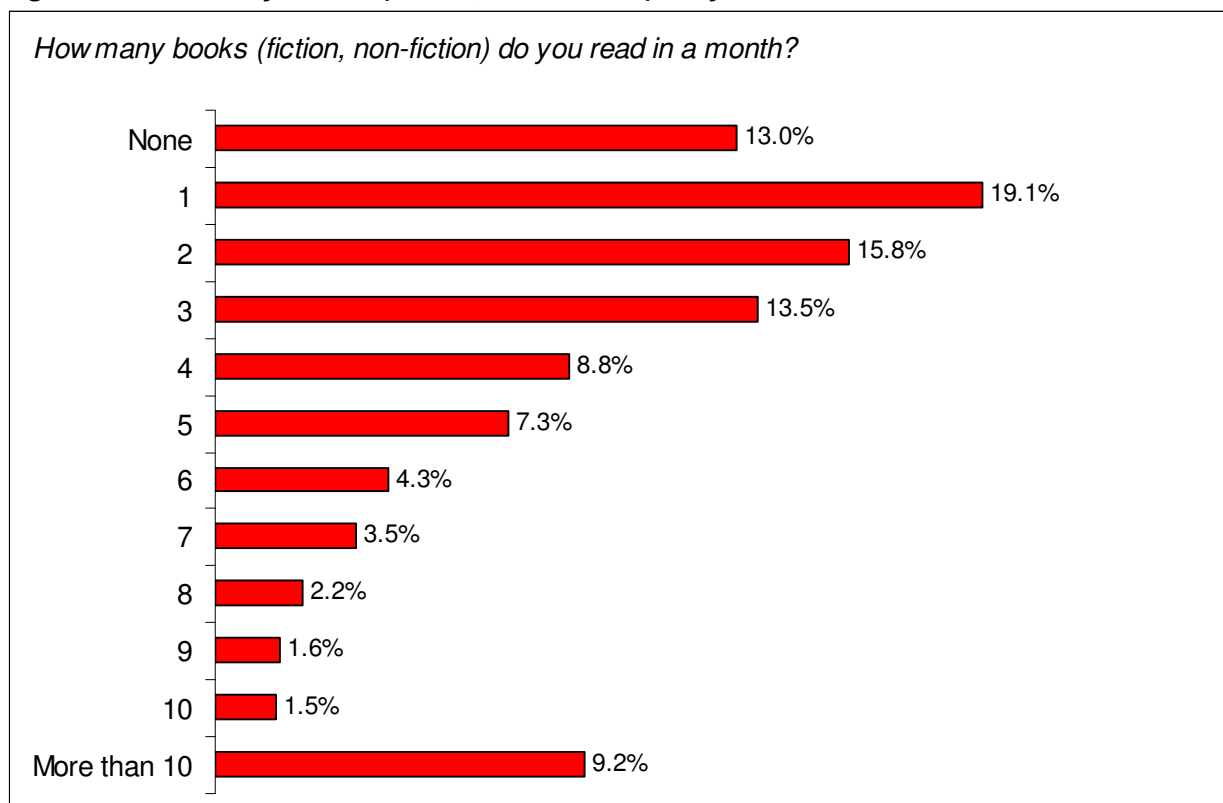
When asked how they would describe their ethnic background, most pupils said that they were White British (72.3%, N = 11,381). The second and third most frequent ethnic categories in this sample were Asian or Asian British Pakistani (5.6%, N = 877) and White other (3.0%, N = 480).

Number of books read a month and wider reading

Number of books read

When asked how many books (fiction and non-fiction) they read in a month, 1 young person in 8 said that they have not read any books (see **Figure 1**). Most young people (48.5%) said that they have read between one and three books in a month, while 1 young person in 12 said that they have read four books. 1 young person in 6 said that they have read between five and eight books a month, while 1 young person in 8 said that they have read nine or more books. These categories (0; 1-3; 4; 5-8; 9+ books read in a month) will be the focus of the remainder of the report.

Figure 1. How many books (fiction, non-fiction) do you read in a month?



Enjoyment of reading

Table 2 illustrates clearly the relationship between the number of books read in the past month and enjoyment of reading, with increases in enjoyment going hand-in-hand with the number of books read. While young people who read up to three books a month tend to veer towards not enjoying reading a lot, the balance gets redressed as young people read at least four books a month, with the majority of young people enjoying reading either “very much” or “quite a lot” from that point onwards.

At the most extreme, young people who read more than nine books in a month are 39 times more likely to say that they enjoy reading “very much” compared with those who have read no books. They are five times more likely to say that they enjoy reading “very much” than young people who read up to three books a month and are still more than twice as likely to enjoy reading “very much” compared with young people who read four books a month.

Table 2. Number of books read in the past month and reading enjoyment

No. of books	Very much %	Quite a lot %	A bit %	Not at all %
0	1.5	3.7	43.7	51.1
1 - 3	13.0	29.3	49.2	8.6
4	27.0	37.4	32.3	3.4

<i>How much do you enjoy reading?</i>				
<i>No. of books</i>	<i>Very much %</i>	<i>Quite a lot %</i>	<i>A bit %</i>	<i>Not at all %</i>
5 - 8	36.0	34.8	26.7	2.5
9 +	58.6	26.5	13.5	1.4

Self-perceived reading ability

Young people who read more books in a month are more likely to rate themselves to be very good readers (see **Table 3**). Young people who read more than nine books in a month are 16 times more likely to say that they are very good readers compared with those who have read no books in the past month. They are also twice as likely to see themselves as very good readers compared with young people who read up to three books a month.

However, even reading just one to three books a month has a noticeable impact on young people's self-perceptions of their reading ability. While nearly half of young people who have not read a book in the past month rate themselves as not very good readers, just 2 in 10 young people who read up to three books a month say the same. Only 1 young person in 10 who reads four books a month rates themselves as a not very good reader.

Table 3. Number of books read in the past month and self-perceived reading ability

	<i>Not very good reader %</i>	<i>Average reader %</i>	<i>Very good reader %</i>
0	48.2	47.3	4.5
1 - 3	18.2	48.9	32.9
4	10.0	45.5	44.5
5 - 8	6.8	35.3	57.9
9 +	6.6	21.4	72.0

Types of materials read outside class

Table 4 shows several interesting relationships between the number of books young people read in a month and the types of materials that they read. For example, the more books young people read the more likely they are to read magazines, lyrics, newspapers, blogs, manuals and eBooks.

However, the most staggering differences exist with regard to fiction, non-fiction, poems and, perhaps a little surprisingly, comics. For example, while fewer than 1 young person in 10 who has not read a book in the past month says that they read fiction outside class, 5 in 10 young

people who have read at least three books, 6 in 10 young people who have read between four and eight books, and 7 in 10 young people who have read over nine books in the last month say that they have read fiction outside class. While comics are often recommended as materials for “reluctant” readers, only 1 young person in 10 who has not read a book in the past month says that they read comics outside class compared with 2 in 10 young people who have read up to three books in the past month, 3 in 10 young people who have read up to eight books in the past month and 4 in 10 young people who have read more than nine books in the past month.

Conversely, young people who say that they have read no books or fewer books in the past month are more likely to say that they have read technology-based materials, such as text messages, messages on social networking sites and instant messages.

Table 4. Number of books read a month and types of materials read

	0 %	1-3 %	4 %	5-8 %	9+ %
Text messages	73.7	67.1	58.2	51.8	44.3
Magazines	49.0	62.4	60.2	62.1	59.3
Emails	49.8	54.3	51.2	49.9	46.1
Websites	50.4	53.3	49.0	47.0	48.7
Social networking site	56.1	54.8	46.8	43.0	40.7
Fiction	7.6	46.6	58.1	60.6	65.9
Instant messages	53.2	50.0	39.5	37.8	31.7
Lyrics	33.7	41.5	41.1	41.9	43.9
Non-fiction	6.2	33.5	45.2	47.4	57.1
Newspapers	26.6	33.8	36.6	37.7	41.9
Comics	10.7	24.5	33.3	34.8	44.0
Poems	4.8	15.2	25.9	31.6	46.2
Blogs	14.6	15.8	16.9	16.8	20.9
Manuals	11.0	14.8	16.0	17.9	23.0
EAL materials	3.8	10.4	14.9	18.5	28.3
EBooks	2.1	3.8	6.1	7.5	14.9

Frequency with which young people read outside of class

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the more books young people read the more often they read (see **Table 5**). For example, 1 young person in 13 who has not read a book in the past month reads something outside of class every day compared with 2 in 10 young people who read up to three books a month, 4 in 10 young people who read between four and eight books a month and 6 in 10 young people who read nine or more books in a month.

Table 5. Number of books read a month and reading frequency

	<i>Every day</i> %	<i>A few times a week</i> %	<i>About once a week</i> %	<i>A few times a month</i> %	<i>About once a month</i> %	<i>Rarely</i> %	<i>Never</i> %
0	7.5	6.0	5.3	5.2	4.1	37.7	34.3
1 - 3	20.7	28.1	13.2	10.5	4.9	19.1	3.6
4	35.7	36.8	11.2	7.0	1.4	5.9	2.0
5 - 8	42.5	34.7	9.5	5.2	1.4	5.8	1.0
9 +	62.1	24.7	4.3	2.7	0.9	5.0	0.2

Length of time young people read for

In addition to reading more frequently, the more books young people read the longer they read for (see **Table 6**). 3 in 10 young people who have not read a book in the past month say that they tend to read for up to 10 minutes at a time. This compares with 2 in 10 young people who have read up to four books in the past month and 1 young person in 10 who has read five or more books.

Conversely, young people who read four books a month are three times as likely as those who have not read a book in the past month to read for longer than one hour at a time, while those who read between five and eight books are four times as likely and young people who read more than nine books a month are nine times as likely to read for longer than one hour at a time.

Table 6. Number of books read a month and reading length

	<i>I don't read</i> %	<i>Up to 10 min</i> %	<i>Up to 20 min</i> %	<i>Up to 30 min</i> %	<i>About 1 hour</i> %	<i>Longer than 1 hour</i> %
0	38.5	29.9	14.6	9.2	3.9	4.0
1 - 3	0.7	23.0	25.1	28.4	14.9	7.9
4	0.6	16.5	23.4	28.8	18.0	12.7
5 - 8	0.6	14.1	20.5	28.3	19.7	16.8

	<i>I don't read</i>	<i>Up to 10 min</i>	<i>Up to 20 min</i>	<i>Up to 30 min</i>	<i>About 1 hour</i>	<i>Longer than 1 hour</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%
9 +	0.2	10.5	12.6	21.8	17.9	37.0

Estimated number of books in the home

Table 7 shows that a sixth of young people who have not read a book in the past month say that there are no books in their home. However, on the flipside, the majority of young people who have not read a book in the past month come from homes that they say contain at least some books. For example, over a third say that there are up to 10 books at home, nearly a third say that there are up to 50 books at home, while a tenth estimate there to be up to 100 books in their home.

The table also shows that the most prolific readers come from homes that contain many books, with a quarter of young people who have read more than nine books in the past month estimating that there are over 500 books at home.

Table 7. Number of books read a month and (estimated) overall number of books in the home

	<i>None</i>	<i>1 - 10</i>	<i>11 - 50</i>	<i>51 - 100</i>	<i>101 - 250</i>	<i>251 - 500</i>	<i>500 +</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
0	16.5	35.2	29.4	11.2	4.9	2.2	0.6
1 - 3	0.7	19.7	33.6	21.3	12.8	6.3	5.6
4	0.8	12.1	29.3	24.2	18.1	7.3	8.1
5 - 8	0.5	10.2	27.6	24.9	17.4	8.9	10.5
9 +	0.1	5.3	18.0	18.8	17.6	13.8	26.4

Reading opportunities

A third of young people who have not read a book in the past month say that they have never been given a book as a present (**Table 8**). This compares to a sixth of young people who have read at least one book in the past month. However, 1 young person in 10 who has read more than nine books in the past month also says that they have never received a book as a present.

In addition to not having been given a book as present, young people who have not read a book in the past month are far less likely to have been to a bookshop and a library compared with young people who have read at least one book in the past month.

Table 8. Number of books read in the past month and agreement with statements assessing reading opportunities

	0	1 - 3	4	5 - 8	9 +
	%	%	%	%	%
I have never been given a book as a present	34.4	17.7	15.5	15.7	10.9
I have never been to a bookshop	28.4	10.0	8.1	9.3	7.8
I have never been to a library	14.9	6.0	5.4	6.3	5.0

Attitudes towards reading

Overall, **Table 9** shows that young people who have read fewer books in a month also tend to have more negative attitudes towards reading compared with young people who have read more books. However, their attitudes give us great insight into why young people who don't read books do not read them. More specifically, their attitudes show that it has everything to do with topics, peer pressure and confidence and less to do with gender stereotypes.

For example, over half of young people who have not read a book in the past month agree that they cannot find things to read that interest them compared with a quarter of young people who have read up to three books and a sixth of young people who have read at least four books in the past month.

A quarter of young people who have not read a book in the past month also agree that they would be embarrassed if their friends saw them read outside of class compared with a sixth of young people who have read at least one book in the past month.

While young people who have not read a book in the past month are twice as likely as those who have read at least four books in the past month to agree that they don't read as well as other pupils in their class, they are nearly two times less likely to see a link between the amount of reading they do and an increase in their ability compared with young people who have read at least four books in the past month.

Interestingly, young people who have read no books in the past month and those who have read up to three books are less likely to agree with the statement that reading is a gendered activity and more for girls than boys, compared with young people who have read at least four books in the past month. Indeed, young people who have read the most books in the past month are the ones who are the most likely to agree with this statement.

While generally the differences were between those who have not read a book in the past month and those who have read one book or more a month, there are two statements that show an increase/decline in agreement depending on the number of books read in a month. With respect to preferring to watch TV to reading, the more books young people have read in the past month the less likely they are to agree with this statement. By contrast, the more books young people have read in the past month the more likely they are to agree with the statement that reading is cool.

Table 9. Number of books read in the past month and percentage agreement with statements assessing attitudes towards reading

	0	1-3	4	5-8	9+
	%	%	%	%	%
The more I read, the better I become	47.1	75.3	82.3	86.6	84.2
I prefer watching TV to reading	88.7	63.0	47.3	40.2	31.9
Reading is cool	5.3	23.2	37.8	49.0	66.7
I don't read as well as other pupils in my class	40.1	27.2	21.6	19.3	18.5
I only read when I have to	63.7	24.5	15.7	14.6	14.4
I cannot find things to read that interest me	53.5	24.1	15.7	13.3	13.6
I would be embarrassed if my friends saw me read	27.4	16.1	12.4	13.7	14.0
Reading is more for girls than boys	14.8	12.8	17.0	16.5	20.6

Reading attainment

Attainment data for reading were available for 5,580 **KS2** and **KS3** pupils. Since our attainment data contained a varied set of levels and spanned young people aged 9 to 14, we standardised the data to form three crude categories to be applied to all ages: below expected level for their age, at expected level for their age and above expected level for their age.

Nearly 9 in 10 young people read at (72.6%) or above (16.1%) the expected level for their age. However, 11.3% read below the expected level for their age.

Table 10 clearly shows that there is a relationship between the number of books read in the past month and young people's reading attainment. Even just reading a few books a month appears to have some benefit. While a quarter of those who have read no books in the past month read below the level expected for their age, this percentage drops to only 1 in 10 of those who have read up to three books in the past month and fewer than 1 in 10 for those who have read at least four books in the past month.

The table also shows that the more books young people read outside of class the more likely they are to be reading above the level expected for their age. Young people who read nine or more books in the past month were nearly four times more likely to read above the expected level for their age compared with young people who read four or fewer books a month.

Table 10: Number of books read in the past month and reading attainment (N = 5,580)

	<i>Below expected level</i>	<i>At expected level</i>	<i>Above expected level</i>
	%	%	%
0	26.8	63.3	9.9
1 - 3	10.7	79.3	10.0

	<i>Below expected level</i>	<i>At expected level</i>	<i>Above expected level</i>
	%	%	%
4	8.3	79.5	12.2
5 - 8	5.7	73.9	20.3
9 +	6.2	49.8	43.9

Discussion

So, does reading more books make a difference? This short paper has shown that it does. For example, children and young people who read 50 books or more a year are more likely to enjoy reading more and to do better at school. And four books a month does seem to be a tipping point.

While there are at times staggering differences in terms of their wider literacy behaviour between young people who read a lot of books in a month compared with those who read none or very few in a month, we are not claiming or suggesting that these relationships are causal. Do children and young people who read more books enjoy reading more because of that or if they enjoy reading in the first place are they just more likely to do it? There are so many factors and those kinds of questions are sadly outside of the scope of the research at this present time.

What can be said about the volume of books read and reading attitudes and attainment may seem almost too obvious: children and young people who enjoy reading, read more; children who struggle at school are less likely to be reading outside of school. However, even though the research does not throw up any big surprises it is still important to know what the facts are. We should not just assume that children who read 50 books do better because it sounds logical – it is important to know if it is actually true.

Similarly, we should not forget that the *quality* of the reading experience or the reading materials is possibly more important to young people's wider literacy behaviour and skills than the sheer *quantity* of books they read. For more information about the importance of interest and choice please see our report from 2008: http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt_research/266.

Indeed, we would be wrong to assume that the answer is simply READ MORE. Think of a child who does not like reading, finds reading difficult, struggles at school, does not have any books at home and reading is not encouraged in their family, has never visited a bookshop or a library and does not know what books (if any) they like. Will all this change if they just READ MORE? It probably will not. There are lots of reasons children do not read and do not enjoy reading (see also our 2008 study on the self-perceptions of readers; Clark, Osborne and Akerman, 2008: http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt_research/268), and it would be wrong to say that sheer volume of books is the only or best way to remedy this. As ex-Children's Laureate Anthony Browne said: "Pleasure, engagement and enjoyment of books is what counts – not simply meeting targets."

And there is a danger that meeting targets is what will count in a 50 book system. Will children with low reading abilities (or even all children) be encouraged to read simple books rather than something more challenging that will take longer to complete? When every book you read is being monitored for this project, will books considered less "literary" be looked down upon? Rather than encouraging children to read widely and discover the pleasure of reading through

all manner of unsuitable and obscure books, will we be shackling them to a view that reading should instead be plodding through recommended classics that are unappealing and at the wrong level for them, simply to reach the hallowed 50 book target?

Children and young people should be encouraged and supported wherever possible to read for pleasure, to choose and access books that they can enjoy and treasure and to see reading as a part of their everyday life. And yes, they should be encouraged to read more. But a 50 book target will not necessarily be best for all pupils.

Appendix A: Background information on our Omnibus survey

We have been surveying children and young people on all sorts of literacy matters since 2005. This has given us great insight into the views and attitudes of children and young people on reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, home resources, role models, perceptions of themselves as readers as well as technology use.

However, what is still lacking in the attitudinal landscape in the UK is annual data on how young people feel about literacy to help us build a continuous picture of their attitudes year-on-year. It is the purpose of the National Literacy Trust Omnibus survey to plug this gap in the evidence base.

Combining previous National Literacy Trust survey topics, the Omnibus survey explores young people's attitudes towards reading, writing and communication skills as well as their technology use. More specifically, the key objectives of the Omnibus survey are to explore:

- Whether young people enjoy reading, how good they think they are at reading, how often they read and for how long, what type of materials they read outside of class, how many books they have in the home and what they think about reading
- Whether young people enjoy writing, how good a writer they think they are, what makes a good writer, what types of materials they write and what they think about writing
- What they think good communication skills are and how important they are to succeed
- How often they use a computer and mobile phone and for what?

In addition to exploring children's and young people's attitudes towards reading, writing, communication and technology use, we will also explore their link to attainment in a subsample of pupils for whom attainment data are available.

These objectives were further broken down into a number of questions. These included the following:

- Do reading enjoyment, behaviour and attitudes differ according to gender, age, socio-economic and ethnic background or educational needs?
- Do writing enjoyment, behaviour and attitudes differ according to gender, age, socio-economic and ethnic background or educational needs?
- Do attitudes towards communication skills and their perceived importance differ according to gender, age, socio-economic and ethnic background or educational needs?
- How is technology use related to gender, age, socio-economic and ethnic background or educational needs?