National Literacy Trust

Change your story

The impact of school libraries on children and young people's literacy outcomes: An evidence review

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Introduction

The value of school libraries is well established, with reviews and studies worldwide highlighting their impact on children and young people's academic achievement and literacy outcomes. Research has shown that reading for pleasure is associated with school library use (e.g., Clark, 2010; Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2018), so it is concerning to see that reading for pleasure among children and young people is on a downward spiral. Our 2023 data showed that only 2 in 5 (43.4%) children aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoyed reading, and fewer than 3 in 10 (28.0%) read daily outside of the classroom (Clark et al., 2023). This is the lowest rate of reading enjoyment we have recorded since we began tracking reading enjoyment data in 2005 (51.4%).

As a recent Book Trust (2022) report highlights, libraries can play a transformative role in children's early literacy development and may act to combat the reduction in reading for pleasure. However, at a time when total expenditure has fallen by 17% from 2020-21 to 2021-22 (CIPFA, 2023), highlighting the impact of school libraries is more critical than ever. These findings present the need to encourage reading and reading enjoyment, and therefore the importance of focusing resources on school libraries.

This report builds on our earlier review (Teravainen & Clark, 2017), and contributes to other recent reviews (e.g., Scottish Book Trust, 2023), to provide an up-to-date picture of both primary and secondary school libraries in the UK. It focuses on what is known about the extent of current school library provision, the evidence of the need for further support of school libraries, and the impact that school libraries can have on children and young people.

"Primary school libraries are the key way for children from ALL backgrounds to discover the books of their dreams. With 1 in 11 children on free school meals not owning a book of their own, it can sometimes be the only way. It's shocking, therefore, that 1 in 7 primary schools don't have a library. Schools lucky enough to have libraries often aren't able to update their stock with the wonderful, exciting new books that are coming out. If we're to have a future generation of lifelong readers who come from all walks of life, this has to change. Right now, there are

Evidence of need: Current school library provision

As was the case in our 2017 school libraries evidence review (Teravainen & Clark, 2017), it is still not a statutory requirement for schools in England, Wales or Scotland to have a school library or school library service. In Northern Ireland, 'School Library Services' are required, but this doesn't necessarily mean a physical library space (APPG, 2014). In Scotland, secondary schools must have access to library services, but this can either be through a dedicated school library, a joint school and community library, or from a central authority library service. Furthermore, Scottish libraries are currently at risk of facing cuts to funding for librarians and library resources (Herald Scotland, 2023).

Generally, the decision to have a school library depends on the head teacher of the school (APPG, 2014). However, it is worth noting that the National Curriculum does encourage schools to provide library facilities (Gov. UK, 2014), and the Department for Education has previously provided suggestions for the amount of library space per pupil within their school layout guidelines (Department for Education, 2014). Additionally, in their recently published Reading Framework, the Department for Education included "encouraging library use" as one of their core strategies to encourage sustained and voluntary reading in young people (Department for Education, 2023, p.94). The framework provides suggestions for how best to organise book stock in primary school libraries or classroom book corners, proposing organising books by type (e.g., core literature by year group, very short page turners) and argues that "the best classroom book areas are like mini bookshops" (Department for Education, 2023, p.92).

School libraries are also viewed highly by parents. Indeed, according to focus groups commissioned by the National Literacy Trust and conducted by Public First, 81% of parents were unaware that it was not a statutory requirement for schools to have a library (Public First, 2023). Even more (86%) said that they would support making it a legal requirement for every primary school in the country to have a designated library on site (Public First, 2023).

Provision in the UK

Number of school libraries

The lack of a systematic monitoring tool means that there are no official figures on the number or proportion of schools that have a school library or a school librarian in the UK, and therefore no complete picture of school provision is readily available.

However, a survey conducted in the summer of 2022 on behalf of the Great School Libraries with the Primary School Library Alliance (PSLA), and supported by the National Literacy Trust, Foyle Foundation, Penguin Random House and the Lightbulb Trust, found that 1 in 7 (14%) state primary schools in the UK did not have a school library, meaning that over 750,000 children did not have access to books that we know enable better educational outcomes and greater wellbeing (PSLA, 2022). The survey also showed that children from schools with an above-average intake of children eligible for free school meals were more likely to say that they didn't have a school library compared with children from schools with a below-average intake of children eligible for free school meals (16% versus 10%, PSLA, 2022). Given that 1 in 10 (9.7%) children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds didn't have a book of their own at home in 2022 (Cole et al., 2022), this is particularly concerning as schools can act as the first opportunity for children to discover the magic and benefits of reading.

A similar finding was obtained by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) in a 2022 survey of 821 primary school teachers in England (CLPE, 2022). Their research showed that 88% of teachers said that their primary school had a school library, and most (94.5%) had a book corner in their classrooms (CLPE, 2022). However, they found that in 57% of these schools, the book corners contained fewer than 100 books, limiting the choice and diversity of texts that children can access. The Department for Education's Reading Framework (2023) explains that "the challenge is to offer pupils choice without overwhelming them". They provide suggestions for how to overcome this, such as by refreshing the stock regularly with books from the school library (Department for Education, 2022, p.92).

Library staffing

Staffing is another key concern in terms of school library provision. A recent report titled *Equal futures? An imbalance of opportunities* by the Great School Libraries (GSL) campaign found that only 2 in 5 (41%) schools in the UK with a designated library area had library staff, down from more than half (54%) in 2019 (Great School Libraries, 2023). When looking by stage, only 29% of UK primary schools with a

designated library had library staff, compared with 87% of UK secondary schools with a designated library (GSL, 2023, p.10).

Additionally, of the 29% of UK primary schools with a designated library staff member, only 8% of these staff members had no other role in the school. Indeed, most were also teachers, literacy leads, or teaching assistants, leaving their library role as an add-on rather than a priority (GSL, 2023, p.9). Lack of budget is often cited as an explanation for the lack of sufficient staffing in school libraries, across both primary and secondary settings (Merga, 2019; GSL, 2023, p.9).

The presence of staff, whether librarians or teachers, who are engaged with children's reading, can support the development of a reading for pleasure culture across a school. In the second phase of their 'Teachers as Readers' study, the Open University found that when teachers developed their understanding and enjoyment of reading children's texts, and became more aware of their own reading practices and those of the pupils they work with, they were better able to build a reading for pleasure strategy and strong communities of readers within their schools (Cremin et al., 2014). Teachers engaging themselves with reading children's texts can support children on their own reading journeys, with new research conducted by BookTrust highlighting that 71% of children in school (aged 4 to 7) experience regular reading with teachers. The report suggests that in this way teachers can act as reading influencers, encouraging pupils to go on to become independent readers (BookTrust, 2023).

This was reinforced by CLPE's evaluation of their programme 'Power of Reading', which supports teachers with engaging children with high-quality reading texts and inspiring a love of reading. All teachers reported that the programme improved children's reading engagement, and almost all (94%) agreed that children now choose to read more independently in school. Overall, the research displays the importance of appropriate staffing for school libraries, whereby staff are engaged with children's reading provision to enable them to better understand and support their pupils with their reading (CLPE, 2023).

"Our librarian is really welcoming and nice and the library is a safe place for me to go to when I'm worried about people in the playground. There are also cool things happening in the library like clubs." (Boy, Year 7)

Library resources and provision

There are guidelines for school library provision. Indeed, in 2022, the School Library Association recommended that a school library should have a minimum of 10 items per pupil and, for primary schools specifically, 10-15 items would be preferable. They also highlight the importance of reviewing any stock older than 10 years to ensure it is relevant to the school curriculum and of general interest to the pupils (SLA, 2022). Similarly, the CILIP has a benchmark of 10 to 13 books per pupil, excluding textbooks, structured reads and class sets (Primary School Library Guidelines, 2023).

However, looking at the reality of primary and secondary provision, an early CILIP study showed that there was not a proportionate increase in school library stock to reflect growth in student numbers (Streatfield et al., 2010). They found that the median stock size was between 10,001 and 15,000 books for all schools with more than 501 students (Streatfield et al., 2010, p.5). For smaller schools, the stock size was between 5,001 and 10,000 books (Streatfield et al., 2010, p.5).

As well as overall provision, diversity of provision is also important. In a report published for 'Life Changing Libraries' (Reading for Pleasure UK & BookTrust, 2022), Cressida Cowell describes the importance of school library resources, specifically school library texts, being up to date, appealing, and encompassing a 'wide variety of interests and genres' (p.7). Additionally, the report highlights the importance of digital provision including audiobooks and e-readers, to enable greater access for pupils with a variety of needs and preferences (Reading for Pleasure UK & BookTrust, 2022).

Diversity in reading provision is also important given that our own 2022 research found that 2 in 5 (38.9%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said they found it difficult to find books with characters or people who look like them. 2 in 5 (38.9%) agreed that "reading about characters that are like me makes me feel more confident about myself" (Picton & Clark, 2022). This is unfortunately somewhat unsurprising, given that CLPE's 'Reflecting Realities' research found, in the same year, that only 20% of children's picture books, fiction and non-fiction titles published in 2021 featured characters of colour (although there was a large increase from 4% back in 2017), (CLPE, 2022).

The importance of both adequate and diverse stock was also evidenced by a survey of over 3,000 parents and carers (National Literacy Trust, 2023). Variety of stock related to a contrast of authors, genres, topics, and age ranges:

"I have better books at home. Some are too childish; some are too difficult to read. Rarely [does] he take home a very good book." (Parent of an 11-year-old)

"Fantastic, children always benefit from a well-stocked library that they can use." (Parent of a 7-, 10- and 18-year-old)

"Well stocked with interesting books. [My] child [is] encouraged to use the library and helped to find suitable reading material." (Parent of a 12- and 14-year-old)

"Very positive. It is curated and the school asks parents to 'adopt a book' each year to keep the library well stocked with appropriate reading material." (Parent of a 15- and 18-year-old)

"The school puts a lot of effort into stocking engaging books for all ages." (Parent of a 10-year-old)

Budgets for school libraries

In the absence of monitoring the number of school libraries in the UK, other evidence suggests that school library provision is decreasing, including in relation to budget. A study by the Great School Libraries campaign found that nearly two thirds (62%) of primary schools in the UK don't have a designated library budget (GSL, 2023), while other research has found that some schools have had their library budget entirely revoked in the wake of the pandemic (Davidson-Cripps, 2022). A 2022 survey of primary school teachers conducted by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) found that 38% of teachers said that they only get new books in the classroom if they buy them themselves, while 17% rely on donations to update their books (CLPE, 2022). Overall, they concluded that more than 60% of the classrooms studied had no access to a budget for new books (CLPE, 2022, p.4).

As pupil numbers increase (Department for Education, 2022), alongside the rise in the cost of living (Office for National Statistics, 2022), budget is a major concern for school library provision. While an additional £2.3 billion was allocated to schools by the government in the latter half of 2022 (UK Parliament, 2022), this only addressed the rising costs and previous cuts to school funding. Indeed, there has been no growth in spending per pupil over the past 14 years. In fact, the Institute of Fiscal Studies predicted that spending per pupil will be 3% lower in 2024-25 compared with 2010 (IFS, 2022).

We asked teachers about the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on school resources in our 2023 Annual Literacy Survey. 84.6% of teachers working in schools with no library or reading space told us that because of the cost-of-living crisis, they were concerned that their children wouldn't have sufficient access to books and reading material outside school, compared with 68.1% of teachers working in schools with a library or reading space. Additionally, 69.2% of teachers working in schools with no school library or reading space agreed that the cost-of-living crisis meant that they wouldn't be able to prioritise the budget for reading for pleasure books this year, compared with 54.0% of teachers working in schools with a school library or reading space. The cost-of-living crisis was therefore found to exacerbate existing inequalities in access to books and reading materials, with schools without a library or reading space being particularly affected.

Sufficient school library funding is even more important given that we found that fewer parents could buy books or educational devices for their children at home during the cost-of-living crisis. We surveyed parents and carers in early 2023 and found that 1 in 5 (20.0%) were spending less on books for their children as a result of the increasing cost of living (National Literacy Trust, 2023). This increased to more than 1 in 3 (36.1%) for parents who told us that they were struggling financially with the increase in the cost of living (National Literacy Trust, 2023, p.7).

Additionally, focus groups commissioned by the National Literacy Trust and conducted by Public First found that 68% of parents whose children had a school library agreed that they were less worried about having to buy new books because of the school library (Public First, 2023). More than half (54%) agreed that they wouldn't be able to afford all the books their child wanted to read if they didn't have access to the school library (Public First, 2023).

In our 2023 Annual Literacy Survey, children and young people also told us about the importance of their school library in providing access to free books:

"I like going to the library because it helps me get books for free without having to pay a ridiculous amount of money for one book!" (Girl, Year 7)

The impact of school libraries

The impact of school libraries is well-established in research across the world. A review commissioned by the Scottish Library and Information Council found that there is now a considerable body of international evidence to show that school libraries have an impact on academic attainment, successful learning outcomes, and positive attitudes towards learning (Williams et al., 2013). These studies often vary in their terminology, methodology, and specific focus. Additionally, they often use different outcomes as evidence for the impact of school libraries.

However, it is not only the elements of the research into school libraries that differ but also the library elements that they investigate. These include, for example, the number of staff or number of staffing hours, hours of operation, budget, collection size, library staff qualifications, and number of computers (Williams et al., 2013).

Additionally, a literature review from the Netherlands highlighted the importance of considering the background of the pupils being studied and how their identity may influence the impact that school libraries have on various outcomes (Kleijnen et al, 2015). The review highlights the experience of children from migrant families, considering the way that their situations may differ in terms of the main language spoken at home, their experience with their culture and community, and potentially their socioeconomic status (Kleijnen et al, 2015). A later American literature review highlighted the relevance of pupil characteristics, finding it to be the third most prominent theme in the school libraries research included in their analysis, following only classroom practices and school characteristics (Pasquini & Schultz-Jones, 2019).

Given the variety of research, this section will look at the impact of school libraries on different outcomes, starting with learning outcomes (general attainment, reading and writing attainment). We will then look at the personal outcomes of school library use including changes to attitudes around reading and writing, reading and writing for pleasure, and improved wellbeing.

Outcomes

General attainment

There is a large research base evidencing the impact that school libraries can have on attainment and learning ([Williams et al., 2013](#); [Lance & Kachel, 2018](#)). In particular, a wealth of insight comes from studies in the US. Arguably the most influential work in the field has been conducted by Keith Curry Lance, whose research in the US since the 1990s has consistently established the impact of school library programmes on pupils' academic achievement. More specifically, a review conducted by Robert Gordon University in Scotland highlighted the key indicators of academic achievement in this research space to include higher test scores and successful curriculum or learning outcomes ([Williams et al., 2013, p.15](#)).

More specifically, in 2003, Rodney, Lance and Hamilton-Pennell found that pupils' general achievement scores rose with increases not only in the number of school librarians and total library staff hours (per 100 pupils), but also with increases in print volumes per pupil, periodical subscriptions, video materials, and software packages per 100 pupils, as well as school library expenditure per pupil [(Library of Michigan, 2003).](#)

In Alaska, Lance and colleagues found that pupils' test results tended to be higher in schools where there was a full-time rather than part-time librarian ([Lance et al., 2000](#)). Furthermore, they found that schools with a part-time librarian had higher test scores than schools without a librarian ([Lance et al., 2000](#)). Similarly, a study by Baumbach in Florida ([2002](#)), as cited in [Scholastic, 2016, p. 17](#), found that elementary schools where the library was staffed 60 hours a week saw a 9% improvement in test scores compared with schools with libraries that were staffed for fewer than 60 hours. Properly staffed libraries were even more important for older pupils: high schools with a library staffed 60 hours per week saw a 22.2% improvement in test scores compared with those staffed for fewer than 60 hours ([Baumbach, 2002](#), as cited in [Scholastic, 2016, p. 17](#)).

A 2009 study conducted in New York explored the effect of school library programmes, services, and resources on pupil achievement and motivation in over 4,000 schools. They found that after controlling for the levels of resources available to schools, there was a positive relationship between school libraries and student achievement, specifically in English Language Arts (ELA) scores (Small et al., 2009). In South Carolina, Lance and his colleagues found other school library characteristics linked to pupils' academic performance (Lance et al., 2014). Indeed, library staffing, teaching activities, budget choices, circulation of library materials, collection size of print and e-books, and library visits by group were all found to contribute towards academic performance (Lance et al., 2014).

Finally, a longitudinal study exploring staffing levels in Kansas school libraries suggested that not only was at least one full-time librarian connected with higher reading proficiency but also scoring higher in other subjects such as maths, science, writing and history/government (Dow, Lakin & Court, 2012). Moreover, the same study found that having a school librarian might be particularly important for certain pupils: pupils in low-poverty schools with a full-time librarian achieved approximately seven points higher in maths than those with no school librarian, whereas those in high poverty achieved approximately 13 points higher in maths than those with no librarian (Dow, Lakin & Court, 2012).

Reading attainment

As may be expected, school libraries have also been found to have an impact on reading scores. A study by Lance and Schwarz in 2012 looked at elementary, middle and high school pupils' reading and writing scores (Lance & Schwarz, 2012). Their study was able to show that well-resourced school libraries, including the presence of a full-time school librarian, impacted pupils' reading and writing regardless of their socioeconomic, ethnic and disability status (Lance & Schwarz, 2012).

A study conducted in North Carolina connected good-quality school libraries with reading: they discovered that pupils' scores in standardised reading and English tests tended to increase when libraries were staffed for more hours during the school week, were open more hours during the school week, and spent more money per 100 pupils on books, print materials, electronic devices, and electronic access to information (e.g., online database searching) (Burgin et al., 2003).

In 2012, Lance and Hofschire also identified a significant relationship between library staffing and reading levels, specifically for children between the ages of 8 and 16 (Lance & Hofschire, 2012). Schools that either maintained or gained a librarian between 2005 and 2011 tended to have more pupils scoring at an advanced level in reading in 2011. Additionally, reading performance in these schools improved more

than in schools that either lost their librarians or never had one in position (Lance & Hofschire, 2012, p. 3). Similarly, a 2015 Australian and New Zealand School Library Survey found that the number of school librarians employed in Australian school libraries and reading literacy results positively correlated (Softlink, 2015). More recently, a 2023 study in North Carolina found that pupils who attended schools with a full-time qualified librarian scored significantly higher on reading tests than matched pupils who attended schools without a full-time school librarian (Wine et al., 2023).

Australian research conducted by Merga explored the ways that school librarians could support reading attainment, in this context, specifically for struggling readers (Merga, 2019). Interviews with primary and secondary school librarians found a variety of methods that librarians use to support struggling readers, from identifying the struggling readers in the first place to providing greater access to skill- and age-appropriate books and support (Merga, 2019, p.150).

PIRLS data also provides insight into the relationship between book provision in the school library and pupil reading attainment (PIRLS, 2016). Indeed, looking at their international sample, they found that the average reading score for schools with the largest libraries (more than 5,000 books) was 525, compared with a score of between 494 and 501 for schools with a smaller (fewer than 500 books) or no central library.

In 2019, researchers from Nottingham Trent University analysed data from the National Literacy Trust's Annual Literacy Survey, as well as reviewing 10 existing surveys, to identify whether there was a link between school library use and reading attainment (Rudkin & Wood, 2019). Overall, they concluded that school libraries did have the potential to influence pupils' academic attainment, but highlighted the importance of library staff and sufficient provision of resources as potentially strengthening this relationship (p.7). This contributed to previous findings from the National Literacy Trust, which found that children and young people with a reading age at or above the expected level of their age were almost three times as likely to be school library users compared with their peers with reading levels below that of their expected age (Clark, 2010). Although causality could not be established, this link between reading attainment and library use does suggest that school libraries play an important role (Clark, 2010).

Finally, Lee and colleagues analysed three studies that compared the reading scores of 10-year-olds from different countries using the PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) data (Lee et al., 2021). The data covered three time points: 2006 (45 countries), 2011 (57 countries) and 2016 (61 countries). The results revealed that the presence of a school library had a significant and positive

effect on reading scores for children in 2006 and 2016 and fell just short of significant in 2011. The authors also noted that in 2006, the positive effect of the school library was almost as large as the negative effect of poverty (Lee et al., 2021, p.21). Lee and colleagues (2021) concluded that library quality was a strong predictor of reading performance.

Writing attainment

There is less evidence on the impact of school libraries on writing compared with reading, but some studies have found that school libraries can positively impact writing attainment. For example, a 2012 study by Lance and Schwarz in Pennsylvania found that pupils who had access to a well-resourced library were two to five times more likely to score 'advanced' in writing than pupils who didn't have access to such libraries (Lance & Schwarz, 2012). Interestingly, the impact of school library programmes was more pronounced proportionally on writing than reading scores (Lance & Schwarz, 2012, p.ii).

Australian research has also found a connection between a good school library and pupils' writing scores (Hughes et al., 2013). This study on schools on the Gold Coast showed that pupils in schools with a qualified teacher-librarian scored considerably above the national average for each year level in writing. In contrast, the average scores for schools without a teacher-librarian were consistently below the national mean (Hughes et al., 2013, p.38).

Learning skills

In addition to academic achievement, school libraries have been found to support learning skills. For example, evidence gathered from school librarians in New Jersey suggests that school libraries can help pupils meet core curriculum content standards and develop a wide range of information-handling competencies, as well as providing them with the intellectual and technical scaffolding they need to learn, and to be ethical and productive users and consumers of information (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2010).

Lance and Maniotes (2020) discussed the role that the school library and librarians can play in inquiry learning, a skill that involves pupils choosing a topic of interest, studying it, and sharing their learnings. Librarians can assist pupils in accessing relevant resources, supporting them to develop what the authors describe as 'self-directed, lifelong learning skills' (Lance and Maniotes, 2020).

In one study, Todd and his colleague found that 98.17% of their sample (5,628 students) indicated that the school library, and particularly their school librarian, had helped them in some way in their learning process (Todd & Heinstrom, 2006).

While there was diversity in the help provided by the school libraries, it included support for finding different sources of information for specific topics (64.8% rated this as 'helpful') and finding different opinions about topics (53.6% rated this as 'helpful') (Todd & Heinstrom, 2006, p.2).

Reading and writing for pleasure behaviours

The links between reading for pleasure and academic attainment are well evidenced, but we also know that effective primary school library provision can support pupils' reading for pleasure behaviours. Indeed, The Open University and UKLA highlight 'reading for pleasure teaching practices… in a social reading environment' as one of five vital things to encourage children to read for pleasure, and a school library can act as a perfect setting for this to take place (Cremin, 2022).

Our 2010 analysis found that pupils who used their school libraries were twice as likely as non-school-library users to report that they enjoy reading 'very much' or 'quite a lot' (Clark, 2010). Our more recent survey in 2018 reinforced this by finding, once again, that school library use was positively associated with reading for pleasure and also writing for pleasure (Clark and Teravainen-Goff, 2018). Finally, our Annual Literacy Survey in 2023[1] again corroborated findings from previous years. Of the 64,000 8- to 18-year-olds who took part, 1 in 2 (51.9%) told us that they used their school library or reading space.

Table 1 shows that more of those who used their school library or reading space told us that they enjoyed reading and writing, compared with their peers who didn't use the school library. More than half (54.9%) of those who used their school library/reading space told us that they enjoyed reading, compared with 1 in 3 (32.9%) of those who didn't use their school library. For writing enjoyment, more than 2 in 5 (42.4%) school library users enjoyed writing, compared with 1 in 4 (26.8%) of those who didn't use their school library.

While confidence in reading and writing ability is generally high, we did see differences by school library users. Indeed, 86.2% of school library users were confident in their reading ability, compared with 3 in 4 (75.2%) of those who didn't use their school library. There was also a 9-percentage-point difference in

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[1] 71,351 children and young people aged 5 to 18 from 285 schools across the UK.

confidence in writing ability by school library use, with more of those who used their school library feeling confident in their writing ability (76.8% vs 65.9%).

Looking at daily reading and writing, again, more of those who used their school library said that they read (35.6%) or wrote (22.5%) daily, compared with their peers who didn't use their school library (21.5% and 15.3%, respectively).

Table 1: Literacy behaviours by school library use of 8- to 18-year-olds in 2023

Literacy behaviour	Uses their school library or reading space	Doesn't use their school library or reading space
Enjoys reading	54.9%	32.9%
Enjoys writing	42.4%	26.8%
Confident in reading ability	86.2%	75.2%
Confident in writing ability	76.8%	65.9%
Reads daily	35.6%	21.5%
Writes daily	22.5%	15.3%

> "When I am stressed during the school day reading often helps me to relax and it can often be quite calm. I love reading, books and libraries, so I often just escape to the library to read." (Boy, Year 8)

Attitudes towards reading

School library use can also impact on children and young people's attitudes towards reading. Our 2010 analysis of Annual Literacy Survey data explored how children and young people felt about school libraries, and how school library use related to wider enjoyment of reading, attitudes towards reading and reading frequency. It found that non-school-library users were twice as likely to agree that they 'only read because they have to' compared with school library users (39.5% vs 19.8%) (Clark, 2010, p.14). Unfortunately, eight years on, the difference in response to this statement by school library use had not changed; in fact, it increased slightly (43.0% vs 22.7%) (Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2018).

In 2020, the National Literacy Trust and Nottingham Trent University collaborated on an analysis of 6,264 children and young people who were receiving free school meals (FSMs) in the UK and who responded to our Annual Literacy Survey between January and March 2019. The analysis found that pupils eligible for FSMs who used their school library had higher levels of reading and writing enjoyment, confidence in their reading and writing ability, and read and wrote for pleasure more frequently compared with their peers who didn't use the school library or had no school library (Wood et al., 2020). Additionally, these pupils also accessed a greater diversity of reading materials (Wood et al., 2020).

More recently, a New Zealand study by McKirdy (2021) found that students who attended schools with a librarian were more likely to have positive attitudes towards reading for pleasure than students where the library was not a priority (McKirdy, 2021). This suggests that having a well-stocked and well-staffed library can help young people develop more positive attitudes towards what they describe as 'leisure reading' (McKirdy, 2021).

Wellbeing

While research into the impact of school libraries often focuses on academic attainment, there is also a wealth of insight suggesting that school libraries can support children and young people with their wellbeing. Australian research has described three key ways it can achieve this: by providing a safe space, by promoting wellbeing initiatives, and by supporting reading practices including reading for pleasure (Merga, 2020, p.663). When later analysing interview data, Merga found that the safe space of a library may be encouraged by the presence of supportive library staff and careful selection of furnishings and decorations (Merga, 2021).

Additionally, a collaborative resource produced by The Reading Agency, ASCEL and Libraries Connected (2021) highlights how physical and digital reading resources can support children to discuss emotions and share how they are feeling (The Reading Agency, ASCEL & Libraries Connected, 2021, p.4). Reading in this way can even support empathic development by encouraging perspective taking, emotion recognition, and active listening (Empathy Lab, 2023).

We also know from our research that 1 in 3 (35.7%) of those who don't use their school library also have low literacy engagement, and children who are the least engaged with literacy are three times less likely to have higher levels of mental wellbeing compared with their most engaged peers (11.8% vs 39.4%)(Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2018).

Conclusions

This report provides an up-to-date picture of current school library provision in the UK and reviewed the evidence of the impact of school libraries on pupils' attainment, development as learners, and wellbeing.

There is still no statutory requirement for schools in England, Wales or Scotland to have a school library or school library service. This means that not all children and young people have access to a school library, and children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately affected by this. At the same time, libraries are clearly highly valued by parents, teachers and children alike, and their importance is highlighted in the government's National Curriculum and the Department for Education's Reading Framework.

This report also shows that schools face challenges in maintaining a high-quality library. Many schools with an existing library were found not to have a full-time librarian. The lack of librarian is evident in both primary and secondary schools but more evident in primary where fewer than 1 in 3 schools reported having a dedicated librarian. Additionally, schools struggle to find the funds to maintain their libraries. Research shows that the budgets for libraries have not increased appropriately with the rise in the pupil numbers and the cost of living, resulting in provision that does not reflect the proportion of students in the school. This was especially important given the number of teachers working in schools without a school library; indeed, they told us they were concerned that children wouldn't have sufficient access to books and reading materials outside of school in light of the cost-of-living crisis.

This report also highlights the impact of school libraries on learning outcomes, including reading and writing attainment, as well as children and young people's attitudes, behaviours and confidence in reading and writing. Some evidence also suggests that school libraries can support children and young people's wellbeing.

Since our last evidence review in 2017, there continues to be a lack of UK-based research into school libraries. Further research could consider the link between school library use and attainment in reading, as well as investigating the mechanisms by which school libraries can better promote reading and writing for pleasure. Such research could inform policy and practice, and display the importance of high-quality staffed school libraries.

About the National Literacy Trust

Our charity is dedicated to improving the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of those who need it most, giving them the best possible chance of success in school, work and life. We run Literacy Hubs and campaigns in communities where low levels of literacy and social mobility are seriously impacting people's lives. We support schools and early years settings to deliver outstanding literacy provision, and we campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians, businesses and parents. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy and drive our interventions.

Literacy is a vital element of action against poverty and our work changes life stories.

Visit www.literacytrust.org.uk to find out more, donate or sign up for a free email newsletter. You can also find us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter.