

## **School libraries: Why children and young people use them or not, their literacy engagement and mental wellbeing**

**Findings from our annual literacy survey 2017/2018**

Christina Clark and Anne Teravainen-Goff

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### **Introduction**

There is currently a buzz around school libraries and they have become a hot topic among practitioners, policymakers and researchers. Indeed, school libraries remain a timely topic in the UK educational discourse as the requirements for critical literacy are increasing and the libraries' role is even more crucial in supporting children and young people to acquire the skills they need.

At the same time, a lack of data on school libraries in the UK means that nobody has a clear idea of the state of provision, potentially contributing to educational inequality. In 2018, the Great School Libraries Campaign was launched with the aim of bringing school libraries and librarians to every school in the UK, and to gather data on the quality and quantity of school libraries that already exist<sup>1</sup>.

Previous research has clearly highlighted the importance of school libraries, not just for children and young people's reading and writing skills but also for their general academic attainment and wider learning skills. This includes their motivation and attitudes towards reading and other personal and interpersonal outcomes such as self-esteem and feelings of success<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://greatschoolibraries.edublogs.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/school-libraries-literature-review-current-provision-and-evidence-impact-2017/>

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T: 020 7587 1842 W: [www.literacytrust.org.uk](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk) Twitter: @Literacy\_Trust Facebook: nationalliteracytrust

Indeed, our own data from 2009 and 2016 have shown that school library use is positively related to reading enjoyment, reading behaviour, self-reported reading ability, and attitudes towards reading. Children and young people who said they use the school library were more likely to say they enjoy reading, that they read more books in a typical month, rate themselves as better readers, and think more positively about reading.

In this report, we discuss school libraries from the point of view of children and young people. Using data from 45,523 children and young people who took part in our Annual Literacy Survey from November 2017 to January 2018, it explores how many children use the school library, why they do or do not use it, how school library use links with literacy engagement and reading skill, and how it relates to mental wellbeing.

### Some key findings are:

- Nearly 2 in 3 (63.2%) children and young people say they use their school library while nearly 1 in 3 (32.9%) say they don't. 3.9% of children and young people told us they don't have a school library.
- This percentage is down slightly from 2016, when 67.1% of children and young people said that they use the school library.
- Children and young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (measured by free school meal uptake as a proxy) and young people aged 14 to 16 are less likely to use their school library compared with their more advantaged and younger peers. Children and young people from white ethnic backgrounds were least likely to use the school library, while those from Asian ethnic background were most likely to use it.
- We also found geographical variations in school library use, with those from the North West of England and Yorkshire and the Humber being least likely to use the school library, and those from Greater London, the West Midlands and the South West being most likely to use the library.
- The most common reason for children and young people to use the library was access to interesting reading materials, followed by the library being a friendly and relaxing space, and because it has computers. Conversely, the main reason for not using the library was that it doesn't have interesting reading materials. Other common reasons for not using the library were friends not going and the perception of the library as a space for younger pupils.
- Our literacy engagement variable (a composite of all of our reading and writing variables with a maximum score of 52) was also linked with library use. The data show that around 73% of the children and young people who use the school library have higher literacy engagement scores than the average child who doesn't use the school library. Indeed, the data also showed that those who don't use the school library are twice as likely to have low literacy engagement compared with those who use the school library, while those who use the library are two and a half times more likely to be engaged with literacy compared with their peers who don't use the school library.
- Looking at the reading and writing variables individually showed that, compared with their peers, children and young people who use the school library are more likely to say that they enjoy reading and writing, that they read and write daily, see themselves

as better readers and writers, and have more positive attitudes towards reading and writing.

- Analysis of reading-skill data from 1,098 young people aged 11 to 15 showed that children and young people who don't use the school library are also more likely to read below their expected level compared with their peers who do use the library. However, the findings also show that as an equal number of children who read below and above their expected level say they use the library, this suggests it can be a space that is relevant to all pupils regardless of reading skill.
- We also used our new mental wellbeing index, which combines life satisfaction, coping skills and self-belief variables into a scale from 1 to 10 to explore the impact of school libraries on mental wellbeing. The findings show that children and young people who use the school library have, on average, higher mental wellbeing scores. Those who don't use the school library are nearly twice as likely to have low mental wellbeing than they are to have high mental wellbeing. However, the differences between the groups are not as great as with literacy engagement.

## Who uses the school library?

Of the 45,523 children and young people who answered our questions on school library use in our last annual literacy survey, nearly 2 in 3 (63.2%, N = 28,759) told us that they use a school library, while nearly 1 in 3 (32.9%, N = 14,994) told us they don't. 3.9% of children and young people we surveyed told us that they don't have a school library.

Overall, school library use decreased slightly over the last couple of years, with 67.1% of children and young people in 2016 telling us that they used the school library.

Our survey also allowed us to dig a bit deeper to see who the groups of pupils are who are more likely to say that they use the school library. As Figure 1 shows, slightly more girls than boys say that they use their school library.

More children and young people who receive free school meals (FSM), our proxy indicator of social disadvantage, say that they use the school library compared with their more advantaged peers.

School library use is highest among children aged 8 to 11 and lowest among young people aged 14 to 16. This group is less than half as likely to say that they use the school library compared with those at the end of primary school.

Fewer children and young people from white backgrounds say that they use the school library compared with their peers from mixed, Asian or black ethnic backgrounds. Overall, children and young people from Asian backgrounds are most likely to say that they use the school library.

**Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people using the school library by gender, FSM uptake, age group and ethnic background**

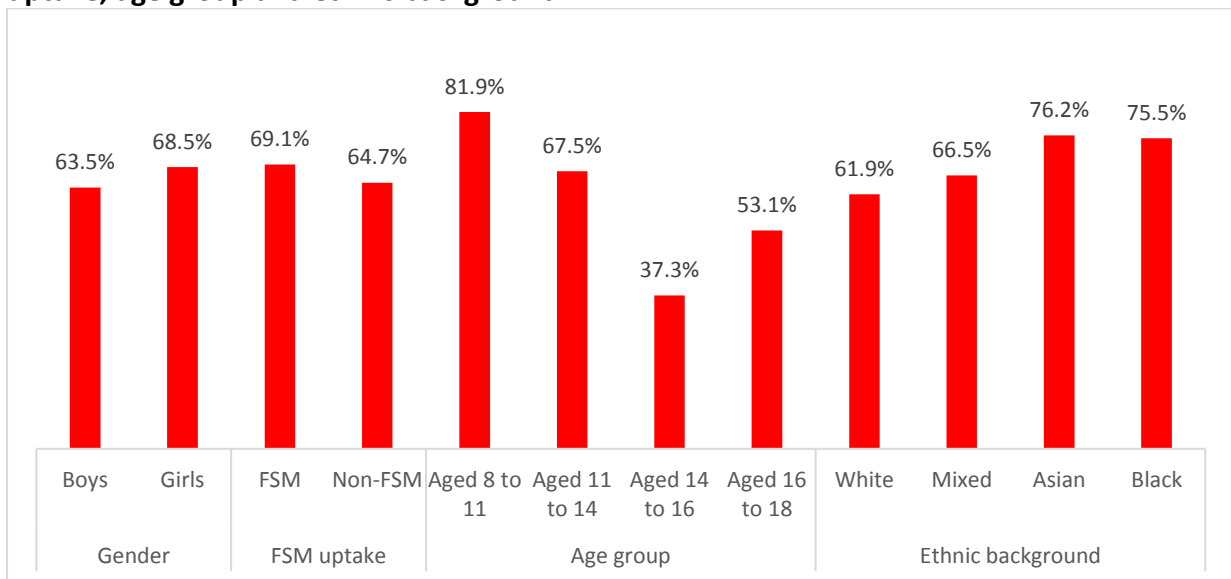
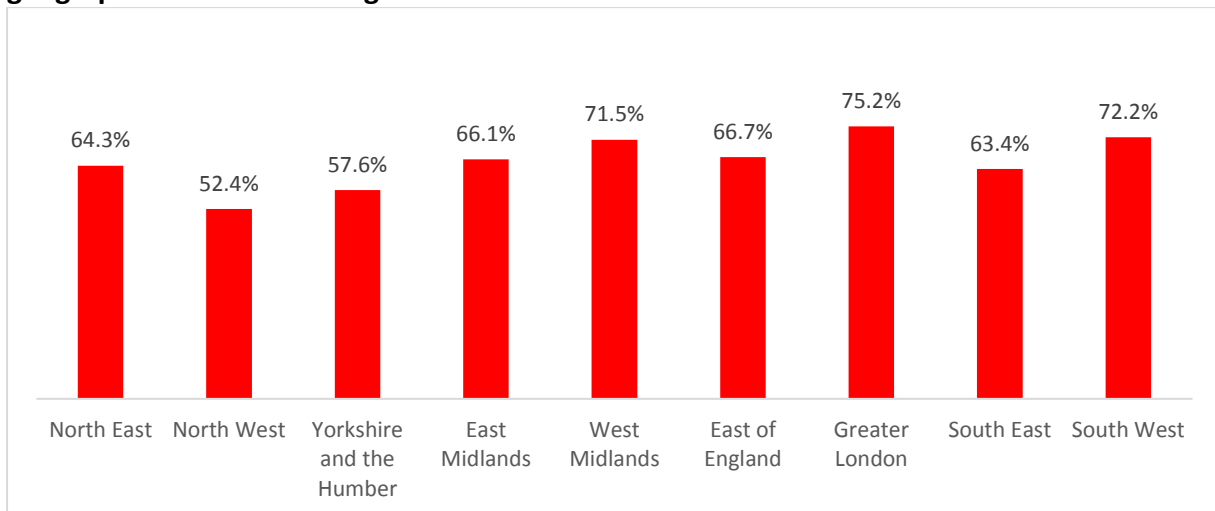


Figure 2 shows levels of school library use across geographic regions in England. It indicates that children and young people in the North West of England and those in Yorkshire and the Humber were least likely to use the school library, while those in Greater London, the West Midlands and the South West are most likely to say that they use the school library.

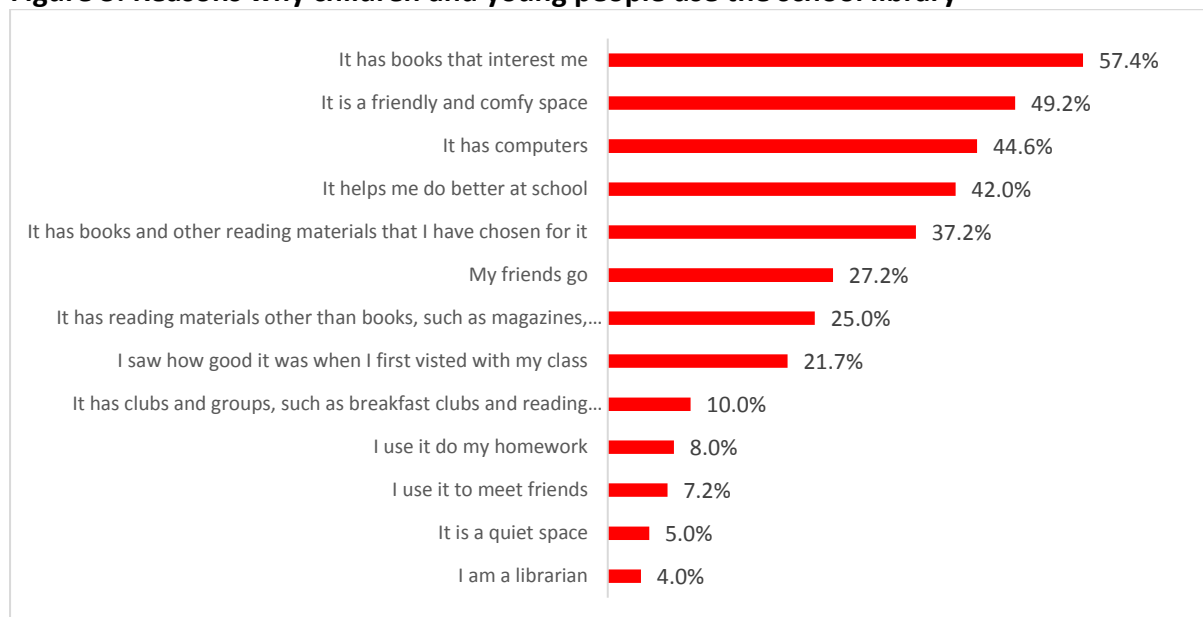
**Figure 2: Percentage of children and young people reporting to use the school library by geographical location in England**



### Why do children and young people use the school library or not?

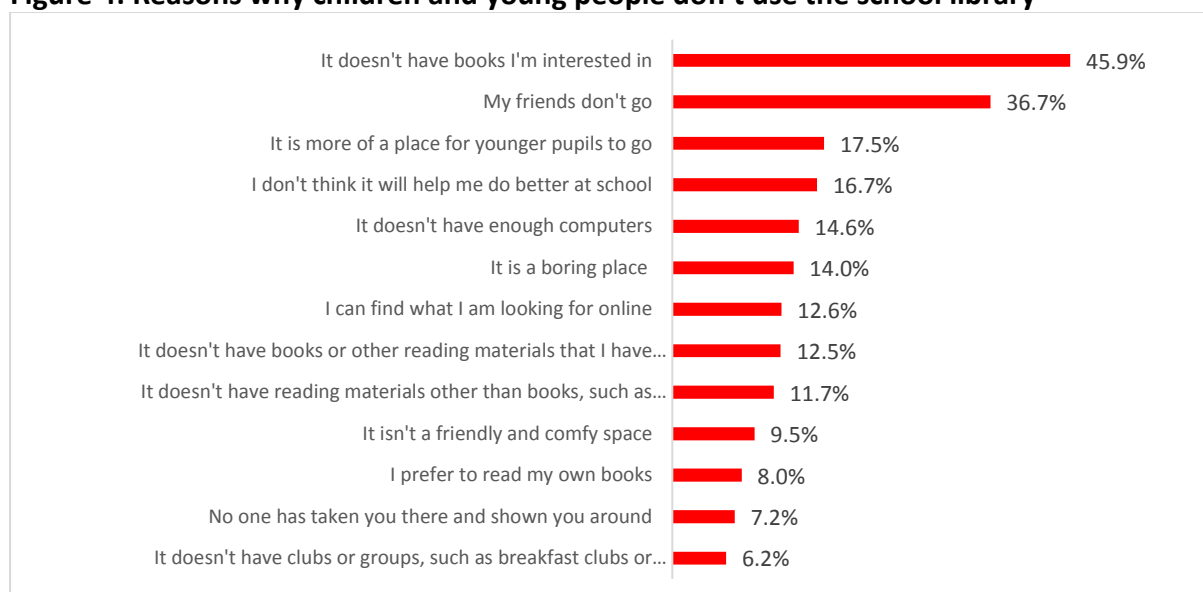
Those who say that they use the school library (N = 28,759) do so for a variety of reasons. As Figure 3 shows, over half of them use it because it gives them access to reading materials that interest them, nearly half also use it because it is a friendly and relaxing space, while 4 in 10 use it either because it has computers or because it helps them do better at school. One in 4 use it because their friends use it, while 7% use it specifically to meet their friends.

**Figure 3: Reasons why children and young people use the school library**



Conversely, the main reason for not using it by those who don't is that it doesn't have books that they are interested in (see Figure 4). While only a quarter of children and young people use the library because their friends do so, friends not using the library is a much greater turn-off, with over a third of children and young people saying they don't use it because of this.

**Figure 4: Reasons why children and young people don't use the school library**



## School library and literacy engagement

Next, we want to explore how those who use the school library differ from those who don't in terms of their general engagement with literacy. To this end, we constructed a variable that summed the responses across all of our reading and writing variables, with positive responses being allocated higher scores (for a total of 52 scores). For some of the analyses we then also divided the sample into four quartiles to explore how those with low literacy engagement

(bottom quartile) differ from those with high literacy engagement (top quartile)<sup>3</sup> in terms of their school library use.

Figure 5 shows that those who use the school library have, on average, a **higher literacy engagement score** than those who don't use their library. This difference is statistically significant<sup>4</sup>. Not only is the difference between the two groups statistically significant but the magnitude of the difference (Cohen's d) between these two groups is 0.64, which in statistical terms indicates a 'medium' difference. This also indicates that around 73% of the group that uses the school library has higher literacy engagement scores than the average child who doesn't use the school library.

**Figure 5: Average (mean) literacy score out of 52 by whether or not they use a school library**

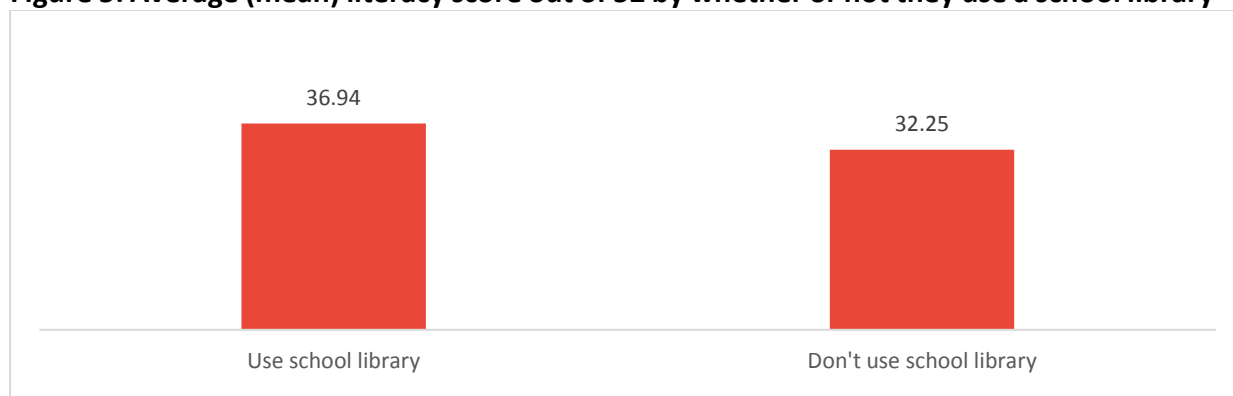


Table 1 cross-tabulates those who either use the school library and those who don't with those who score in the bottom and top quartiles for literacy engagement. It shows that 1 in 3 of those who don't use the school library also have low literacy engagement. Indeed, those who don't use the school library are **twice as likely** to have low literacy engagement compared with those who use the school library.

Conversely, those who use the school library are **two and a half times more likely** to be engaged with literacy compared with their peers who don't use the school library.

**Table 1: Cross-tabulation of whether or not they use the school library with bottom and top literacy engagement scores**

	Low literacy engagement (bottom quartile)	High literacy engagement (top quartile)
Use the school library	15.4%	32.6%
Don't use the school library	35.7%	13.5%

<sup>3</sup> Quartiles look at the distribution of responses and divide those into four roughly equal parts. The first quartile (also called the lower quartile) is the number below which lies the bottom 25 percent of data. The second quartile (the median) divides the range in the middle and has 50 percent of the data below it. The third quartile (also called the upper quartile) has 75 percent of the data below it and the top 25 percent of the data above it. In our study, the quartile scores are divided into the following four groups: bottom = 0-29.75; lower middle = 29.76-35.60; upper middle = 35.61-40.58; top = 40.59-52.

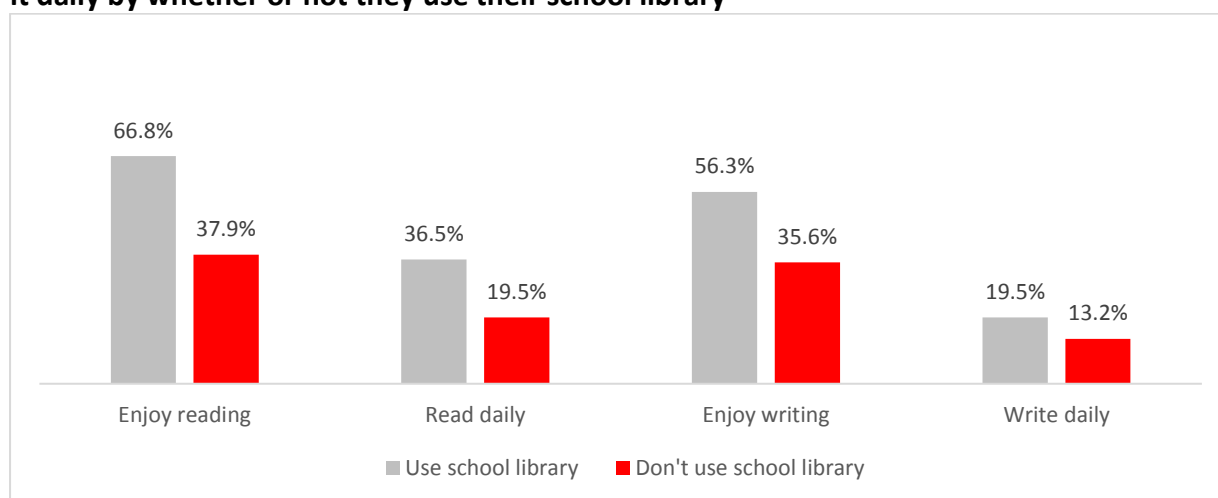
<sup>4</sup>  $t(4621.02) = 61.45, p < .001$ , adjusted for unequal variances

## Literacy engagement in more detail

The above section has explored the overall link between school library use and literacy engagement. Here, we will look at the relationships between school library use and the individual components of engagement: enjoyment, behaviours and attitudes.

As can be seen in Figure 6, children and young people who use the school library are nearly twice as likely to say that they enjoy reading and that they read daily compared with their peers who don't use the school library. Similar differences exist in relation to writing but it might be worth noting that the differences between the two groups are smaller than they are in respect to reading.

**Figure 6: Percentage of children and young people enjoying reading and writing and doing it daily by whether or not they use their school library**



Our survey also asks children and young people to indicate how good a reader or writer they think they are on a 10-point scale where 1 = not a very good reader/writer and 10 = a very good reader/writer.

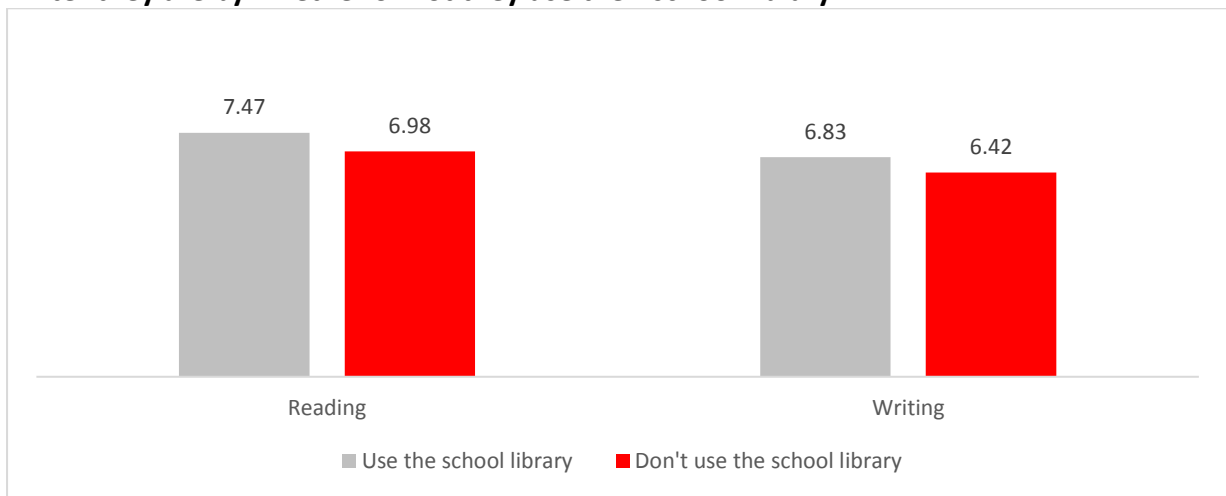
As Figure 7 shows, those who use the school library consider their reading skill to be better than those who don't use the school library. This difference is statistically significant<sup>5</sup>, though the actual size of the difference between the two groups is 'small' (Cohen's  $d = .24$ ).

The same holds true for writing, with children and young people who use the school library considering themselves to be better writers than those who don't use the school library. As with reading, this difference was statistically significant<sup>6</sup> but the size of the difference between the two groups was also 'small' (Cohen's  $d = .19$ ).

<sup>5</sup>  $t(28182.853) = 23.581, p < .001$ ; adjusted for unequal variances

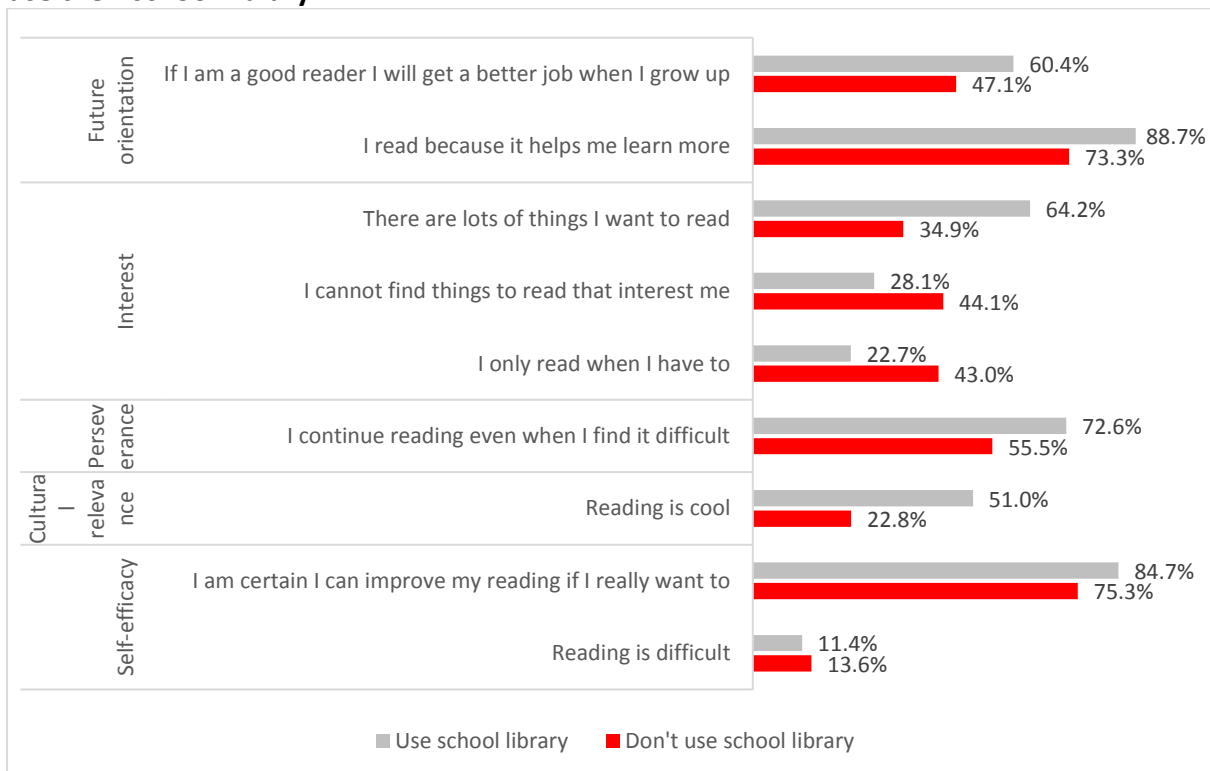
<sup>6</sup>  $t(29289.197) = 18.722, p < .001$ ; adjusted for unequal variances

**Figure 7: Average (mean) scores of how good children and young people think a reader or writer they are by whether or not they use their school library**



Finally, there were also differences between those who use the school library and those who don't in how they think about reading and writing. As Figure 8 shows, more children and young people who use the school library agree that reading is cool, that they will get a better job when they grow up if they are a good reader, that there are lots of things they want to read, that they will persevere with reading even when it is difficult, and that they can improve their reading if they put their mind to it. Similarly, they are less likely to agree that they cannot find things to read that interest them, and that they only read when they have to.

**Figure 8: Percentage agreement with reading attitudinal statements by whether or not they use their school library**





The same relationships hold true for writing (see Figure 9), with the exception of self-efficacy where there are no marked differences between those who use the school library and those who don't.

**Figure 9: Percentage agreement with writing attitudinal statements by whether or not they use their school library**



## School library use and reading skill

In 2017/18 we had reading skill data for 1,098 pupils aged 11 to 15, which allows us to explore the link between school library use and reading skill. Schools measured reading skill using different assessments, so we categorised pupils into three groups depending on whether or not they were reading at the level expected for their age: reading below expected level (13.2%), reading at expected level (75.5%) and reading above expected level (11.3%).

Table 2 shows that children and young people who don't use the school library are twice as likely to read below the level expected for their age compared with their peers who use the school library. Overall, as many children and young people who read below their expected level as well as above their expected level say that they use the library, indicating that it can be a space that is relevant to all pupils regardless of their reading skill.

**Table 2: Reading skill by whether or not children and young people use the school library**

	Below expected level	At expected level	Above expected level
Use the school library	10.4%	78.6%	10.9%
Don't use the school library	22.3%	70.2%	7.6%

## School library use and mental wellbeing

For the first time last year, we inserted a few questions about mental wellbeing in our annual literacy survey (for our report on the link between mental wellbeing, reading and writing, please see here: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/mental-wellbeing-reading-and-writing/>). We chose to focus on three aspects of mental wellbeing: life satisfaction, coping skills and self-belief.

To explore how mental wellbeing in general is associated with school library use, we combined responses across the three components (life satisfaction, coping skills and self-belief) into one to create an overall wellbeing index with a range of 1 to 10, where a higher score equals a higher level of mental wellbeing. Again, for some of the following analyses we also split the sample into quartiles to help us explore how those who score at the bottom (N = 10,675) and top quartile (N = 10,863) of our mental wellbeing index<sup>7</sup> differ in terms of their school library use.

Figure 10 shows that those who use the school library have, on average, a **higher mental wellbeing score** than those who don't use the library, and the difference is statistically significant<sup>8</sup>. The actual size of the difference between the two groups was 'small' (Cohen's  $d = .28$ ), indicating that the mean wellbeing score of those who use the school library exceeds the scores of 62% of those who don't use their school library.

**Figure 10: Average (mean) mental wellbeing score out of 10 by whether or not they use the school library**

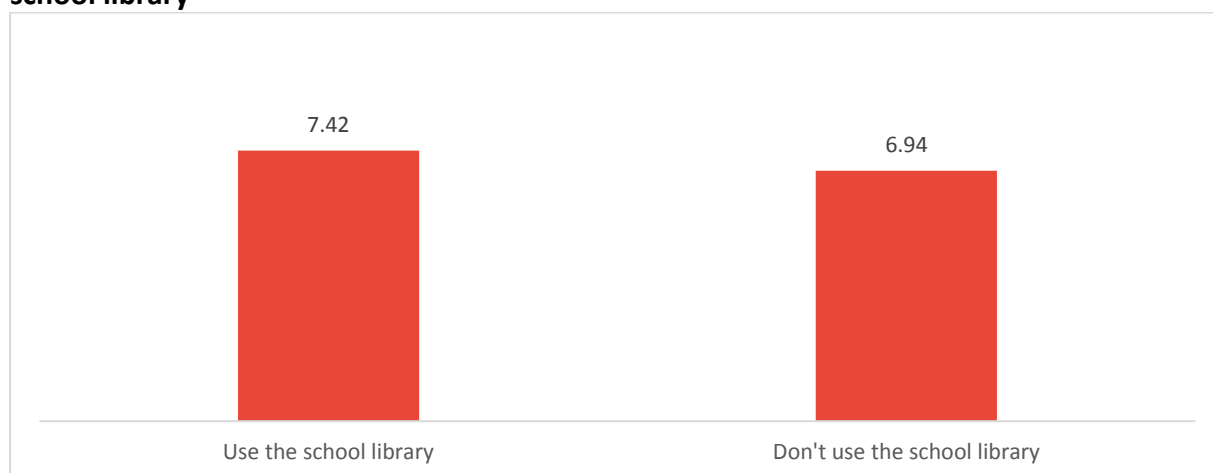


Table 3 cross-tabulates those who either use or don't use the school library with those who score in the bottom and top quartiles for mental wellbeing. It shows that those who don't use the school library are nearly **twice as likely** to have low mental wellbeing than they are to have high mental wellbeing. However, the differences between the groups are not as clear cut as we saw earlier with respect to literacy engagement.

<sup>7</sup> Quartile scores: bottom = 0-6.32; lower middle = 6.33-7.50; upper middle = 7.51-8.50; top = 8.51-10

<sup>8</sup>  $t(28051,695) = 27.395$ ,  $p < .001$ , adjusted for unequal variances

**Table 3: Cross-tabulation of whether or not they use the school library with bottom and top literacy engagement scores**

	Low mental wellbeing (bottom quartile)	High mental wellbeing (top quartile)
Use the school library	20.2%	26.7%
Don't use the school library	29.3%	17.9%

## Conclusion

This report has shown that while nearly 2 in 3 children and young people use the school library, there are some sociodemographic differences in library use. The findings indicate that more girls and pupils who receive free school meals use the school library than boys and those from more advantaged backgrounds. Moreover, school library use declines as children get older: more than 8 in 10 children in primary school use the library but fewer than 4 in 10 use it by the age of 14 to 16.

Furthermore, the regional differences in school library use indicate that children and young people face educational disadvantage when it comes to school libraries. In particular, the North-South divide identified in education<sup>9</sup> is reflected in the results as children and young people in the North West of England and Yorkshire and Humber were least likely to use the school library, whereas Greater London and the South West of England were among the areas where children and young people were most likely to use the library.

The reasons for children using the school library or not using it highlight some of the important elements of school libraries identified in previous research<sup>10</sup>. Nearly 6 in 10 children who use the library report that they do so because it has books they are interested in. Nearly half of those who don't use the school library mention a lack of books that interest them as the reason. A good-quality and engaging collection that reflects the school community is crucial to ensure all children can find materials they enjoy reading.

The importance of good-quality physical space is also evident: half of the children and young people say the library being friendly and comfortable is a reason for going. Indeed, evidence collected as part of the APPG for school libraries report<sup>11</sup> suggests that the school library can play a significant role for pupils who find the school environment particularly unwelcoming.

The findings of the report also show that over a third of children and young people don't use the school library because their friends don't go. Therefore, more work could be done to promote the school library as a suitable social space for children and young people. The library was also seen by some children and young people as a place for younger pupils so they didn't want to go. This, together with the age gap in library use, might suggest that it would be

<sup>9</sup> Children's Commissioner for England. (2018). *Growing up North: A generation of children await the powerhouse promise*. Retrieved 7 November 2018 from <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Growing-Up-North-March-2018-1.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Teravainen, A. & Clark, C. (2017). *School libraries: A literature review on current provision and evidence of impact*. National Literacy Trust. Retrieved 7 November 2018 from <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/school-libraries-literature-review-current-provision-and-evidence-impact-2017/>

<sup>11</sup> All Party Parliamentary Group for Libraries. (2014). *The beating heart of the school*. Retrieved 7 November 2018 from <https://archive.cilip.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/BeatingHeartoftheSchool.pdf>

particularly important to make the library a relevant social space for teenagers where they feel they belong.

This report also shows that school library users are more likely to have higher overall literacy engagement. Indeed, we also found that reading and writing enjoyment, daily reading and writing, seeing oneself as a good reader and writer, and positive attitudes towards reading and writing are all positively linked to school library use. These findings are consistent with previous research and further highlight the importance of school libraries.

Finally, this report also shows that school library use is linked to mental wellbeing, with those who use the library having a higher mental wellbeing score. While the differences between children and young people who do and do not use the school library are not as pronounced as with literacy engagement, these findings still show that school libraries are not only valuable for children's reading and writing but also for supporting them to lead happy and healthy lives. This corroborates previous findings of the school library being a safe space. For example, the school library as a safe space has emerged as one of the most important characteristics in focus group discussions with children and young people<sup>12</sup>.

To sum up, more work is needed to boost good school libraries across the country and ensure that all children and young people can benefit from having a good-quality school library. The findings of this report have not only highlighted the importance of school libraries for reading and writing but also for overall mental wellbeing.

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<sup>12</sup> Douglas, J. & Wilkinson, S. (2010). *School libraries: A plan for improvement*. National Literacy Trust & Museums, Libraries & Archives. Retrieved 7 November 2018 from <https://literacytrust.org.uk/programmes/love-our-libraries/>

## About the National Literacy Trust

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