

## Why do children need great school libraries?

*In this Development and Discussion blog the National Literacy Trust's Head of Research Christina Clark explains how the charity's latest research demonstrates the value of school libraries on children's lives.*

It is an undisputed fact that school libraries play a crucial role in supporting children and young people to acquire the skills they need and deserve for the future. Indeed, previous research has 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, wider learning skills, their motivation and attitudes towards reading, and other personal and interpersonal outcomes, such as self-esteem and feelings of success.

While school libraries are clearly important for the reasons outlined above and more, there is a lack of data on school libraries in the UK, which 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 to bring 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.

A benchmarking survey will be conducted across the UK in early 2019, which will tell us how many schools have a school library, in its many guises, and much more. However, that survey will not provide information on the pupils' experience and use of school libraries, which is why we thought that it might be interesting to see what children and young people who participated in our latest annual literacy survey that we conducted in November 2017 and January 2018 had to say about school libraries.

So, how many children and young people say that they use the school library? Of the 45,523 children and young people who answered our questions on school library use, nearly 2 in 3 (63.2%) told us that they use their school library, while nearly 1 in 3 (32.9%) told us they don't. 3.9% of children and young people we surveyed told us that they don't have a school library.

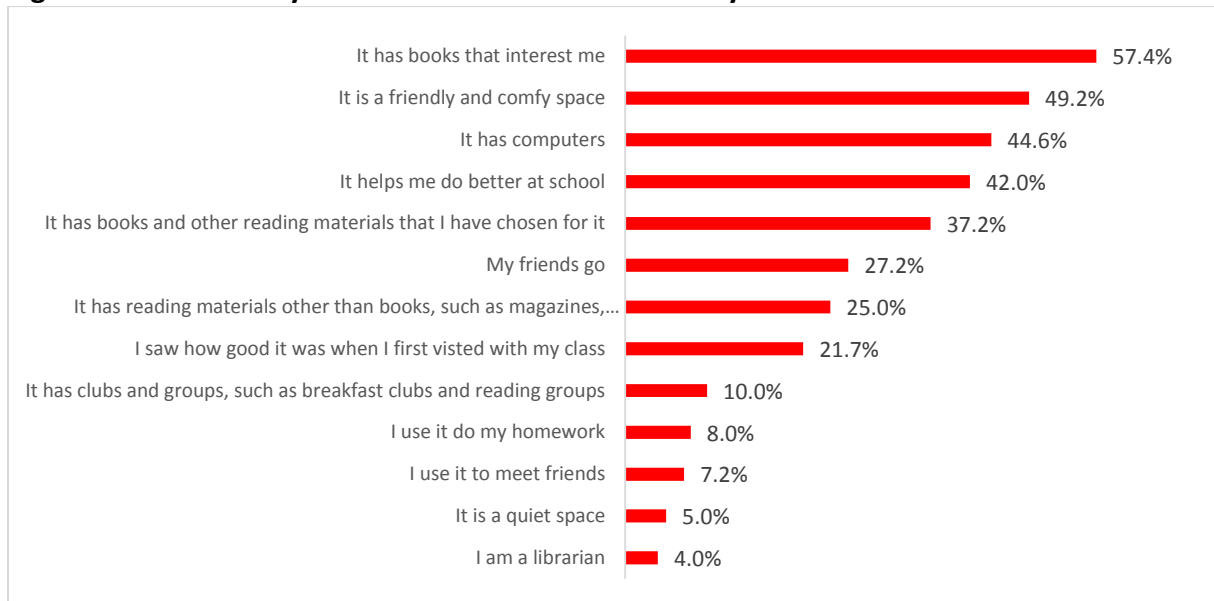
Overall, school library use decreased slightly over the last couple of years, with 67.1% of children and young people in 2016 telling us that they used the school library.

Our data tells us how many pupils use the school library - and also who is more likely to use it. For example, more girls than boys say that they use their school library (68.5% vs. 63.5%). Similarly, more pupils who receive free school meals, our proxy of socioeconomic background, use their school library compared with their more advantaged peers (69.1% vs. 64.7%).

However, the biggest difference in school library use is seen across age groups, where over twice as many pupils aged 8 to 11 as those aged 14 to 16 say that they use their school library (81.9% vs. 37.3%). We also found geographical variation in school library use with those from the North West of England (52.4%) and Yorkshire and the Humber (57.6%) being least likely to use the school library and those from Greater London (75.2%), the West Midlands (72.2%) and the South West (71.5%) being most likely to use the library.

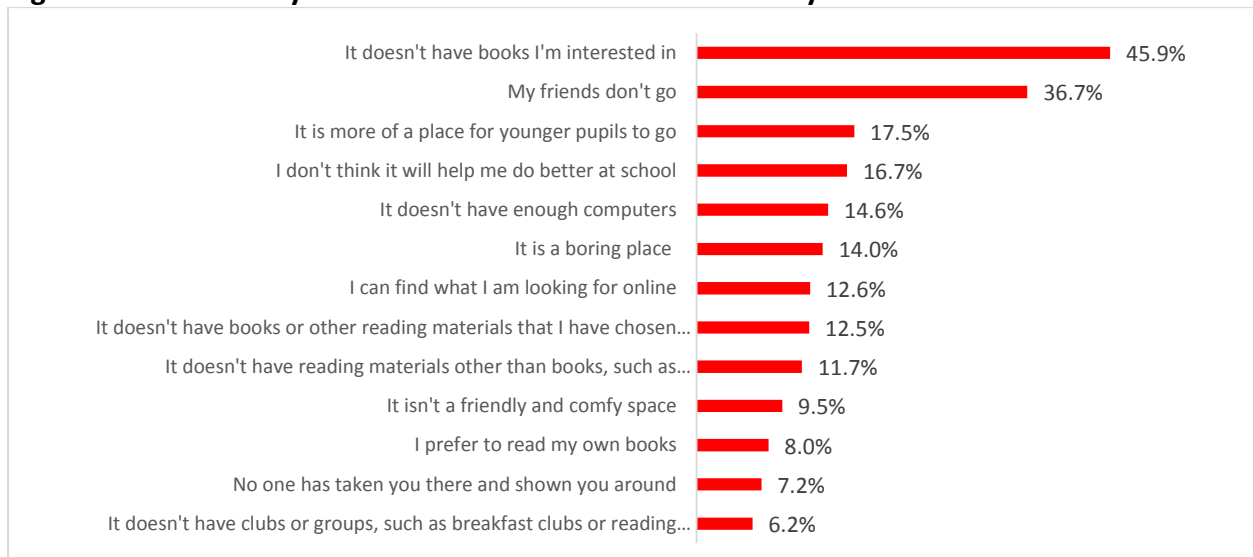
Why do children and young people use, or don't use, their school library? Well, those who say that they use the school library do so for a variety of reasons. As Figure 1 below shows, over half of them use it because it gives them access to reading materials that interest them, nearly half also use it 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. 1 in 4 use it because their friends use it, while 7% use it specifically to meet their friends.

**Figure 1: Reasons why those who use the school library do so**



Conversely, the main reason for not using it by those who don't use is that it doesn't have books that they are interested in (see Figure 2). While only a quarter of children and young people use the library because their friends do, 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. The library was also seen by some children and young people as a place for younger pupils, so they don't go. This, together with the age gap in library use, might suggest that it would be particularly important to make the library a relevant social space for teenagers where they feel they belong.

**Figure 2: Reasons why those who don't use the school library don't use it**



Why does it matter? Our latest data not only shows us that those who use their school library have greater literacy engagement than those who don't use their library, they also report greater mental wellbeing. Indeed, those who don't use the school library are nearly **twice more likely** to have low mental wellbeing than they are to have high mental wellbeing (29.3% vs. 17.9%).

Lastly, 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. Table 1 shows that children and young people who don't use the school library are twice more 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 that read below their expected level, as well as above it, say that they use the library, indicating that it can be a space that is relevant to all pupils, regardless of reading skill.

**Table 1: Reading skill by whether or not children and young people use the school library**

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

Overall, our latest findings suggest that school library use is indeed not only important for children and young people's academic achievement but they also have a much wider impact on children and young people leading happy lives. It is therefore crucial that every child has access to a friendly, welcoming library that feels like a place for everyone.