Exploring the Literacy-Related Behaviors and Feelings of Pupils Eligible for Free School Meals in Relation to Their Use of and Access to School Libraries

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Abstract

Although it has been argued that school libraries are important for supporting the reading engagement of pupils who receive free school meals, to date there has been little analysis of the extent to which use of school library spaces is related to these pupils' reading behaviors. We analyzed data from 6,264 children and young adults in the United Kingdom entitled to free school meals (FSM) who completed the 2019 National Literacy Trust Annual Literacy Survey. Our goals were to understand the extent to which these pupils' engagement with reading and writing were related to access to or use of their school libraries and to understand some of the reasons why they do or do not use school libraries. We found their enjoyment of both reading and writing, their confidence in their own abilities, and the frequency with which they read or wrote for pleasure outside of school was significantly higher for those pupils eligible for FSM who used their school libraries relative to both those who did not use their school libraries and those who had no school library. Consistent with this finding, children eligible for FSM who used their school library engaged with a greater diversity of reading material and writing than those who were not school library users. Pupils who had access to welcoming, well-equipped libraries with books well-matched to students' interests used the libraries for those reasons and because, for many, it was a safe haven. Many non-users either had no school library or perceived the library as poorly equipped, unwelcoming, or uninteresting. We argue that effective school libraries can be a significant resource in supporting engagement with self-motivated literacy practices in children from low-income families.

Introduction

BACKGROUND

In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, schools are not required to have a school library (BMG Research 2019), a circumstance that stands in stark contrast to other institutions, such as prisons, where library provision—including the need for qualified librarians—is mandated in the United Kingdom (UK) (Bowe 2011). At the same time, school library use has been connected to a wide variety of improved outcomes for children and young adults. Existing evidence suggests that school libraries are beneficial not only to pupils' reading attainment but also their reading enjoyment, reading frequency, reading confidence, and attitudes towards reading (Clark 2010; Teravainen and Clark 2017; Clark and Teravainen-Goff 2018). In addition, school libraries have been linked to improved outcomes in academic achievement in general and specific areas such as writing skills (Teravainen and Clark 2017). Studies that have examined the impact of school libraries have also shown that both parents and school staff believe that school libraries do impact pupils' personal development (Fodale and Bates 2011).

Previous findings have shown that UK children from low-income families tend to use their school library more than their peers (Clark and Teravainen-Goff 2018). Indeed, it has also been argued that school libraries have a crucial role to play in relation to supporting children from low-income backgrounds to become engaged readers (Williams 2008). This finding is particularly important because socioeconomic status (SES) has been reported to impact children's academic performance and literacy-related achievement in particular. For example, in 1997 Steve Strand showed that children who received free school meals (FSMs), for which eligibility is determined by their families' financial need, started school (aged four to five years) with lower baseline scores on tests of general abilities and on a test of reading readiness when compared to age peers from more-affluent families, and that this achievement gap widened over the course of Key Stage 1 (that is, the first two years of school for UK students). A recent government analysis (UK Dept. for Ed. 2018) reported that pupils who were eligible for FSM showed lower achievement at the end of Key Stage 4 (school years 10 and 11) relative to non-FSM-eligible peers, and that this achievement gap was larger if learners attended schools in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage. FSM-eligible students were also found to be 23 percent less likely to be in sustained employment at the age of twenty-seven, and three times more likely to be receiving out-of-work benefits compared to non-FSM-eligible age peers.

This paper focuses on understanding how the apparent achievement gap experienced by UK children eligible for FSM may be related to their use of school libraries. We explore this question because evidence also suggests that pupils receiving FSM are less likely to enjoy reading and writing or engage in reading and writing outside of school than their age peers. For example, data from the National Literacy Trust's Annual Literacy Survey collected between 2005 and 2018 has consistently suggested that pupils eligible for FSM are less likely to enjoy reading than their more-advantaged peers (Clark 2017). We argue that this lack of enjoyment in reading might also contribute to reduced reading achievement for children eligible for FSM because the affective and behavioral aspects of reading have been linked to increased proficiency in reading (Clark and Teravainen-Goff 2018). Reading motivation, attitudes, and self-efficacy are reported to influence the frequency with which children engage with reading. For example, if children hold positive attitudes to reading then they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to read, whereas negative attitudes inhibit motivation to read (McKenna et al. 2012; McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth 1995). Motivating children to read is important (Gambrell 2015), as the more

frequently children read the better readers they become (Teravainen and Clark 2017; Gambrell 2015).

We believe that school libraries and librarians have the potential to engage children from disadvantaged backgrounds with books and other print-based resources and to provide learning resources and environments that these children may be unable to access elsewhere. Such access may be transformative for some children in stimulating interest in books and literacy in a way that could benefit their achievement in reading and writing. Competency in reading is critical for enabling children to access the rest of their school curriculum. However, we lack research that specifically examines a large sample of children eligible for FSM and compares them *to each other* (as opposed to their more-affluent age peers) on their use of school library facilities, while also assessing their engagement with literacy-related activities that we know are linked to higher attainment (Clark and Teravainen-Goff 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inequalities in access to school libraries is not an issue only in the UK; research from the United States has previously identified similar concerns. A brief review by Stephen Krashen identified that US children in poverty have an increased risk of not achieving academically and also have very poor access to books both at home and in their community (2011). Similarly, Shana Pribesh, Karen Gavigan, and Gail Dickinson examined the variability in school library staffing, accessibility, and provision across schools with learners from various socioeconomic backgrounds. These researchers used online questionnaires to acquire data from a sample of 176 school librarians in North Carolina (64 percent) and Virginia (36 percent). They found that 43 percent of the total sample had 40 percent or more of their students on free and reduced-price school meals, and 51 percent of these were elementary schools. They discovered that schools with the highest proportion of students living in poverty had the least access to resources, were less likely to have full-time school librarians or even more than one member of library staff, and were unlikely to have up-to-date collections of material compared to those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were further disadvantaged by overdue fines at some schools and by learners' lack of the competencies needed to access, evaluate, and use information (2011).

More recently, Denice Adkins (2014) explored the results of the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) to examine the effects of school libraries on student achievement, with specific focus on socioeconomic influence. She found that students from lower SES schools had lower levels of school library staffing. Like Christina Clark and Anne Teravainen-Goff (2018), Adkins found that children from low SES backgrounds reported greater school library use than higher SES peers. Family wealth was a strong predictor of math, reading, and science performance. However, interestingly, school library adequacy and technology were negatively associated with reading scores in general. Adkins concludes that low SES students rely on school libraries that aren't necessarily well resourced.

When we consider international data on this topic, we again see evidence to suggest the importance of both SES and school library provision on student achievement. Stephen Krashen, Syying Lee, and Jeff McQuillan (2010) analyzed a subset of the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) data for thirty-four countries. The authors examined intercorrelations among factors, including SES, sustained silent reading, school libraries (including only those with over 500 books), and direct instruction. These researchers discovered

that higher SES countries had greater levels of independent reading and greater access to school libraries. Analysis of the PIRLS data revealed SES to be the strongest predictor of reading achievement when controlling for the effects of the other factors, with school library access also being a strong predictor.

In January 2019 nearly one in six children and young adults (15.4 percent) attending school in England got free school meals (UK Dept. for Ed. 2019), suggesting that a large number of children and young adults are at risk of falling into the "attainment gap," the term used in the UK for the gap in achievement between learners from more- and less-affluent and privileged groups.

PURPOSE

An analysis of how reading and writing behaviors of pupils qualifying for FSM may be linked to their ability to access a school library, and whether they use it, could help us to understand how the observed long-term inequalities in literacy attainment and subsequent life prospects might be disrupted by effective use of school libraries. In this paper we characterize the reading and writing behaviors of pupils eligible for FSM and how they feel about reading and writing, and relate individual differences in these variables to the availability of a school library and pupils' use of it. This focus on the potential links between school library use and students' reading and writing activity provides a novel broadening of our understanding of pupils' engagement with literacy when they come from low-income backgrounds, and the ways in which school libraries could contribute to reducing the attainment gap going forward.

Our research goals were:

1. To explore whether access to or use of school library facilities by pupils eligible for free school meals was linked to their engagement with and feelings about reading and writing.

2. To understand some of the reasons why pupils who receive free school meals either use or do not use school libraries.

This work therefore is within the traditions of critical and equity-based education theory and practice. Our epistemological approach to our work is one of critical realism. This position proposes that there exists a reality, but it cannot always be observed directly because of the societal structures and systems that operate at any time (McLeod 2011; Sayer 2000). As a result we offer an interpretation of that reality based on our data, but we accept that our interpretation may differ from that of other people, and that our data may not always give us full access to what is really going on.

Method

OVERVIEW

We report an analysis of 6,264 children who were receiving FSM in the UK and who responded to the Annual Literacy Survey between January and March 2019. This online survey is conducted yearly by the National Literacy Trust and covers all regions of the UK. In 2019 the

survey included a total of thirty-six questions, two of which asked about the pupils' library use. These two questions were included to inform the National Literacy Trust's own work with school libraries as well as to provide information for a wider school library campaign in the UK.

The National Literacy Trust and Nottingham Trent University collaborated on supporting a national campaign aimed at promoting the importance of school libraries (the Great School Libraries campaign, see <https://www.greatschoollibraries.org.uk>), with up-to-date research. The university-based authors of this paper conducted a literature review, while the National Literacy Trust made data from their Annual Literacy Survey available to them for additional analyses, which specifically looked at pupils' school library use. This paper is an outcome of this collaboration. For this paper, all authors contributed to the literature review and data analysis, with Georgina Rudkin leading the review, Clare Wood leading the quantitative analyses, and Emma Vardy leading on the qualitative analyses. Christina Clark and Anne Teravainen-Goff ran the survey and collated the data, and contributed to the data analysis and literature review.

PARTICIPANTS

For this research 56,905 pupils, recruited from 240 schools (representing about one percent of all schools in the UK), completed the Annual Literacy Survey between January and March 2019. Of these 7,400 reported that they were eligible for free school meals (13 percent), and of these 6,264 answered the questions about school library provision (11 percent), so these pupils formed the sample for this report. Within the sample, 3,666 of these pupils were male, 3,464 were female, with a further 110 identifying as having a non-binary gender identity, and 160 preferring not to state gender at all. The pupils were drawn from Year 3 (7 and 8 years old) through to Year 13 (17 and 18 years old). All regions of the UK were represented (see table 1), and 74.2 percent of pupils were from urban areas, and 17.6 percent from rural areas. The pupils were drawn from the full range of school types, including academies (57.8 percent), community schools (2.3 percent), independent schools (2.4 percent), local authority schools (27.7 percent), voluntary aided schools (1 percent), and other types (0.7 percent).

Table 1. Distribution of participants by UK region.

Region	Number of Participants	% Total Sample
North East	723	9.8
North West	508	6.9
Yorkshire	443	6.0
East Midlands	240	3.2
West Midlands	1049	14.2
East of England	833	11.3

Greater London	2044	27.6
South East England	386	5.2
South West England	397	5.4
Wales	116	1.6
Scotland	344	4.6
Northern Ireland	213	2.9
Not Reported	104	1.4

ANNUAL LITERACY SURVEY

The National Literacy Trust has conducted the Annual Literacy Survey since 2010. It is designed to ask pupils aged 9 to 18 about their enjoyment of reading and writing, their reading and writing behaviors, and how they feel about reading and writing. The online survey is free to schools and open for eight weeks, and in 2019 was conducted between the beginning of January and beginning of March. Schools are recruited through a range of channels, including newsletters, social media, and through partner organizations. As a thank-you for taking part, schools receive their own school-specific report of their pupils' responses. Because this was a self-selecting sample, there may be bias in the types of schools that elected to participate in the survey, so schools eager to foster a culture of reading may be over-represented. However, we do know some schools took part because they had identified their reading culture as lacking and wanted the data provided via the survey to support the promotion of reading in their schools.

On average, the survey takes twenty minutes to complete and consists mainly of multiple-choice options that ask about pupils' reading and writing in their free time, resulting in mainly ordinal and nominal data. In 2019 89 percent of participating children and young adults completed the survey during school hours, with the remainder completing it at home.

DATA ANALYSIS

As a result of the ordinal nature of the majority of the data produced by the questionnaire, all analyses conducted are based on non-parametric tests. Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to compare the distribution of responses across the three groups of interest (that is, school library users, non-users, and pupils without library access), and *post hoc* pairwise comparisons were Bonferroni corrected, and adjusted p values are reported in all cases. Associations between categorical variables are based on Chi-Square tests.

Results

SCHOOL LIBRARY USE

All pupils completing the survey were asked if they used their school library. In line with earlier findings (Clark and Teravainen-Goff 2018) the data showed that pupils eligible for free school meals were more likely than their more-affluent peers to use the school library daily (66.5% vs. 60.3%; χ^2=99.385, *df*=2, *p*<.001).

From this point on we examined only the responses of the 6,264 children who were eligible for FSM. When we consider their pattern of school library use, the majority (4,167) responded that they did use their school library, with 1,893 pupils reporting that they did not. A further 204 pupils reported that their school did not have a school library. Looking at gender and age differences within the sample of pupils eligible for FSM (see table 2), we find that in all four gender categories, the pupils were more likely to be library users than not, with girls most likely to be users of these spaces (χ^2=60.503, *df*=6, *p*<.0005). UK school children are grouped into "Key Stages" based on their age and where they are in terms of covering key subjects and learning outcomes. National attainment goals are set for children at the end of each Key Stage, with Key Stages 1, 2, and 3 focusing on core curriculum areas. Key Stages 4 and 5 work towards the completion of qualifications, typically General Certificates of Secondary Education (more commonly known as GCSEs) and A Levels in specific subjects, respectively, although Scotland has a different qualifications framework. We found evidence that children from Key Stages 2 and 3 were more likely to use the school library compared to those in Key Stages 4 and 5 (χ^2=457.3, *df*=6, *p*<.0005).

Table 2. Contingency table indicating distribution of participants by school library access group relative to gender and school Key Stage.

	School Library Use		
	Yes	**No**	**No School Library**
Boy	1974	992	106
Girl	2069	831	75
Other	46	26	8
Prefer not to say	78	44	15
Key Stage 2 (Ages 7–11 years)	1444	295	74
Key Stage 3 (Ages 11–14 years)	2383	1131	88
Key Stage 4 (Ages 14–16 years)	274	415	37

Key Stage 5 (Ages 16–18 years)	65	52	5

SCHOOL LIBRARY USE AND ENJOYMENT OF READING AND WRITING

When learners responded to the Annual Literacy Survey, they were asked how much they enjoyed reading and writing in their free time and were asked to indicate their response on a four-point Likert scale that ranged from "very much" to "not at all." In the case of pupils receiving FSM, significant differences in the distribution of responses were evident when we compared pupils who used their school library to those pupils who did not, and to pupils who did not have access to one ($H = 623.889$, $N=6264$, $p<.0005$). Specifically, the pupils who used the school library showed greater enjoyment of reading than did those who did not use the library ($p<.0005$) and those who did not have access to one ($p<.0005$) (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of pupils in each library use group within the sample reporting enjoyment of reading.

No significant differences were evident between the reported reading enjoyment of those who chose not to use their school library and those who do not have access to one (p=.055). The same pattern emerged for the children's enjoyment of writing ($H=467.667$, $N=6201$, $p<.0005$), with children who used the school library showing greater enjoyment of writing than both of the other two groups did ($p<.0005$ in both cases), and there was no difference between the non-users of school libraries and children without access ($p=.091$) (see figure 2).
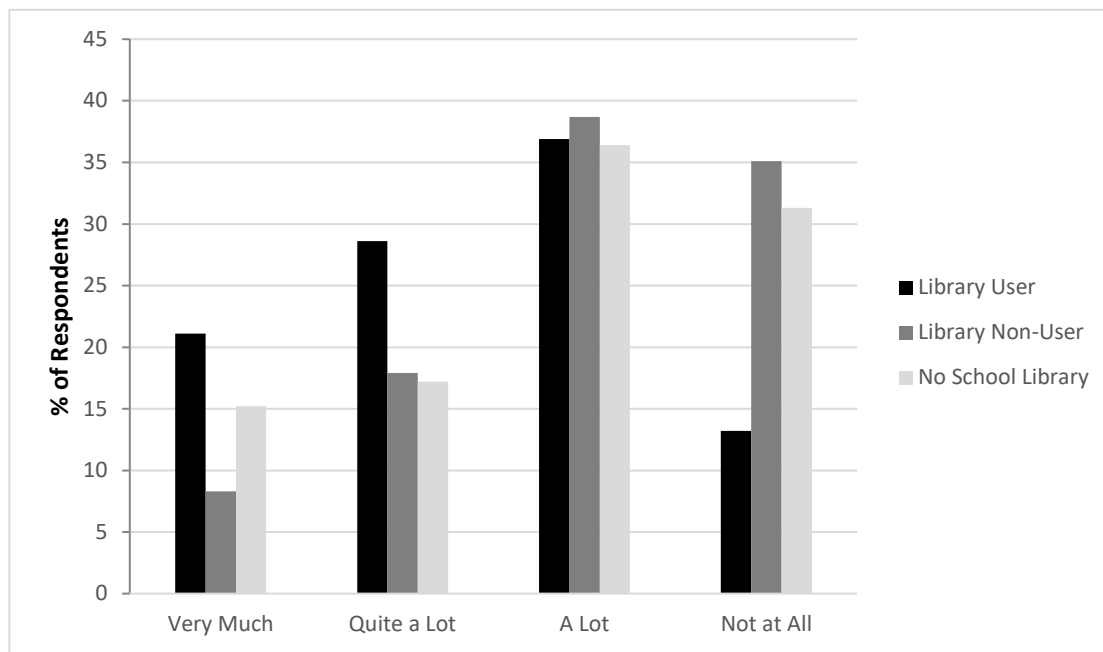
Figure 2. Percentage of pupils in each library use group within the sample reporting enjoyment of writing.

SCHOOL LIBRARY USE AND READING AND WRITING BEHAVIOR

Significant differences were found in the distribution of how often the pupils eligible for FSM read in their free time when compared to library use (H=599.880, N=6264, p<.0005), with the library users reading more frequently in their free time than both the non-users of the school library and those without a school library (p<.0005 in both cases). The pupils who did not have a school library read in their free time more often than those who chose not to use their school library (p=.01) (see figure 3).
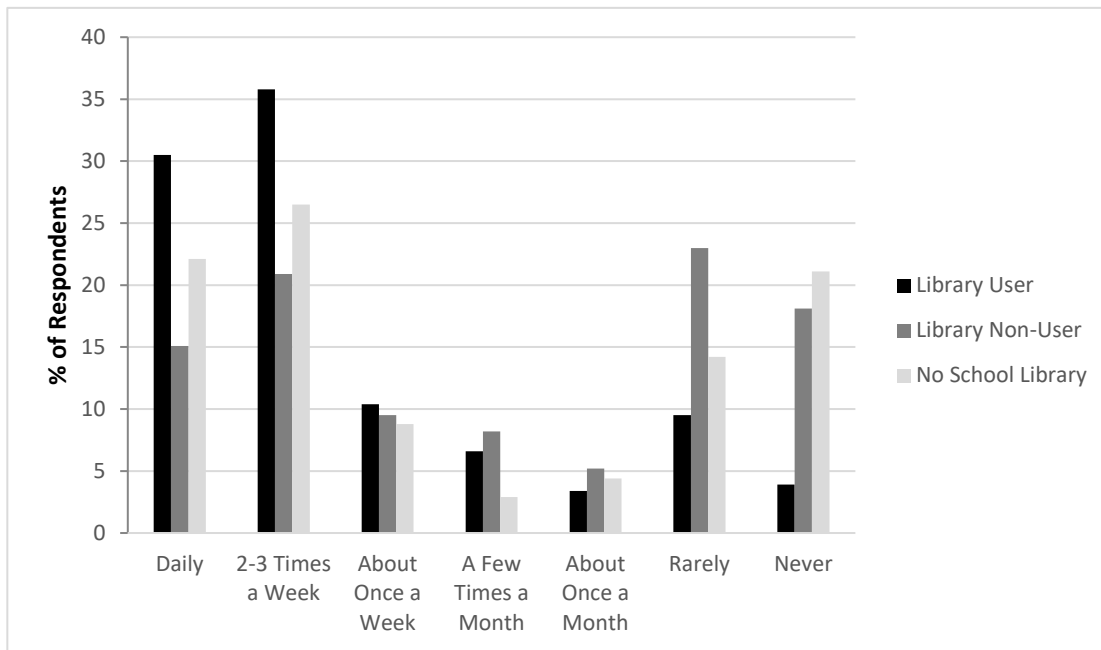
Figure 3. Percentage of pupils in each library use group within the sample reporting how often they read for pleasure outside of school.

This pattern was repeated for writing in their free time (*H*=326.707, *N*=6247, *p*<.0005), with the pupils who used the library showing significantly more frequent writing outside class than both of the other two groups (*p*<.0005 in both cases). The pupils who did not have access to a school library showed significantly more frequent writing behavior than the children who elected not to use their school library (*p*=.044) (see figure 4).
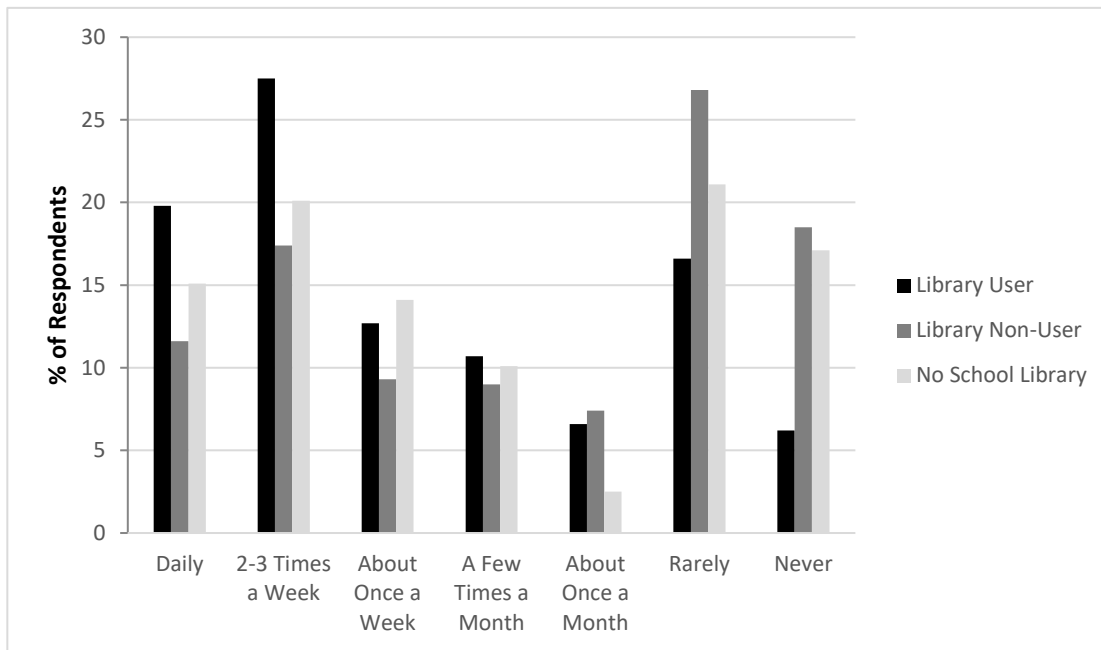
Figure 4. Percentage of pupils in each library use group within the sample reporting how often they wrote for pleasure outside of school.

From the pupils' responses to questions about the different types of reading and writing they engaged in outside of school, we were able to compute a measure of how diverse their engagement with texts was. It seems reasonable to propose that there would be a relationship between how widely pupils read and wrote, and the extent to which they used their school library. We therefore directly compared the text diversity scores of the pupils depending on whether they used their school library, did not use a school library, or had no access to a school library (see table 3). This comparison revealed that there were significant differences in the distribution of scores across the three groups. Looking at the number of different text types read by the respondents in their free time revealed a significant overall effect (H=580.822, N=6264, p<.0005), with those who used the school library reading a greater range of texts compared to both the non-users (p<.0005) and those without library access (p<.0005). The pupils who did not have access to a school library also reported engaging with significantly more diverse reading material relative to children who were non-users of their school library (p=.003).

Table 3. Median diversity of material read or written outside of school (range in parentheses) by school library use groups within the sample.

	Reading Diversity Score	Writing Diversity Score
School Library Users	4.0 (13)	3.0 (12)
School Library Non-Users	2.0 (13)	1.0 (12)
No School Library	3.0 (13)	2.0 (12)

This pattern was repeated for writing (H=513.053, N=6264, $p<.0005$), with library users writing the greatest range of material in their free time relative to non-users of libraries ($p<.0005$) and those without school library access ($p<.0005$). Again, pupils without school library access tended to produce a greater range of different text types in their free time relative to non-users of school libraries ($p=.003$).

READING CONFIDENCE

Pupils were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how confident they felt about their reading ability and again about writing. (The rating of 10 indicated greatest confidence.) Overall, differences in the distribution of confidence scores across the three groups were identified (H=180.302, N=6118, $p<.0005$). Specifically, the pupils eligible for FSM who used their school library had significantly higher reading confidence ratings than both of the other two groups ($p<.0005$ in both cases). There was no difference between the confidence levels of those who did not use their library and those without a school library ($p=1.0$) (see figure 5).
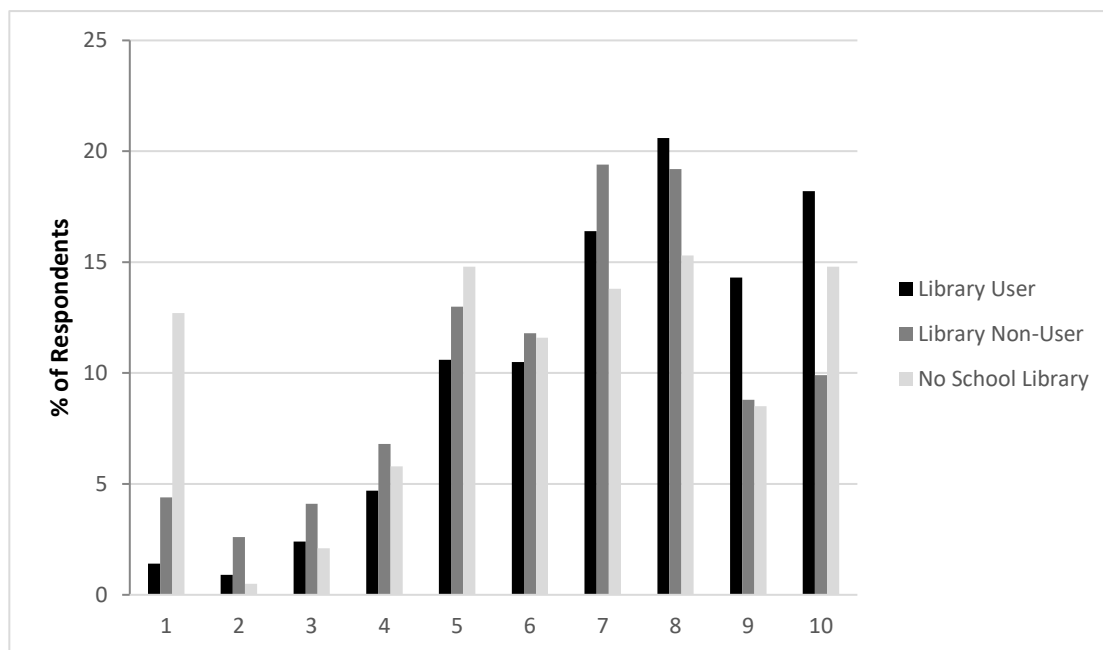

Figure 5. Percentage of pupils in each library use group within the sample reporting how confident they were in their reading ability on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 = most confident).

We also found the same pattern for writing confidence, with differences in distributions of scores across the three groups (H=139.030, N=6058, $p<.0005$) and school library users rating their writing confidence more highly than both of the other two groups ($p<.0005$ in both cases). There was no difference in confidence scores between those who did not use their school library and those without access to one ($p=1.0$) (see figure 6).
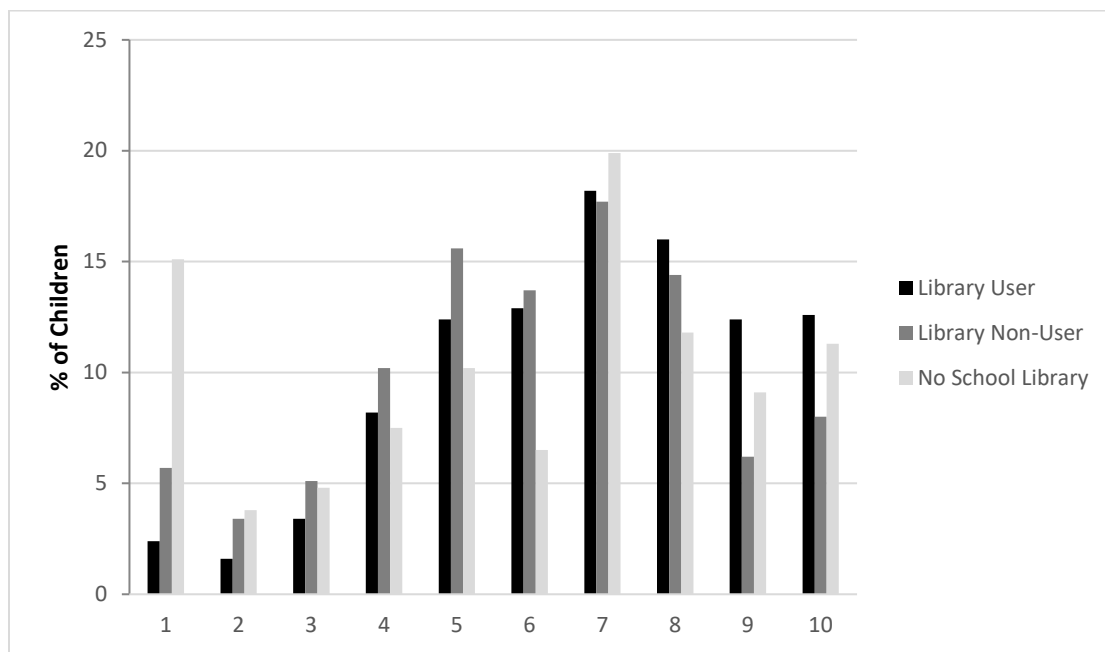
Figure 6: Percentage of pupils in each library use group within the sample reporting how confident they were in their writing ability on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 = most confident).

UNDERSTANDING PUPILS' USE AND NON-USE OF SCHOOL LIBRARIES

When students responded to the Annual Literacy Survey, they were also asked why they did or did not use the school library. A set of reasons were provided for selection based on responses to previous surveys; respondents could select more than one, but students were also able to input their own responses to the question if they wished. The pre-provided reasons selected by the pupils who are eligible for FSM are ranked in table 4 in order of frequency. There was a strong sense that the school library was a friendly and fun place to be, and a place that could support students' learning. This impression was reinforced by the open-ended responses. There were 690 responses to the open-ended question of why they used the school library. We categorized these responses using content analysis and calculated frequencies. The most-frequently mentioned reasons for using the school library were: *school curriculum, quiet place, safe haven, book access, equipment access,* and *self-improvement*. To arrive at these themes, we categorized key words and phrases. For example, if the responses mentioned safe/safety or they described the school library as a safe space for them, these responses were grouped together under the theme "safe haven." If the pupils mentioned they visited the library only for class these responses were grouped under "school curriculum."

Table 4. Reasons why the pupils used the school library: suggested reasons in rank order of importance.

Reason	N Agreed	Percentage of Sample
Friendly space	2156	29.1
Interesting books	2143	29.0
Helps me to learn	1948	26.3
To do homework	1968	26.6
Fun place	1695	22.9
There are computers there	1596	21.6
My friends go	1300	17.6
Other material than books	1236	16.7.
Meet friends	1212	16.4
Good first visit	967	13.1
Clubs	516	7.0
I am a pupil librarian	408	5.5

Table 5 provides examples of how the themes were developed via content analysis for three of the main themes; keywords are underlined.

Table 5. Examples that illustrate how the themes were identified for three of the main themes.

School Curriculum	Quiet Place	Safe Haven
A **reading lesson/English lesson** We have library lessons where we read books and take quizzes on them to get points and reach our point targets.	Allows me to read in **peace and quiet** most of the time	A good place to **get away from all bad things**
As a **class we go** the library	**Relax** and do my homework	I am friends with the librarian. I **feel safe** in the library because I get to go behind the desk as I help out (You could say I am a training or pupil librarian.)

Because I **have to for school work**	Because it **calms me down**	Because **I don't want to go outside**
Because I **have to go there for library [time]**	Because it is the **perfect place to calm down**	Because I have **literally no friends**. And I stay by myself
Because **our teachers make us**	Because it is a really **quiet and peaceful** place to read and it has a great variety of books to choose from.	Because it is the **only safe place** in the school
Because the English lessons in school make it **compulsory event two weeks**	Because it is a **quiet** in the library whereas outside it is loud	It's a **safe haven** from bullies

The most-frequently mentioned reason for visiting the school library was because such visits were part of the school curriculum (138 responses), with either a scheduled English lesson for the library or a time for Accelerated Reader (9 responses). Associated with the use of the school library for schoolwork, 33 responses mentioned the library was where they went to change or obtain a new reading book. For other pupils the library was a place they could complete classwork and homework, or study (8 responses).

The school library was recognized by the pupils eligible for FSM as providing the opportunity for self-improvement (62 responses) either with reading or generally for school. Pupils mentioned how they used the library for reviewing work and studying for exams (15 responses). The library for these pupils was a place where they could "practice a test that you have to do the next day."

For 51 pupils the school library provided a place where they could access books. Analyzing the comments, this appears to have been for personal use. For example, the library was described as a "magical place filled with books that I can read," offering pupils a "wide range of books from fiction and nonfiction." "I like to use the school library as I can find interesting books to read." This finding was linked to another reason pupils mentioned: they used the library because they enjoyed reading (47 responses).

Students used school libraries to access equipment such as a laptop, desktop computer, or printer, or to purchase a pen (14 responses). For pupils who may not have had access to a digital device at home, the school library enabled access to the facilities needed to complete schoolwork. A typical response was "I can print things and use Word for school and outside purposes."

For the second theme of "a quiet place" many pupils (113) explained that the school library offered somewhere they could read, concentrate, relax, and be calm. The environment of the library offered these pupils something different from the rest of the school. Typical responses were "because it is quiet in the library whereas outside it is loud" and "it is calm and quiet and the perfect reading environment." Forty-seven pupils mentioned how quiet the library was, and this helped them to concentrate (18 responses). For these pupils the library was a place to go because "it is a calm place to get on with your work without being disturbed and it makes me

feel confortable (sic) to read" and "because it helps me concentrate especially when I am with mu (sic) siblings and they try to distract me."

Associated with this theme of a quiet place is the use of the school library as a safe haven (21 responses). Typical responses were "it's a safe haven from bullies" and "only safe place in the school" and "a good place to get away from all bad things." This theme is perhaps summed up best by the following response: "I just feel it [is] a place where I can be my self (sic) and where I can be me it like my little sancery (sic)."

The reasons why some pupils eligible for FSM did not use the school library were also captured using a mixture of predetermined response options within the survey and an open-response box. The reasons as options provided by the survey were ranked in order of popularity and are summarized in table 6. Key reasons included a perception that the library was boring and their friends did not use it, that the books were not interesting enough (and, in some cases that they preferred to use their own books) and that they could find information they needed online.

Open responses to the question were provided by 344 pupils. The majority reported finding the library boring or not interesting (54 responses), and others mentioned "hating reading" (39 responses). Eight respondents mentioned that they did not have a school library or a school librarian. An example of such a response was, "Our library is not an actual library its just a bookcase at the back of my English teachers classroom."

Table 6. Reasons why the pupils did not want to use the school library (suggested reasons) in rank order of importance.

Reason	Number Who Agreed	Percentage of Sample
It's boring	1043	14.1
No interesting books	878	11.9
Friends don't use it	775	10.5
I prefer my own books	734	9.9
I can find information online	632	8.5
Doesn't help me learn	470	6.4
It's for younger pupils	392	5.3
No computers	321	4.3
No other materials	293	4.0
Isn't a friendly space	229	3.1
No clubs	181	2.4

I haven't visited it	143	1.9

Other reasons for not using the school library varied. Some pupils preferred to read or complete schoolwork at home (22 responses). This preference may be associated with social identity, with pupils mentioning in open responses that they avoided the library because it was for "nerds" or for those to be bullied. The overall message conveyed by these responses was that going to the library was not cool (24 responses). However, 22 respondents mentioned disappointment in the reading material available. Typical responses were "does not have the genre I'm interested in/am reading (manga)" and "there's nothing edgy or even slightly good in school everything is so politically correct and there are so many rules."

Interestingly, 35 respondents mentioned that they did not have time to visit the library during the school day, and 19 mentioned how busy their library was, with one pupil saying there is "never enough space and if there is no space you have to go." Other reasons for not using the school library included not having access to computers (5 responses mentioned this in addition to this being one of the predetermined options in the dropdown list) or being banned from the library (4 responses).

Discussion

We found that the extent to which pupils eligible for FSM were able to access a school library— and whether they used it if they did have access—was significant in terms of their reading- and writing-related feelings and behavior. Specifically, we found that pupils eligible for FSM who used the school library were more likely to enjoy reading and writing, and to read and write more frequently outside class compared to pupils eligible for FSM who were not library users. Library users among the students eligible for FSM also reported reading and writing a wider variety of texts and had higher confidence in their reading and writing ability. Our analysis of the pupils' open-ended responses to Annual Literacy Survey questions about why they did or did not use a school library underscores the importance of school libraries for these pupils' ability to engage effectively with literacy. Libraries afford students eligible for FSM safe spaces not only for their learning but—for some—to have a respite from school life in general, and provide access to resources that they need to engage with the school curriculum and find learning rewarding and motivating.

Perhaps most noteworthy is the evidence here that school library use may be somehow linked to the frequency with which the pupils eligible for FSM read and wrote outside of school. The status of these activities has been recently recognized as important for schools to encourage (Cremin 2014; Cremin and Locke 2017), with reading for pleasure now forming part of the school inspection framework in England and Wales. It would seem that reading and writing outside of school may be critical in enabling pupils who are eligible for FSM to close the achievement gap. For example, Tiffany A. Flowers found that Black high school students' reading for pleasure positively impacted their performance on standardized tests of reading (2003). More recently, Minna Torppa and colleagues found that individual differences in 1,309 Finnish children's leisure reading explained variance in their PISA reading scores (2017). Perhaps most convincingly, Torppa et al. have also found that increased levels of leisure reading (of books in particular) was related to growth in children's reading comprehension over time

(2020). We argue that that school libraries may afford students spaces where they can develop identities as readers and writers and, thereby, increase their engagement with such activities. As a result, they can improve their literacy level and skills over time.

The qualitative data we have presented here has highlighted that access to school libraries is important to pupils who are eligible for FSM for other reasons. They represent a highly vulnerable group of young people, and their open-ended responses indicate the importance that the library holds for them. It affords them a quiet space in which to work, which may be the only quiet space available to them for study, depending on home conditions. The issue of safety was raised by respondents, and the importance of the library as somewhere that offered respite was key to some of those who used it. By restricting pupils' access to school libraries, especially in primary school (as indicated by the findings of the 2019 BMG Research report), we are not just limiting the academic potential of pupils from low-income backgrounds. We are also potentially putting their wellbeing at risk.

Although our report is based on a large and diverse sample of pupils, we recognize that our sample may not be representative of all schools in the UK. However, it should be noted that if the sample comprised only schools with a positive reading culture then we would expect the reading enjoyment and frequency data to be higher than reported here. The survey revealed a large number of pupils who reported that they did not enjoy reading and did not engage with it in their free time.

The cross-sectional nature of our data is perhaps more of a limitation (that is, it is only taken from one point in time). Our results should not be taken as indicative of a causal association between school library use and reading outcomes. We recognize that without longitudinal evidence over multiple time points or some form of intervention-based design there is no way of being sure that it was the pupils' use of school libraries that was driving their reading behavior, enjoyment, and confidence scores. It could equally be the case that those pupils who were the most engaged and the most able were the most motivated to use the resources available to them. It should also be noted that pupils' school library use and their status as receiving free school meals was self-reported and, therefore, may not have been accurate reflections of their actual school library use or their level of disadvantage.

We also note that our content analysis of reasons for using the school library—or not—is based on 690 open-ended responses from 6,264 Annual Literacy Survey respondents. They did not have to write a response if they felt that their reasons were adequately captured by selecting one or more of the answer options in the previous question. While the open-ended responses were enlightening and thought-provoking, we feel it is important to recognize that the qualitative analyses reported here are based on only a modest subset of our sample.

While noting these important limitations, we believe that this paper represents an important dataset for beginning to better understand the needs of pupils who are eligible for free school meals. Acting on this understanding can help reduce the achievement gap between students from low-income homes and those from more-affluent families. Our data have shown that within a large sample of UK children and young adults eligible for FSM, there is variation in the extent to which they can access a school library. Also, even if they can access one, some pupils choose not to use it. The reasons for this lack of use are varied. Acting on this feedback provided by pupils who already face challenges in their lives and learning could improve the learning environment for them and for their classmates.

From our perspective, students' perception of the library as a "boring" place with unappealing texts is the first area that should be tackled. The reduction in qualified library staff in English

school libraries (BMG 2019), for example, may be part of the reason why this perception has been developed. Reduction in school budgets year-on-year has resulted in school librarians being made redundant, the role being downgraded or not replaced as non-essential staff. However, this fails to recognize that school librarians are important curators of literature and the information held by libraries. Therefore, they have the ability to enthuse children about texts in a way that is much broader than the focus of individual classroom teachers. If a school library has been allowed to become dated, becoming merely functional rather than a place of stimulation and new material, pupils sense that libraries have less to offer them than does their own collection of books at home.

Similarly, school librarians need to recognize the influence of peer groups and create spaces where groups of young people will want to spend time and treat it as a safe space to explore their identities as readers. A sense of belonging is important to children's academic motivation and emotional reactions to school (Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni 2013; Gray 2017). It would seem from our data that the school library can provide this valuable space to some students, but if pupils' peers see the school library as unappealing or uncool, school librarians may find it difficult to overcome negative perceptions of library use.

We consistently found the best outcomes in terms of confidence, enjoyment, and frequency of extra-curricular reading and writing in the group of students who reported that they had a school library and they used it. We propose that school libraries may be important in encouraging students from disadvantaged backgrounds to engage with a wide variety of texts, to enjoy reading and writing, and to have confidence in their reading and writing abilities. In other studies these positive attitudes have been linked to increased reading frequency (McKenna et al. 2012; McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth 1995). Increased frequency of reading and writing outside of school has, in turn, been associated with better reading achievement (Teravainen and Clark 2017; Gambrell 2015; Torppa et al. 2020).

Needed now are longitudinal data that track pupils' use of library spaces at school, and how their reading behaviors, confidence, and reading competencies develop over time in the context of the ways in which they are using those spaces. Such studies must use sensitive measures of school library engagement that can be verified independently. In particular, it would be helpful to break down and focus on specific aspects of school library provision when analyzing the benefits of this resource on pupils' achievement. Among the factors to be studied are the impact of having qualified librarians, the nature and extent of school library access for pupils, their frequency of book borrowing, availability of e-books, and access to quiet study spaces. Given the pressures on school funds, the more-detailed the account of what works, the stronger the case we can make for getting the right kinds of library resources and services in all schools for the benefit of all pupils—but especially those most vulnerable to underachievement.

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