Public Libraries and Literacy

Young people's reading habits and attitudes to public libraries, and an exploration of the relationship between public library use and school attainment

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February 2011

Transforming Lives

Suggested reference for this report is: Clark, C. and Hawkins, L. (2010). *Public Libraries and Literacy*. London: National Literacy Trust.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the pupils and staff at the following schools without whom this study would not have been possible:

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Tables and figures

Key findings

The following results are drawn from an online survey of 17,089 pupils aged 8 to 16 from 112 schools, conducted in November and December 2009.

Young people's use of their public libraries

- Nearly half (47.8%) of young people said that they do not use public libraries at all.
- Young people from white backgrounds use public libraries the least (40.8%).
- Public library use declines drastically and significantly with age, with 63.1% of KS2, 41.8% of KS3 and only 24.5% of KS4 pupils saying that they use their public library.
- Public libraries do not disproportionately attract young people from more or less affluent backgrounds (47.8% of FSM pupils using one compared with an equivalent 46.1% of non-FSM pupils).

What factors influence why young people do or do not use their public libraries

- Of the 43.8% of pupils who do use the library, the most common reason, cited by over half of all pupils, was that the library had interesting reading materials.
- 38.2% of young people who use the library believe it will help them to do better at school.
- The most common reason young people did not go to their public libraries, cited by over half, was that their family did not go, even amongst older pupils.
- There are significant differences in factors influencing library use for young people depending on gender, age, ethnicity and socioeconomic background.

The link between public library use and young people's reading

- Non library users are:
  - more than three times more likely to only read when in class
  - more than three times more likely to state that they cannot find anything to read that interests them
  - almost three times as likely to rate themselves as not very good readers compared to library users.
- However, the vast majority of pupils, whether or not they use the library, agree that reading is important to succeed in life.
- Young people that use their public library are nearly twice as likely to be reading outside of class every day.
- Public library users are nearly twice as likely to say that they enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot.
- Public library users are twice as likely to say that they talk with their family about what they are reading at least once a week and report that they get significantly more encouragement from their parents in reading.

The link between public library use and young people's school attainment

- Young people reading above the expected level for their age are twice as likely to be public library users.
- Young people reading below the expected level for their age are twice as likely not to be public library users.

Introduction to this paper

This paper presents additional information from our 2009 survey of young people's reading and writing – for more information see our forthcoming report Clark and Douglas (forthcoming) *Young People's Reading and Writing: An in-depth study focusing on enjoyment, behaviour, attitudes and attainment.*

We conducted an online survey of 17,089 pupils aged 8 to 16 from 112 schools, conducted in November – December 2009, which consisted of 32 questions exploring young people's background, reading and writing behaviour, perceived ability and attitudes. The survey included questions exploring school library use, which are examined in the separate National Literacy Trust research report *Linking School Libraries and Literacy* (Clark, 2010). In addition, the survey contained a few questions that explored public library use, which is the focus of the present paper.

This paper aims to use this information to inform thinking around the following areas:

- Young people's use of their public libraries: numbers of users, and differences according to age or background demographics.
- What factors influence why young people do or do not use their public libraries, again according to age or background demographics.
- The link between public library use and young people's reading (enjoyment of reading, attitudes towards reading and reading behaviour).
- The link between public library use and young people's school attainment, using a subsample of young people for whom we have reading attainment data (N = 4,405).

Although this final link can only be described in a correlative, rather than a causative manner, an understanding of how public library use and school attainment may correlate is useful either in terms of assessing to what extent libraries provide a resource for achieving or underachieving students.

Sample characteristics

17,089 pupils from 112 schools participated in our online survey between 16 November and 4 December 2009. The questionnaire consisted of 32 questions exploring young people's background, reading and writing behaviour, perceived ability and attitudes. In addition, the survey contained a few questions that explored school library use and which are the focus of the present paper.

There was an almost equal gender split in the sample: boys = 51.2% (N = 8,752) and girls = 48.8% (N = 8,337). **Table 1** shows that the majority of pupils were 11 and 12 years old. To investigate the impact of age, three broad categories were identified according to Key Stages – KS2, KS3 and KS4. The KS2 category (22%, N = 3,704) refers to pupils aged 7 to 11, KS3 (63%, N = 10,842) refers to pupils aged 11 to 14, while KS4 (15%, N = 2,543) applies to pupils aged 14 to 16.

Table 1: Sample age

	%	N		%	N
8	4.8	825	**13**	18.5	3,169
9	7.3	1,246	**14**	9.1	1,554

10	9.6	1,633	15	4.3	738
11	21.9	3,735	16	1.5	251
12	23.0	3,938			

(Based on N = 17,089)

The percentage of pupils who receive free school meals (FSM), which is frequently used in educational research as a crude indicator of socio-economic background, was 19.3%, with 24.7% of KS2, 18% of KS3 and 15.2% of KS4 pupils receiving free school meals. The percentages of FSM uptake in this study are higher than the national average for primary and secondary pupils (17% and 14%, respectively; DCSF, 2009b).

When asked how they would describe their ethnic background, most pupils said that they were White British (70.2%, N = 10,955). The second and third most frequent ethnic categories in this sample were Asian/Asian British Indian (4.0%, N = 623) and White Other (3.6%, N = 559). See **Table 2** for a full breakdown of ethnic background.

Table 2: Ethnic background

	%	*N*
White British	70.2	10,955
White Irish	1.7	259
White Traveller	.5	76
White Romany	.8	128
White other	3.6	559
Mixed White and Black Caribbean	2.0	316
Mixed White and Black African	1.0	150
Mixed White and Asian	1.0	162
Mixed other	1.9	297
Asian Indian	4.0	623
Asian Pakistani	2.2	338
Asian Bangladeshi	1.9	293
Asian Chinese	2.2	337
Asian Other	0.2	37
Black Caribbean	2.1	321
Black African	3.7	574
Black other	1.1	174

(Based on N = 15599)

Who uses public libraries?

Young people were divided as to whether they use a public library or not. Nearly half (47.8%) of young people surveyed said that they do not use their public library at all. However, over two-fifth of young people (43.8%) said that they do, while 8.4% indicated that they were not sure whether they have a public library.

Girls were marginally but significantly[1] more likely to use the public library compared with boys (38.7% vs. 49.2%, respectively)[2]. Public library use declined drastically and significantly with age, with 63.1% of KS2, 41.8% of KS3 and only 24.5% of KS4 pupils saying that they use their public library[3]. There were no significant socio-economic differences in public library use, with 47.8% of FSM pupils using one compared with an equivalent 46.1% of non-FSM pupils.

However, there were significant differences in public library use by ethnic background, with young people from White backgrounds using one the least (40.8%) and young people from Asian backgrounds using one the most (61.8%). This compares with 50.4% of young people from Black and 47.4% of young people from Mixed backgrounds[4].

Why do those who do not use their public library not use it?

Nearly half of young people surveyed do not use their public libraries. When those who do not use their local library were asked to indicate the reasons why (from a list of ten possibilities), over half said that they do not use one because their family does not go. Over 40% stated that one reason for them was that their friends do not go and nearly as many gave as one reason that the public libraries did not have any interesting materials for them (see **Figure 1**). A sixth of young people said that they do not use their public library because no one had taken them, while the same proportion believe that going to a public library will not have any educational advantage: they do not believe that it will not make them better at school.

Figure 1: Why young people who do not use their public library do not use it
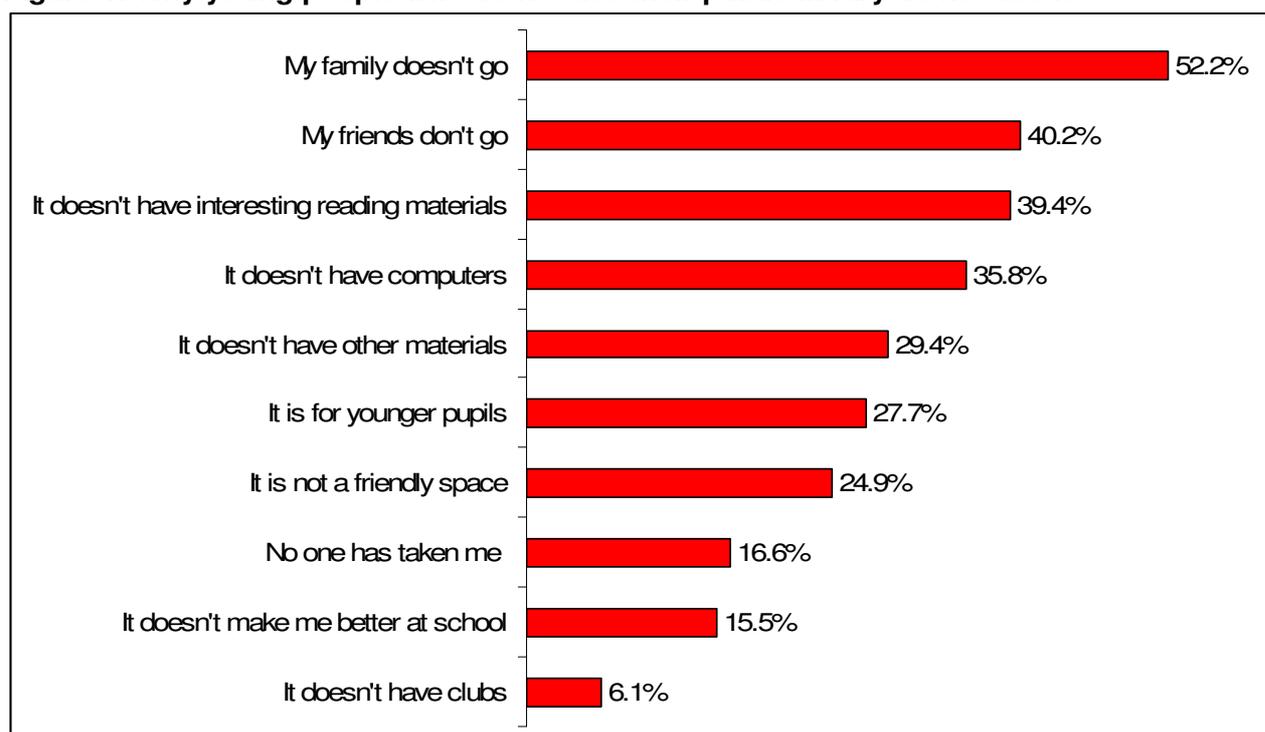
(N = 7,671)

Public library non-users: differences in attitudes based on gender

Table 3 breaks down these results by each set of demographic information – the first of which separates results by gender. It is clear from this that boys generally thought about public libraries more negatively than girls, with significantly more boys than girls saying that they do not use one because it has no interesting books, it has no materials other than books, they do not think it is a friendly space and it does not have enough computers[5]. Boys were also more led by the behaviour of their friends, with more boys than girls saying that they do not use a public library because their friends do not go[6].

Public library non-users: differences in attitudes based on age

There were several interesting differences in the reasons given by young people for not using a public library depending on age. **Table 3** breaks down the results of non-library users based on school Key Stages, showing (as we might expect) significant difference in results between Key Stages 2 (8-11 year olds), 3 (11-14 year olds) and 4 (14-16 year olds).

For nearly every possible reason why they did not use the library, the proportion of young people selecting it as a reason increased with every successive key stage. The only exception to this was for "they have no clubs or groups", which generally seemed less important a factor across the board (with only 3% of KS2 non-users selecting this as a reason and only around 7% of KS3 and 4 non-users). he most common reason cited by all non-library users was that their family did not go, and this age breakdown reveals that this factor remains important for all ages. Despite the fact that by Key Stage 4 (aged 14-16) young people generally achieve more independence in their movements, the majority of Key Stage 4 pupils (56.5%) cited the fact that their family does not go as the main reason why they themselves are not going.

Public library non-users: differences in attitudes based on socio-economic background

There was only one significant difference in terms of socio-economic background, assessed in this study by using free school meal (FSM) uptake as a proxy. **Table 3** shows that young people who do not receive FSM were more likely than those who receive meals to say that they do not go to public libraries because their friends do not go.

The overall lack of significant differences by socio-economic background suggests that socio-economic background was not an important correlate of why young people do not use public libraries, indicating that public libraries are not disproportionately attracting pupils from more affluent or less affluent backgrounds.

Public library non-users: difference in attitudes based on ethnic background

There were also significant differences by ethnic background and the degree to which young people said that they do not use public libraries (see **Table 3**). Young people from White backgrounds were overall more likely than young people from other ethnic backgrounds to say that they do not use public libraries because it does not have anything of interest or any other things than books. Young people from White backgrounds were also more likely than young people from other backgrounds to say that they do not use one because their family or friends do not go and because it is more a space for young pupils, which is not very friendly.

Table 3: Why young people who do not use the public library do not do so – by gender, key stage, socio-economic background and ethnicity

	It has no interesting books %	My family does not go %	It has no other materials %	It is not a friendly space %	It does not have enough computers %	My friends do not go %	It is for younger pupils %	It has no clubs or groups %	No one showed me around %	It will not make me do better at school %
All young people who do not use school library (N = 7.619)	39.4	52.2	29.4	24.9	35.8	40.2	27.7	6.1	16.6	15.5
Boys (N = 4,402)	**40.9**	53.0	**33.5**	**28.7**	**38.8**	**42.5**	27.7	6.6	17.2	16.7
Girls (N = 3,217)	**37.9**	51.3	**27.4**	**22.8**	**33.9**	**39.5**	26.2	5.7	15.9	14.1
KS2 (N = 873)	**33.4**	**47.4**	**20.8**	**21.5**	**32.3**	**33.4**	**22.3**	**3.2**	**13.5**	**11.7**
KS3 (N = 5,088)	**40.4**	**52.7**	**35.5**	**25.1**	**36.3**	**41.3**	**27.7**	**7.0**	**17.0**	**15.5**
KS4 (N = 1,710)	**43.9**	**56.5**	**37.2**	**29.0**	**38.6**	**49.4**	**30.9**	**6.7**	**19.0**	**20.9**
FSM (N = 964)	38.5	51.8	29.1	24.8	34.6	**38.0**	27.5	5.8	16.2	15.8
Non-FSM (N = 6,363)	39.8	53.1	29.7	25.0	36.1	**41.6**	27.9	6.5	17.0	15.7
White (N = 6,133)	**51.0**	**59.6**	**35.8**	**35.6**	36.6	**51.4**	**30.1**	7.1	17.4	19.4
Mixed (N = 358)	**37.8**	**52.8**	**34.2**	**34.3**	35.5	**44.3**	**24.9**	5.3	16.2	14.9
Asian (N = 545)	**35.4**	**46.4**	**22.1**	**22.8**	33.4	**35.6**	**25.3**	4.7	15.7	12.3
Black (N = 416)	**37.4**	**47.3**	**23.7**	**23.9**	34.8	**34.6**	**25.9**	6.7	15.4	14.3

(Numbers in bold indicate statistically significant differences in the answers for each column by each group – e.g. there is a statistically significant difference between boys' and girls' answers that a reason that they do not go is that the library has no interesting books)

Why do young people use the public library?

43.8% of young people surveyed stated that they use their local library. These were then asked to indicate which reasons for this applied to them (from a selection of 10 options). **Figure 2** shows the most common reasons why young people use public libraries. The most common was the presence of reading materials which interest them – over half of all the library users surveyed claimed this as a reason they used the library. Other reasons, which were claimed by over a third of library users, were that it is a friendly space, it has computers and because they think it helps them do better at school.

Figure 2: Why young people who use the public library use it

Reason	%
It has interesting reading materials	51.5%
It is a friendly space	39.5%
It has computers	39.0%
It makes me better at school	38.2%
It has other materials	37.4%
My family goes	33.0%
My friends go	32.5%
My family showed me round	31.9%
Someone showed me round	25.5%
It has clubs	6.6%
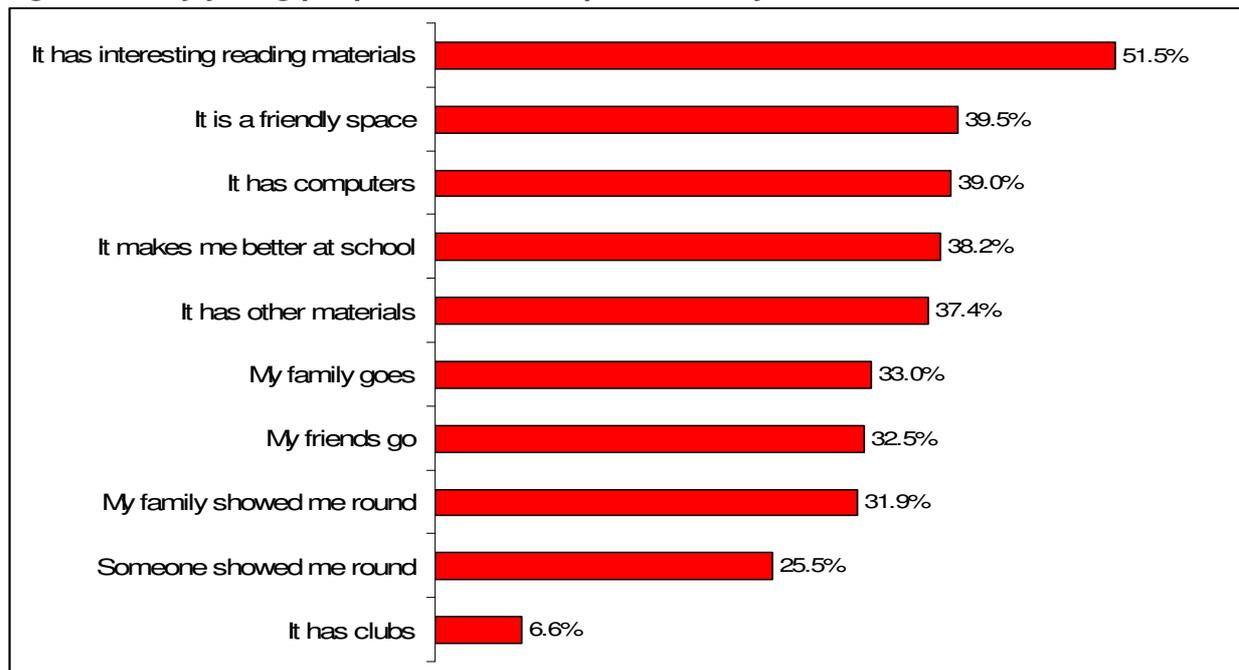
(N = 7,034)

Public library users: gender differences

With one exception, there were significant gender differences across the board in the reasons given as to why they use public libraries (see **Table 4**).

Girls were significantly more likely than boys to say that they use public libraries because it has interesting materials and materials other than books, their family goes, it is a friendly space that also has computers, it has clubs and because they saw how good it was when their family showed them around. More girls than boys also said that they go to public libraries because they believe it makes them better at school.

While girls use public libraries because their family goes, boys were more likely than girls to be driven by the behaviour of their friends, saying that they use public libraries because their friends go.

Table 4: Why young people who use the public library do so by socio-demographic background

	It has interesting reading materials %	My family goes %	It has other materials %	It is a friendly space %	It has computers %	My friends go %	It has clubs %	I saw how good it was when someone showed me %	I saw how good it was when my family showed me %	It makes me better at school %
Boys (N = 3,206)	**45.1**	**30.3**	**34.7**	**37.8**	**35.7**	**34.5**	5.8	25.3	**30.3**	**35.7**
Girls (N = 3,769)	**58.2**	**36.5**	**40.2**	**41.4**	**42.4**	**29.0**	7.5	25.7	**33.3**	**40.4**
KS2 (N = 2,190)	**63.6**	**40.2**	**41.5**	**41.1**	**47.3**	**37.4**	9.5	**28.9**	**40.8**	**48.3**
KS3 (N = 4,251)	**50.9**	**32.0**	**38.1**	**41.1**	**38.3**	**32.3**	6.6	**24.4**	**30.6**	**36.9**
KS4 (N = 593)	**36.4**	**26.6**	**28.9**	**30.7**	**29.5**	**25.3**	2.6	**21.5**	**24.3**	**27.9**
FSM (N = 1,074)	50.5	33.0	37.3	**44.2**	39.6	35.6	7.0	**26.7**	32.2	**40.5**
Non-FSM (N = 5,578)	52.1	33.2	37.7	**38.9**	39.0	**30.9**	6.4	**24.6**	31.8	**37.5**
White (N = 4,899)	**39.6**	**29.3**	**30.8**	**28.2**	**28.7**	**30.4**	3.2	**20.1**	**27.0**	**26.8**
Mixed (N = 392)	**59.4**	**31.8**	**33.5**	**42.1**	**42.4**	**35.1**	6.1	**28.0**	**31.0**	**29.9**
Asian (N = 993)	**66.5**	**38.2**	**48.5**	**53.4**	**46.5**	**32.5**	9.5	**25.0**	**39.0**	**55.8**
Black (N = 535)	**42.0**	**32.8**	**35.1**	**29.6**	**39.6**	**32.0**	9.4	**25.6**	**31.1**	**31.7**

(Numbers in bold indicate statistically significant differences between groups)

Public library users: age differences

For nearly every possible reason why they did not use the library, the proportion of young people selecting it as a reason increased with every successive key stage. The reverse is true for public library users where the proportion of young people selecting a reason decreased with every successive key stage (see **Table 4**).

For example, while only over a third of KS4 pupils say that they use public libraries because it has interesting materials, nearly two thirds of KS2 pupils say so. Nearly twice as many KS2 than KS4 pupils also believe that going to public libraries helps them at school.

Public library users: socio-economic differences

Again, there were very few statistically significant differences between the views of young people by socio-economic background. Those who receive FSMs were more likely than those who do not get meals to say that they use public libraries because it is a friendly space and because it helps them do better at school. They are also more likely to say that they go to public libraries because their friends go and because they saw how good it was when someone showed them around.

Public library users: ethnic background differences

Table 4 shows that there were also numerous differences according to ethnic background in the reasons given by young people as to why they use public libraries. For example, twice as many young people from Asian than White backgrounds said that they use public libraries because it will help them succeed at school. Overall, young people from Asian backgrounds than from other ethnic backgrounds, most notably White backgrounds, were more likely to say that they use public libraries because it is a friendly space and has materials other than reading materials. Young people from Black and Mixed backgrounds rated the presence of computers more highly than most other factors, this being the second most common factor for this audience, as opposed to the fourth most common for White and Asian audiences. Notably, a large proportion of young people from Asian and Mixed background said that they used the library because it is a friendly space, including well over half of Asian respondents. For Black and White young people the findings were starkly different, with under 30% of these audiences citing the friendly space as a reason.

The link between public library use and reading

A comparison of young people who use the public library with those who do not reveals some interesting relationships. **Table 5** shows that nearly 8 in 10 public library users consider themselves to be a reader compared with only 5 in 10 non public library users[7].

Public library users are also nearly twice more likely than non public library users to say that they enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot[8], or to be reading outside of class every day[9]. By contrast, non public library users were almost three times as likely to rate themselves as not very good readers compared with young people who use the public library[10].

Table 5: Public library users and non-users and young people's reading enjoyment, self-reported reading ability and reading frequency

	Public library users %	Non public library users %
Being a reader	84.3	54.9
Enjoying reading either very much or quite a lot	68.0	35.0
Rating themselves to be not very good readers	3.3	8.1
Reading outside of class every day	46.5	22.2

Young people who use the public library tend to hold more positive attitudes towards reading than young people who do not use it (see **Table 6**). Nearly four times as many young people who do not use the public library agree with the statement that reading is boring than do public library users. Similarly, non public library users are more likely to agree with the statements that they cannot find anything to read that interests them, that they only read in class, that they only read because they have to and that they do not read as well as other pupils in their class than are young people who use the school library.

By contrast, public library users are more likely than non public library users to agree with the statement that reading helps them to find the information that they need or want.

Table 6: Public library users and non-users and their attitudes towards reading (% agreement)

	Public library users %	Non public library users %
Reading is more for girls than boys	10.4	14.9
Reading is boring	7.9	29.8
Reading is hard	6.6	10.6
I cannot find anything to read that interests me	10.6	34.9
I only read in class	7.7	22.3
I only read when I have to	14.4	35.0
I do not read as well as other pupils in my class	22.4	30.9
Reading helps me find what I need/want to know	76.6	59.4

Generally, reading is seen to be important to succeed in life by both those who use the public library and those who do not. However, young people who use the public library are more likely to believe that reading is either very important or important to succeed in life (94.6%) compared with young people who do not use the public library (85.7%).

In addition to reading enjoyment, reading frequency and reading attitudes, there were also differences between public library users and non-users in the degree to which there was involvement in reading in the home.

Table 7 shows that public library users were twice as likely to say that they talk with their family about what they are reading at least once a week compared with young people who do not use the school library. Young people who use the public library are also more likely to believe that they get a lot of encouragement to read from both their mother and their father compared with young people who do not use the public library.

It is worth keeping in mind that the most common reason given by young people who do not use the public library is that their family does not go to the library, again possibly indicating that reading is not a family activity in the home.

Table 7: Public library users and non-users and family involvement in reading

	Public library users %	Non public library users %
Talk with their family about what they are reading at least once a week	57.0	27.9
Get a lot of encouragement to read from their mother	47.4	26.9
Get a lot of encouragement to read from their father	34.0	18.2

Reading attainment and public library use

There was a strong relationship between reading attainment and public library use (see **Table 8**)[11], with young people who read below the expected level for their age being almost twice as likely to say that they are not a public library user. This picture is reversed at the higher spectrum of attainment, with those who read above the expected level being nearly twice as likely to say that they are public library users.

Of particular interest is the relationship between public library use and attainment for those young people who read at the expected level for their age, where there was an almost 50/50 split as to whether those who read at the expected level also use the public library or not.

Please note that while public library use is related to attainment, our research design can make no inference about causality: that is, higher attainment may lead to school library use or greater school library use may lead to higher attainment.

Table 8: Percentage of young people who read below or at or above the expected level and whether they are a public library user or not (N = 4,503)

	Public library user %	Non public library user %
Below expected level for their age	36.7	63.3
At expected level for their age	48.9	51.1
Above expected level for their age	64.5	35.5

Discussion

This report has shown that nearly half of young people do not use their public library, but that public library use is strongly correlated with positive outcomes for reading attitudes, motivation, and behaviour and school attainment, and non-library use with negative outcomes. Much of the correlations around public library use are similar to the use of school libraries, as outlined in the separate National Literacy Trust research report *Linking School Libraries and Literacy* (Clark, 2010) and both public and school libraries are shown not to disproportionately attract more or less affluent users. However, it is notable that whereas 68.7% of the young people surveyed said they used a school library, only 43.8% of the same young people said they used a public library.

Most young people reported that they used their public library because it gives them interesting reading materials, is a friendly space, has computers and because they believe that the library, and by default reading, will help them do better at school. These are similar reasons for school library use (although for school libraries, computers fell to the fourth most popular reason, and the perception that using the library would make them do better at school rose to third place).

For school libraries, the reasons pupils did not use the library were broadly very similar – they felt that the library did not hold interesting books or other materials, friends did not go, and their school library had insufficient computers. However, for public library use, a new and dominant reason for non-use was introduced – family encouragement.

For those children and young people who do not use their public libraries, the majority, 52%, cited that this was because their family did not go. Perhaps surprisingly, this factor actually increased with each successive key stage with 57% of KS4 pupils citing it as the leading reason for not using their library, despite the likelihood that at age 14-16 the pupils would have far more independent movement and travel.

Family engagement is well understood as a key element in supporting educational achievement, and it seems that the public library use, as well as being associated with similar positive child outcomes to school library use, has in addition a particularly specialised correlation with family support for reading. Young people who use their public library are twice as likely to say that they talk with their family about what they are reading at least once a week and report that they get significantly more encouragement from their parents in reading generally. It appears that the role that the child's family plays is both a key positive feature of library use, and the major barrier to library access.

For reading outside of class too, it appears that public libraries have a stronger association than school libraries. For young people who did not use their public library, like young people who did not use their school library, only just over 20% read outside of class every day. 38% of

school library users read outside of class every day, a significant difference. However, for public libraries the results increased further – 46.5% of public library users read outside of class every day. Indeed, previous research (Stone, 1999) found that public libraries gave children access to a wider range of books compared with school libraries.

These links are not necessarily causal, but they suggest that public libraries do not only have a role to play in the reading patterns of those pupils who use them, but also a unique role in providing opportunities to support learning outside of the classroom including support for family engagement.

References

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Clark, C. and Douglas. J. (forthcoming). *Young People's Reading and Writing: An in-depth study focusing on enjoyment, behaviour, attitudes and attainment,* London: National Literacy Trust.

Stone, E. (1999). *The Impact of Public Library Use on the Educational Attainment of Primary School Children,* Sheffield: University of Sheffield http://dagda.shef.ac.uk/dissertations/1998-99/stone.pdf

[1] Any result for which statistical significance is reported was significant at the stringent significance level of 0.001. This means that the result would be likely to occur by chance only once in every 1000 cases. This level was chosen over the more conventional of 0.05 due to our large sample size to make it more difficult for extremely small and non-notable differences to be found to be statistically significant. However, a statistical significance test only tells us whether a result is likely to have occurred by chance; it tells us nothing about the actual strength of a relationship. Cramer's V is a measure of the strength of an association between categorical data and varies from 0 – 1, with 0 being no association between variables and 1 being a perfect one.

[2] χ^2 (2, N = 15935) = 206.534, p = .000; Cramer's V = .114

[3] χ^2 (4, N = 16060) = 1236.728, p = .000; Cramer's V = .278

[4] χ^2 (7, N = 15534) = 472.403, p = .000; Cramer's V = .214

[5] Any result for which statistical significance is reported was significant at the stringent significance level of 0.001. This means that the result would be likely to occur by chance only once in every 1000 cases. This level was chosen over the more conventional of 0.05 due to our large sample size to make it more difficult for extremely small and non-notable differences to be found to be statistically significant.

[6] χ^2 (1, N = 4622) = 13.395, p = .000; Cramer's V = .054

[7] χ^2 (2, N = 14668) = 1563.674, p = .000, Cramer's V = .326

[8] χ^2 (3, N = 14683) = 1973.166, p = .000, Cramer's V = .367

[9] χ^2 (6, N = 14653) = 1674.166, p = .000, Cramer's V = .338

[10] χ^2 (2, N = 14606) = 498.325, p = .000, Cramer's V = .185

[11] χ^2 (2, N = 4503) = 378.323, p = .000, Cramer's V = .161