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'We're very book rich': the impact of School Library Services on reading, resourcing and reducing inequality

Abstract

School Library Services (SLS) provide curriculum resources and expertise to schools. Changes in educational policy have affected the resourcing and security of these services. This article reports on a UKLA funded case study of one school library service co-designed with two librarians from the service. The aims were to investigate the role and impact of the service and to identify priorities for the development of the service. Data were collected using a mixed methods approach, through an online survey to 226 schools, (67 responses representing 43 schools received), and semi-structured interviews with teachers and senior leaders from three schools. Two phases of data analysis were conducted; the first was deductive coding to inform a service impact report (Author 1 & 2, 2023) the second was reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) conducted independently of the partner SLS, the results of which are discussed here. The data showed that the value of school library services should not be underestimated. The responses evidenced that services were vital to ensuring a sustainable book rich curriculum and provided a valuable source of curriculum and literacy expertise which supported teacher's professional development. This study indicates that the loss of school library services in many parts of England could be of significant detriment to teachers and children, and raises concerns about equality of access to books.

Introduction

The XX School Library Service (SLS) is housed in a former school in a city in northern England. In the old school hall there is a library with rows of enticing books; contemporary fiction, poetry, non-fiction, diverse books, large print and a range of specialist collections line the shelves. The former classrooms are piled high with boxes waiting to be delivered- blue for non-fiction and red for fiction. The blue boxes contain current topics in the primary curriculum such as the Stone Age or the Romans; the red ones provide reading for pleasure sets for different age groups curated by the librarians or sets of class readers. There are two full-time members of staff, one of whom is a qualified librarian, and two other part-time staff who are involved in delivering the boxes to the 180 schools served by this SLS. Once, services such as this one were ubiquitous in England, providing regular loans of books to primary and secondary schools in local areas. In 2025 there are now 57 SLS in England (author 1 & 2, Shetty, P 2024), down from 130 in 2004 (Creaser and Maynard, 2004). XX SLS receives funding from the Local Authority to provide the service, but concerns about the ongoing security of this funding, in the context of the closure and reduction of SLS in other parts of England, led the SLS staff to invite our research team to collaborate with them on a study of their service. The intention of the study was to provide evidence of the value of the service to its users and to inform plans for development, protecting the XX SLS from funding cuts. Our findings show how highly valued these services are, how important their role is for schools promoting reading for enjoyment, and their place in a system giving children access to books. Mackey (2022) argued that if children are to develop habits of reading they need 'access, choice and time to read' (p97). Our study indicates that in areas such as XX where there is a SLS still available, children can access and choose from a far greater range and variety of texts than their schools individually could provide. The fact that these services are not available everywhere is an issue of great concern and raises questions about socially just access to print.

Policy Contexts

Education policy in the UK is the responsibility of the devolved regions and nations, which means that Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have different systems and policies to those in England. Our study took place in XX, a city in Northern England, so a brief summary of Education

policy in England which has had a direct or indirect impact on SLS is provided for context. In the 1980s and early 1990s School Library Services (SLS) were typically part of the offer to schools in every English Local Authority and provided a range of book loan services to enhance school library stock and to add resource to different curriculum areas. Qualified librarians provided advice and expertise for schools, and both primary (5-11 years) and secondary (11-18 years) schools were entitled to the service. They were part of an entitlement to books and resources for teaching and learning provided centrally in each area, thus offering equal access to all schools within the Local Authority.

In 2025 this is no longer the case. A series of policy changes have affected SLS both directly and indirectly over the last 40 years. The organisational structures of state schooling in England have changed considerably. Local Authority control over schools and education services in local areas has declined, and Academy Trusts (which are independent bodies made up of groups of schools), now manage 41.6% of all schools and educate 54.4% of pupils (Lordslibrary.parliament.uk). Locally funded support services to schools began to be at risk as the budget awarded to Local Authorities declined in the 1990s due to the policy of Local Management of Schools introduced in 1990 (Hansard.parliament.uk). This policy change transferred central government funding from Local Authorities to individual schools, leaving Local Authorities less able to provide central services. The Academies Act of 2010 compounded this decline by incentivising schools to 'opt-out' of Local Authority control and manage more of their own budgets (Stearn, 2001; Dewes, 2024). SLS, whilst being a service to schools and therefore associated with education planning and provision, were (and are) very often part of the public library service in a Local Authority. Public library services have also been at risk in recent years due to austerity measures designed to reduce public sector funding. Funding for public libraries has fallen by 47.9% since 2010 (Kelly, 2023) and these twin issues of school reorganisation and reduction in public library funding have affected SLS across England, leading to closures and reductions in service.

The XX SLS currently serves 180 primary schools, of which the majority are Local Authority schools with approximately 7% being primary academies choosing to buy in to the service. Details about the specific range of services offered are reported in the findings, however, in general terms the XX SLS supply a wide range of fiction and non-fiction books to support the curriculum and reading for pleasure in schools across the local area.

Reading for pleasure and access to books

The benefits of reading for pleasure are well established. Internationally, reading enjoyment has been demonstrated to have a positive impact on reading attainment, comprehension and vocabulary (Cremin, 2023; Sulivan and Brown, 2015; OECD, 2002) as well as having the potential to promote wellbeing (Clark and Teravainen-Goff, 2018). As Cremin and Scholes (2024) argue in their review of the evidence base around reading for pleasure 'multiple cognitive benefits as well as social and emotional ones are seen to accumulate and are associated with choosing to read recreationally in childhood and beyond' (p542). Whilst these benefits are nuanced and need to be considered contextually, there is a clear case for encouraging and supporting reading for enjoyment in children. The National Curriculum (2013) stipulates that schools should encourage children to develop a habit of reading for enjoyment and primary schools in the UK typically promote reading for pleasure in a variety of ways through the curriculum and additional activities designed to engage and interest children. However, despite these efforts the National Literacy Trust (Clark, Picton & Galway, 2023) argued based on data from their annual survey in 2023 that 'children and young people's reading enjoyment is at crisis point' (p1). They recorded the lowest level of reading for enjoyment among children aged 8-18 years in the UK since 2005. The most recent report, published in 2024, showed further decline. In 2024 only 34.6% of children aged 8-18 years said that they enjoyed reading in their spare time. The figures for primary school age children were less stark, with 66.5% of 5-8 year olds and 51.9% of 8-11 year olds saying that they enjoyed reading. However, the most recent Family Survey by Booktrust (2024) showed that in England children's reading enjoyment declines steadily during primary school falling from 33% at age 7 to only 25% of children saying that they 'love' reading by age 11.

Children's responses offer valuable insights into factors that may contribute to this decline. When asked what might encourage them to read for pleasure, children aged 8-11 years rated having books recommended, having books given to them and seeing themselves represented in what they read more highly than their older peers (Clark, Picton and Galway, 2023). These responses indicate that families, teachers and librarians have an important role to play in giving primary school age children access to books that are appealing to them and reflect their interests. After a prolonged period of austerity in public sector in the UK which has reduced the capacity and opening times of public libraries (McCahill et al. 2018; Lynch, 2023) and a cost of living crisis that has affected the amount of disposable income many families have (Harari et al. 2024), it is reasonable to assume that access to books in homes and communities has been reduced for many children. In addition, schools are struggling with ever tightening budgets. The Institute for Fiscal Studies reported in 2023 that school budgets in England fell by 8.5% in real terms between 2009 and 2020 (Sibieta, 2023) making it more difficult to set aside the funds for new and interesting books on a regular basis.

The likelihood that different local areas might offer very different access to books has been examined in the United States by Neuman and Moland (2019, Neuman 2022), who use the term 'book deserts' to describe areas in which access to print is limited. Based on a sample of six neighbourhoods in the US with different demographic features in terms of poverty, employment and ethnicity they undertook a '*systematic social observation focusing on the prevalence of books in the neighbourhood'* (p135) to identify the availability of books on sale for children. They found that there were '*significant inequalities*' (p139) across different socio-economic areas. Despite omitting libraries from their analysis, and the deficit positioning of areas of low income in the term 'desert', their analysis raises interesting questions about unequal access to print across neighbourhoods of different socio-economic status. No similar study has yet been conducted in the United Kingdom, nor in any other Anglophone country. Organisations in Canada, Australia and New Zealand regularly collect data about public reading habits, (AustraliaReads.au; Read-NZ.org; BooknetCanada.ca) but this information does not seem to have been systematically linked to demographics or access to print. Public libraries, school libraries and the services that support them are all important elements that contribute towards the accessibility of books in any local area. Further research which develops the concept of the book desert and takes an international perspective would be a valuable addition to the field.

Libraries, librarians and literacy

School libraries have always had an important role to play in supporting literacy, reading for pleasure and curriculum resourcing, but in the UK they have also suffered from lack of investment, space and professional expertise in recent years. The Great School Libraries report (Cavender et al., 2023; BMG research 2022) which surveyed a representative sample of 4,330 schools across the UK found that 86% of primary schools have a School Library on site, but of those only 60% are in a separate designated library space. School libraries are typically used for other purposes such as non-library lessons, meetings and small group interventions, meaning that they may not always be accessible to children for library purposes. As primary classrooms tend to have their own classroom selection of books this limited access may not necessarily limit children's access to books overall, but it may limit the number and range they can choose from. Cavender et al. (2023) report that new resources were added to primary schools yearly in 31% of cases and less frequently in 15% of cases, so in 54% of schools library stock was added to more frequently. However, there was no indication of the quantity of stock being added or the budget allocated to do so. Most notably, '*40% of primary school respondents indicated that reading was restricted*' (Cavender et al., 2023, p9) in schools with designated library spaces and that '*children's reading in the school is restricted by limited library resources/availability of books*' (Cavender et al., 2023, p25). Primary schools were also unlikely to have designated staff with responsibility for the library; only 29% of schools indicated that they had such staff, and these staff were unlikely to have professional qualifications. These figures refer to Local Authority controlled schools. Independent schools in both primary and secondary phases were more likely to have a designated library space with professionally trained staff and a larger budget for

replenishing stock. The Great School Libraries report (Cavender et al., 2023) is an indicator that there are great disparities across the UK and that many children do not have access to a range of quality texts in school.

It is not a statutory requirement for schools in England to have a library (Teravanien & Clark, 2017). Of the primary schools surveyed in the Great School Libraries report 14% did not have designated library provision. Lack of adequate space was cited as a reason in many cases. Where schools lack the space to dedicate to a separate library provision, SLS could be a good solution, because books are on loan and do not need to be permanently stored. In areas where there continues to be a SLS borrowing rather than purchasing books may be an adequate solution, but there is no consistent provision of SLS across England. Our recent research (Authors 1 & 2, 2024) on behalf of the Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (ASCEL) indicates that of 150 Local Authorities Districts with responsibility for Education in England 95 have access to an SLS (even if it is one based in another Local Authority area), 45 don't have an SLS and for 10 the availability of an SLS is unknown. Almost twenty years ago in 2006 the report from the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) *Good School Libraries: making a difference to learning* emphasised the importance of SLS to school library provision, noting the positive support provided to schools in resourcing and managing their libraries. This report was published during a period of change for SLS and at the end of a period of consistent UK-wide coverage. The changes to school funding were being felt at this time, and SLS were faced with difficult decisions about how to continue to provide their service if de-delegated local authority funds were no longer available (Eyre, 2000).

     It is interesting that a concern during this period of change in the late 1990s and early 2000s was technology, and the ability of school libraries and SLS to keep up with changes (Elkin and Lonsdale, 1996). Being able to make a digital offer to schools was seen as important, as technologies such as CD-rom were increasingly used in schools. However, the pace of change in technological terms between 2000 and now has been such that any digital resources purchased soon became obsolete. Whilst we know that digital technologies have a great deal to offer children as readers and writers, and in allowing them to engage with a range of media (Parry & author 1, 2021; author 1, 2022; Kucirkova & Cremin, 2020), there is no evidence that digital reading has superseded or replaced the physical book. The National Literacy Trust's most recent survey (Clark, Picton & Galway, 2023) included digital reading in the data collection, and there was no indication that reading from physical books had moved to reading on screen. The decline in reading for enjoyment encompassed both these modes. The continued importance of the availability of physical books, particularly for young children, is evidenced by data from a longitudinal study of approximately 450 children who were starting school at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic (Nash, author 2, Davies, Hart, Homer & Mathieson, 2022). Access to hard copy books was a stronger positive predictor of children's progress in reading between March 2020 and summer 2021 than access to online books.

     Teravainen and Clark (2017) found that school libraries had a positive impact on academic attainment, reading behaviours and attitudes, and on personal factors such as self-esteem and confidence. They suggested that there were eleven factors which were key to a good school library (p4) and a number of these are aspects of provision that SLS are (or were) well placed to support. Where there is no professionally trained school librarian SLS staff can provide support and advice to staff; the quality of the physical space and the quality of the collection can both be developed with advice from SLS; monitoring and evaluation can be undertaken to ensure that quality is maintained. These services were part of the offer to schools routinely provided by SLS across the country until the early 2000s. Tilke (2009), argues that in the 1980s and 90s SLS were providing advisory functions about curriculum development, learning and information skills, reading development, training of staff, and library evaluation and guidance (p16). The kinds of advisory roles previously provided by SLS may have been taken in-house in the larger Academy chains, be supplied by Local Authority advisory teams, or have disappeared altogether.

     Since the Academies Act of 2010, schools are much more likely to be managing their own budgets with fewer services centrally provided by local authorities. Schools can choose whether to

buy into such services and have important decisions to make about the way that they allocate resources for the benefit of all children. SLS need to be competitive and offer a service that schools can see offers them good value and enhances the way they can deliver the curriculum. With these considerations in mind and in the context of declining reading enjoyment in children, the continued importance of access to physical books, reduced budgets, space and staffing for school libraries, and inconsistent provision of SLS, our work with the XX SLS focused on the following questions:

RQ1. What are the factors that influence SLS use?

RQ2. What is the role and impact of the XX SLS?

Method

Design

The study was co-designed with XX SLS and used a mixed methods case study design with two data collection methods, an online survey and group semi-structured interviews. The scope of the study and its research questions were informed by the needs, priorities and preferences of the SLS. Co-design was essential in the planning of the methodology to ensure that the research tools captured the breadth of services offered by the SLS and that they were potentially suitable for the SLS to use again in the future to monitor the continued use and impact of their work. The partnership approach did not extend to the data analysis as the SLS requested that the evaluation be independently conducted and findings reported back. The SLS were invited to give feedback on the report, and they also contributed to the dissemination of the findings.

Participants

The project was advertised to all schools in the area through a blog post circulated via the XX city council website. The link to the online survey was sent to all two hundred and twenty-six primary schools in XX, whether or not they were users of the SLS. Sixty-seven responses were received, representing forty-three different schools. The XX SLS has no secondary school users and secondary schools were not included in our data collection. Of the schools responding to the survey, thirty-seven were local authority controlled, four were academies and one was a free school. All but one of the schools was a current user of the service.

At the end of the survey, participants were given an option to leave contact details to take part in an interview and XX SLS provided an additional list of contact details for 10 schools. Six schools were contacted to gain a sample of LA maintained and Academy schools in different parts of the city, of which three agreed to participate. Group interviews took place in three schools with seven staff members participating. One school was an Academy, and two schools were LA maintained. In interview 1 participants were a senior leader and the English lead, in interview 2 participants were two senior leaders and an early career teacher, and in interview 3 participants were two senior leaders. The number of people participating in each interview was determined through school preference; we invited any interested parties in the school to join in a discussion with the research team.

A convenience sampling approach, with voluntary participation, was used for practical reasons. The evaluation needed to be carried out in a period of a few months, burden on schools needed to be minimal and the method needed to be potentially feasible for the SLS to replicate in the future. The resulting sample size for the online survey was 19% of the total population of schools. The three schools and seven staff interviewed captured perspectives from different school types and job roles. It is not possible to claim that these samples are representative, however the data generated is sufficient for providing initial insights in response to the research questions.

Data collection

The research team and staff at the SLS co-designed the questions for both data collection methods. SLS staff provided information regarding school entitlement to SLS through the de-

delegated funding offer to local authority schools (which may be purchased by non-local authority schools), this is shown in Figure 1.

Resource	Number	Frequency	per
Fiction box	2	yearly	class
Topic box	2	termly	class
Extra non-fiction	3	termly	school
Self-select fiction	1	yearly	Book per child in school
Audio sets	3	termly	school
Advisory visit	On request		

Figure 1. The core entitlement of resources for local authority schools through the de-delegated funding offer.

They also informed us of additional services available to schools at a cost. These were author visits, story bags, weeding the library (to remove old and outdated books), classifying the library, a book purchasing scheme and reading for pleasure projects. This information informed the design of the survey questions and response options. Survey questions covered four areas; the users' knowledge of the service; how the service was accessed; how the resources were used and suggestions from service users. For each resource participants were asked whether they were aware of it and whether their school used it. Based on responses to these questions, further questions were asked about the way the resources were used or reasons why they were not used. The questions therefore invited a range of different responses including both quantitative and qualitative information.

The interview questions were designed to explore the role and impact of the XX SLS. Six questions focused on the role of the resources, including questions such as 'Who is involved in making decisions about what is ordered?' and 'How do they work alongside your existing resources?'. Nine questions invited consideration of the impact of the resources, including questions such as 'Does having these resources contribute to your design and delivery of the curriculum? If so, how?' and 'To what extent do the resources make a difference to children's learning experiences?' The interviews were conducted in an informal manner and were semi-structured. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis by the research team.

Ethical approval was gained from the Ethics Committee at the University of XX in line with BERA guidelines for educational research.

Data analysis

The first phase of data analysis used a rapid deductive approach for the purpose of providing a summary report for the XX SLS within a short time frame (Author 1 & 2, 2023). Whilst we were satisfied that our initial analysis was sufficient to answer the questions our partners in the XX SLS were interested in, we recognised the richness of the interview data and the potential broader insights it could provide. This recognition prompted the second phase of data analysis for which we used an inductive reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clark, 2022). The interview transcripts were shared between the authors, with one leading the coding for two interviews and the other leading the coding for the remaining interview. After carrying out familiarisation and initial rounds of coding independently, the codes were pooled into one data set. At this point, the authors collaborated to refine the codes and group them into themes and subthemes.

Findings

Survey

Of the services included in the de-delegated funding offer, the most well used was the topic boxes with 100% of respondents using this resource, followed by class readers (72%), fiction boxes (67%) and self-select fiction (40%). Despite being part of the entitlement, advisory visits had only been used by 27% of respondents and audio sets were used by 25%. Low usage of some resources seemed in part to be due to lack of awareness; 43% of respondents said they were not aware of the self-select fiction service and 46% were not aware that they were entitled to advisory visits. Of the services attracting an additional cost, author visits organized by the SLS were the most popular. In answer to questions about the way that resources were chosen (such as decisions about which topic boxes or class readers should be ordered) respondents stated that they consulted long and short-term curriculum documents (47%) and talked to colleagues about their immediate requirements (51%). These responses indicated that the SLS resources were embedded in school curriculum planning and provoked conversations between colleagues about curriculum resourcing.

In response to questions about the way the resources were used, participants stated that topic boxes were typically displayed in classrooms for children to access (69%) and 41% of respondents stated that they used them to support literacy skills, in addition to teaching topic content. Class readers were specifically used to support reading for pleasure in 51% of cases, and to support literacy skills in 40% of cases. Mixed fiction boxes were similarly used to support reading for pleasure (in 63% of cases) and the children had free access to the books for reading in class. The books were added to the class library in 48% of cases, suggesting that they added to the range and number of books children could choose to read. The self- select fiction box was particularly valued for supporting reading for pleasure. Whilst only 41% of respondents used this service, 70% stated that they used the books to encourage reading for pleasure, and 65% added them to their class library. Teachers appeared to value the opportunity to make choices that they knew would be popular with their own classes and the additional variety that the books would offer. Whilst advisory visits had not been used by many respondents, those that had taken up this service variously stated that the visit was about developing the school library, assessing the quality of existing stock and setting up a new library. In summary, the survey results demonstrated that core services were very well used and were embedded into teaching and learning in terms of resourcing topics, developing literacy skills and supporting reading for pleasure. SLS resources prompted professional conversations between colleagues, enhanced the range and variety of books in the classroom and provided opportunities for the development of libraries in schools.

Group interviews

A codebook was produced containing 281 unique codes grouped into 13 subthemes and 3 overarching themes.

Theme 1- 'We are very book rich': Why schools use the SLS

Data coded for this theme included responses that indicated why the schools interviewed used the SLS and how SLS use fitted in with their approach to teaching, their values and the identity of the school. Subthemes covered by this theme included codes about the ways that *SLS resources connect to the school curriculum* and how the *SLS resources enhance the school's own*. These responses illustrate the ways the schools see SLS resources as integral to their philosophy and pedagogy, and that there are differences between schools which use the service and those which don't. For example, the comment '*you notice a school that doesn't straight away. It's just not as booky*'; suggests that the speaker considers being 'booky' as a positive thing and something which the school would aspire to. The SLS is positioned as helping the schools achieve their aims in terms of identity around books and reading. Curriculum design is completed with reference to the SLS offer, '*it's from our long-term plan'* and decisions about the reading curriculum are influenced by SLS resources '*we have a reading spine, so every year group has class readers*'. SLS resources help schools keep their fiction up-to-date, and they value this as important. A participant stated that '*using these has broadened even more the choices that we have and that the children have'.* Data

coded for this theme also includes responses relating to *Professional development and knowledge exchange,* because using SLS is seen to enable staff to develop knowledge that contributes to the overall ethos of the school. Examples of comments allocated to this subtheme include *'passing on that knowledge as the year's progressing'; 'saw what other people were doing with them,'* and *'so it's a really discreet way of CPD'.* School expectations around the use of texts in teaching are implicitly communicated in the model of colleagues using SLS resources. Using the SLS enables schools to maintain a set of values about teaching and learning and about curriculum design: *'we are very much led by quality texts in the whole of our teaching'.*

The comment *'We are very book rich'* which characterises this theme reflects the ethos and values that inform the practices of everyday teaching. Curriculum planning is underpinned by considerations about the use of quality texts and the SLS facilitates these considerations, enhancing existing school resources and knowledge. This is different from, although connected to theme 2, which covers the different day-to-day uses of SLS resources in the participating schools.

Theme 2: 'We are quite established': How schools use the SLS

Data coded for this theme included comments centering around the subthemes *of frequency of service use, the way the school uses SLS resources and services, school factors that influence the use of SLS and limitations of SLS.* Participants described the practical considerations that were involved in the selection of resources, how these were distributed in the school and the way that teachers made use of them in the classroom. Schools had routines which govern the way resources are ordered *'every term we order the topic boxes'*, often relating to curriculum mapping, but also giving individual staff autonomy to select their own resources *'self-select they do have ownership'.* Giving staff individual choices reflected concerns that where resources were ordered in a routine way by a designated member of staff, they may not be as useful to class teachers. Books borrowed from the SLS were described as being useful *'for doing research'*, for *'doing topic type work'*, so that *'kids have...more access to books'*, and to *'promote reading in school'* demonstrating that in a practical sense, teaching and learning was positively influenced by the SLS books. Services offered by the SLS beyond borrowing resources such as advisory visits and reviews of school book stock, were valued because they had an impact on the use of the resources such as *'how the children can have a voice'.* Comments about the cost of the SLS were coded for this theme. For schools whose entitlement was subsidised by the local authority, there was a desire to make as good use of the services as possible *'you're paying for the service level agreement'* and that the SLS could help offset some capital investments the school had to make in other areas *'we've had to spend a lot of money on phonics books'.* For academy schools outside of LA control the SLS was perceived to be good value *'always found the money to pay for it'* but also that the services offered should be used fully. Because this theme covered the practical uses of the SLS services, it also included *limitations* identified by users that affected their perceptions of the resources available. Comments focused on the variable quality of the topic boxes, or low availability of particular titles *'sometimes they run out of, some topics are very popular at certain times of year'.* Other considerations, relating to the administration and organisation of SLS in school, were the focus of theme 3, which covered working relationships between schools and the SLS.

Theme 3: 'Having those conversations': Working relationships with the SLS

Data coded for this theme included responses grouped into the subthemes of the *relationship between the SLS and schools*, the *flexibility and responsiveness of SLS*, *administrative issues* and *suggestions for the future development of the SLS.* Relationships were important and a core part of the experience of working with the SLS *'they've known our school for a long time'* and there was a sense of mutual support and trust in the relationships *'we help each other out' 'I haven't got a bad word to say about it'.* This positive regard was closely related to the flexibility and responsiveness of the SLS to school requirements and requests *'they are really, really helpful', 'it helps you in your job'.* Respondents commented on the administrative considerations for schools around managing the books once they were in school, making sure they were ready to be returned at appropriate times and ensuring that colleagues were aware of return dates *'you get one or two*

that have been secreted into trays'. Some of these comments were reflected in the suggestions for development of the service, such as changing collection and delivery dates so that books could be kept for longer. Suggestions typically built on or wanted more of the services currently offered- such as more training and CPD or different subscription options 't*here'll be gorgeous books out there that we're missing',* and widening the range and diversity of texts offered.

This theme underpinned the other two described, because if relationships were not good and administrative factors too onerous, the schools would not be able to make good use of the resources and services offered, nor would they feel that the SLS enhanced the school.

Synthesis

Schools using the XX SLS clearly benefitted from this support service; they valued the way the loan of books enabled them to provide the quantity and quality of resources that their pupils need and deserve. SLS resources were a fundamental part of the curriculum provision and supported teachers to do their jobs, as well as to develop as professionals. Good, flexible relationships between the SLS and the service users contributed to the value of the service overall, with positive regard for the knowledge and experience of the librarians being a key aspect. Although some limitations were acknowledged, these were responded to with positive suggestions for change and participants recognised the potential threats to SLS should de-delegated funding be withdrawn. The SLS contributed to school identity around the use of texts, around curriculum development and around reading for pleasure. Using the resources was an integral part of school planning and practice. In answer to the first research question 'What are the factors that influence SLS use?', we can draw on all three themes. The use of the SLS was influenced by (and influenced) school ethos and the identity of the school; it was influenced by practical requirements of the curriculum and by issues around management and organisation. It was also influenced by relationships with SLS librarians and the value that teachers gained from the resources and services. In answer to the second research question 'What is the role and impact of the XX School Library Service?', we can draw on the three themes again. The role of the SLS was emphasised in theme 2, indicating how the resources and services were used in schools and the purpose that they served for teaching and learning. The impact of the SLS was highlighted in theme 1, emphasising the overall effect on the school of accessing the resources and services and why they were valuable to teachers.

Discussion and conclusions

To some extent, the participants in this study were a self-selecting sample who were likely to give a positive impression of the services offered by the XX SLS. Participants were all current users who were motivated to provide feedback, and the interview participants were those who were interested enough in the SLS and its future to take time to be involved in the project. We were not able to gain any general information about schools that did not use the SLS, such as schools that were part of multi- academy trusts who did not buy into the service. One participant from a non-using school suggested that financial reasons were a factor in not buying the service, but we were not able to find out what kinds of measures schools were taking that did not use the service in terms of resourcing the curriculum, the library or supporting reading for pleasure. It may be that multi-academy trusts are developing their own loan and advisory services, but it was beyond the scope of the project to investigate this possibility. Nevertheless, for the schools who participated the SLS provided an integral and invaluable service, which they were very keen to support and regarded highly.

An unexpected finding was the extent to which schools saw the SLS as a source of professional development and consultancy. Opportunities to develop knowledge about books for children and how they might be used were welcomed and the choosing and use of the books provided a space for discussion and shared practice. An interview participant said she would like to consult with the SLS librarian about curriculum design in order to understand how books could best be integrated into the whole curriculum. In view of such comments, it could be argued that SLS are filling the gaps left by reductions in Local Authority school improvement and advisory services, but further research is needed to explore this.

Publicly owned, shared, high-quality books and resources should be available for all schools. Furthermore, librarians with curriculum knowledge and expertise in promoting reading for pleasure should also be available for all schools. The fragmentation of education systems in England and the reduction in Local Council budgets has caused the decline of SLS and continues to threaten those that exist. Even schools with generous budgets would struggle to be able to afford to maintain a library and up-to-date resources for all curriculum areas; many schools have difficult decisions to make about where to prioritise their funding with a range of competing demands. All schools can aspire to be 'book rich' if they can access a regular, changing supply of fresh stock through an SLS. SLS support reading in schools, provide resourcing across the curriculum and in doing so can reduce unequal access to books for children across England. As shown, SLS are not available to all schools and we believe this unequal access is a matter of social justice. For children whose education takes place in schools with tired and underfunded libraries where there is no SLS to refresh the stock, it will surely be much more difficult to develop positive habits of reading for enjoyment. It was clear from our study that the SLS was significant in enabling schools to offer greater access and choice of books to children than they could have done by relying on their own resources. SLS are contributing to a more socially just distribution of texts, helping to fulfil two of Mackey's criteria of 'access, choice and time to read' (2022, p97). It is not possible to show direct links between the decline of services providing access to books with children's decline in interest in reading, but these two factors would benefit from further investigation, and the parallel decline is a matter for concern. Whilst there is reason to celebrate the service that is available in XX and the positive impact it has, it seems inequitable that schools in neighbouring cities do not have the same options. SLS should be valued and protected because the implications of losing them altogether are significant.

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