

## The impact of writer visits on children and young people's reading and writing engagement

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2019

Evidence on the impact of writer visits is limited, perhaps in part because it is such a broad area including different models (from assemblies to residencies) with different aims (including increased enjoyment of reading, improved writing skills and many more) and as many different approaches to delivery as there are writers working with schools.

Through key investigations into this area of work (*Magic Dust that Lasts: Writers in Schools*, Horner 2010; *Teachers as Writers*, Cremin, Myhill et al 2017; *Creative Writing in Schools*, ACE 2019), we have consistently seen that working with writers has the potential to improve the enjoyment, attitudes and confidence of pupils and teachers in both reading and writing. Through our Annual Literacy Survey and the findings of a national school library survey, we have explored these findings in more detail and attempted to identify any link between writer visits and pupils' skills. There are important aspects of these reports that were beyond the scope of our survey, for example exploring how long children were able to work with the writer, on how many occasions and over what period. However, our findings support many of the assertions made in these reports about the positive impact of writers working in schools.

There is no consistent measurement for how many schools work with writers. A Society of Authors report in 2013 included a reference to a QCA document published in 2008, which stated: "Only 10% of schools in England work with professional writers of any kind". Just over a decade on, this report provides a timely and important health check into this area of work, which is a key element of children's education as well as a vital source of income for the writers who work with them.

Data for this report come from two sources. Information on writer visits from the schools' perspective comes from the National School Library Survey of 1,750 primary and secondary schools, conducted by BMG on behalf of the Great School Library Campaign, who kindly made

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the data available to us. The survey included two questions on writer visits: 1) whether they have had a visit from a writer/poet; and 2) the reasons for organising this visit.

Using data from our latest Annual Literacy Survey of 56,905 children and young people, conducted between January and March 2019, this report then explores how many children and young people say that they have had a writer visit and what the relationships are between a writer visit and children and young people's reading and writing enjoyment, behaviours and attitudes.

## Key findings:

### Writers visits from the school's perspective

- **3 in 5 schools** (61%) said that they have had a visit from a writer or poet in the past year.
- The most commonly cited reason was to support reading for pleasure (79%), followed by to encourage creating writing (67%) and to support the English curriculum (47%).

### Writer visits, children and young people – some background stats

- **1 in 4** (26.9%) children and young people said in 2019 that they had had a writer visit at school.
- Slightly **more girls than boys** said that they had a writer visit (29.9% vs. 24.4%).
- **More children aged 9 to 11** (34.0%) compared with their older counterparts had a writer visit (aged 14 to 16: 18.8%; aged 16 to 18: 19.5%).
- Slightly **fewer children and young people who receive free school meals (FSMs)**, our proxy of socioeconomic status, said that they had a writer visit compared with their peers who don't receive FSMs (23.7% vs. 27.6%).
- There were **regional variations** in the percentage of children and young people who said that they had a writer visit, with more children and young people living in the North East (34.1%) and the South West (31.9%) saying that they had such a visit, while children and young people living in Wales (8.8%) were least likely to say that they had a writer visit at school.
- There were **no differences between rural (27.4%) and urban (26.6%) schools** in whether children and young people reported having had a writer visit.
- However, there were **differences by school type**, with more children and young people attending independent schools (54.7%) reporting having had a writer visit than children and young people attending other schools.

### Reading skill

- Reading skill data from 712 participating children and young people shows that those who benefited from a writer visit have, on average, **higher reading scores** than those who didn't have such an experience.
- Overall, **twice as many** children and young people who had a writer visit read **above the expected level** for their age compared with their peers who didn't have a writer visit.

## Enjoyment of reading and writing

- **Reading enjoyment** levels are markedly **higher** among those who said that they had a writer visit (68.2%) compared with both the sample as a whole (53.0%) and those who haven't had a visit (47.4%).
- The level of **writing enjoyment** (43.9%) is also **higher** among those who had a writer visit but the differences with levels in the sample as a whole (35.8%) and those who didn't have a visit (32.5%) are less pronounced.

## Daily reading and writing and reading and writing length

- **Daily reading levels are higher** (36.2%) for children and young people who had a writer visit than they are for the sample as a whole (25.8%) and those who didn't have a visit (22.0%).
- There were **no differences in daily writing levels** between the sample as a whole (12.5%), those who had a writer visit (14.0%) and those who didn't have a visit (12.0%).
- Not only are children and young people who had a writer visit more likely to read daily, they are also **more likely** than the sample as a whole or those who didn't have a visit to say that they **read** (91.9% vs. 83.4% or 80.1%) **and write** (75.5% vs. 67.1% or 63.6%) **for 10 minutes or more** every day.

## Reading and writing confidence

- Children and young people who had a writer visit are **more likely to have high reading confidence** compared with their peers who didn't have a visit (36.8% vs. 25.1%).
- Fewer children and young people who had a writer visit rated their writing confidence as low compared with their peers who had no visit (21.0% vs. 31.1%). By contrast, they were slightly **more likely to rate their writing confidence as either "average" or as "high"**.

## Reading and writing attitudes

- More children and young people who had a writer visit have high reading (45.3%) and writing (32.3%) attitudes compared with either the sample as a whole (31.6% and 24.8%) or their peers who didn't have a visit (26.1% and 21.6%).
- Conversely, fewer hold low reading and writing attitudes. For example, children and young people who had a writer visit are twice less likely to have low reading attitudes compared with those who didn't have a visit (16.0% vs. 32.8%).

## How many schools report writer visits and why?

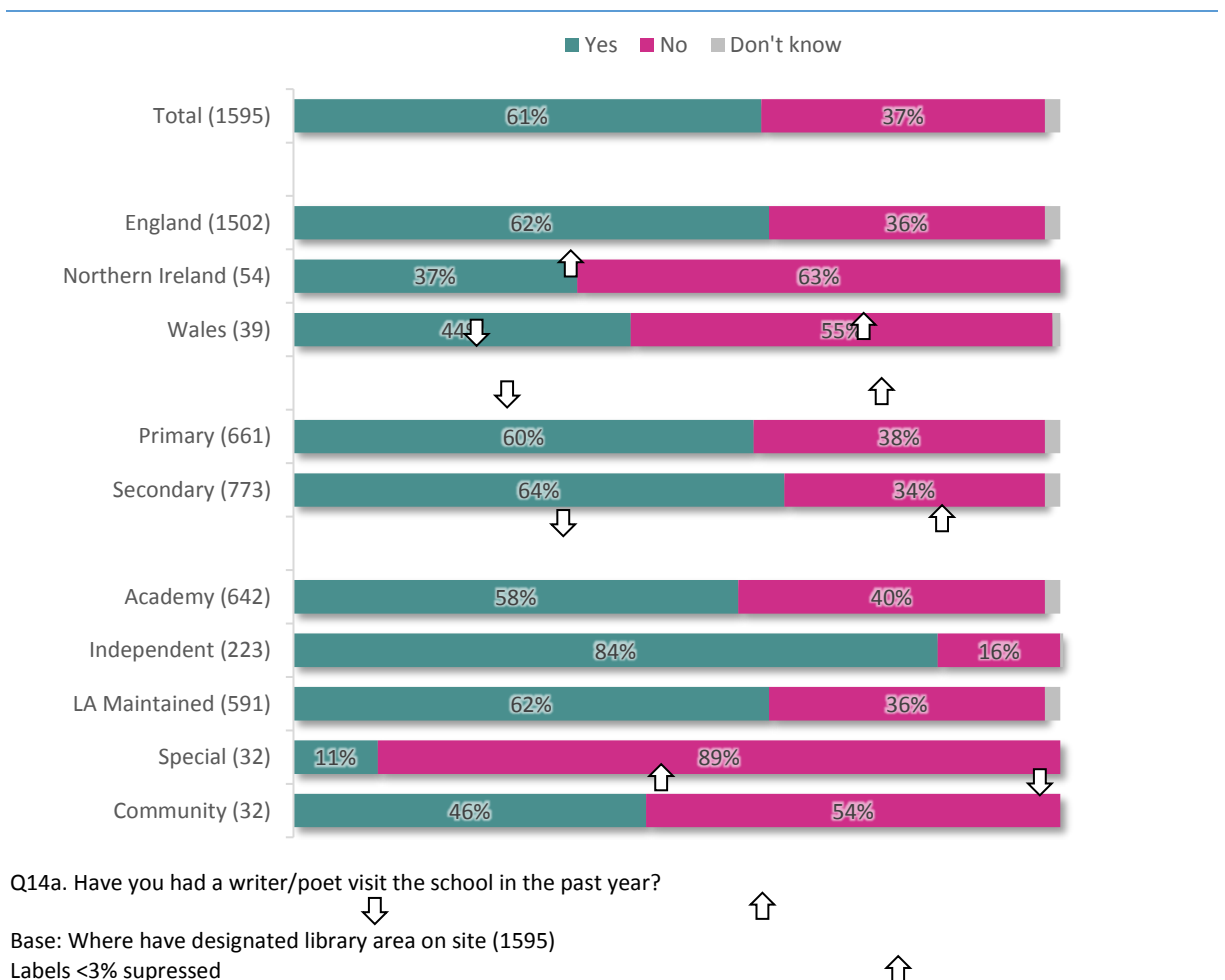
A question about writer visits in schools was included in a recent survey commissioned by the Great School Library Campaign. 1,750 schools from England, Wales and Northern Ireland took part in an online survey or phone interviews in February and March 2019.

Just over 3 in 5 schools (61%) have had a visit from a writer or poet in the past year while 37% have not (see Figure 1).

Breaking this down by country, schools in Northern Ireland (37%) and Wales (44%) are significantly less likely than schools in England (62%) to have had a visit (NB data not collected for Scotland).

While there is little disparity between primary and secondary schools, there are major differences observable by school type. Independent schools are considerably more likely than other schools to have had a writer visit (84%) – 23 percentage points greater than the average. In contrast, just 1 in 10 special schools (11%) say that they have been visited by an author or poet.

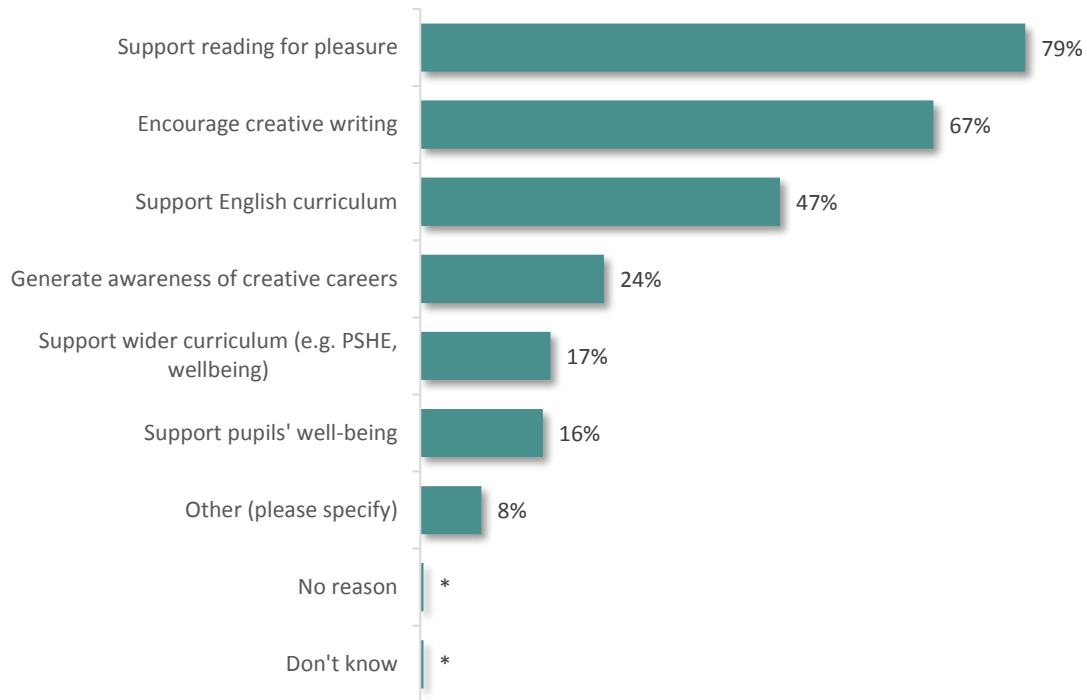
**Figure 1: Writer visit in the past year**



↑ Indicates a statistically significant difference compared with the total  
↓

Schools who have had a visit of this nature were then asked about the reasons behind it (see Figure 2). The most commonly cited reason was to support reading for pleasure (79%), followed by to encourage creating writing (67%) and to support the English curriculum (47%).

**Figure 2: Reason for writer visit**



Q14b. What was the reasoning behind the visit?  
Base: Where have had a writer visit (1014)

## Children, young people and writer visits

**1 in 4** (26.9%) children and young people who took part in our Annual Literacy Survey in 2019 said that they had had a writer visit at school. Slightly more girls than boys said this, as did children aged 9 to 11 compared with their older counterparts (see Figure 3). Slightly fewer children and young people who receive free school meals (FSMs), our proxy of socioeconomic status, said that they had a writer visit compared with their peers who don't receive FSMs.

**Figure 3: Percentage of children and young people aged 9 to 18 reporting a writer visit at school in 2019 by gender, age group and FSM uptake**

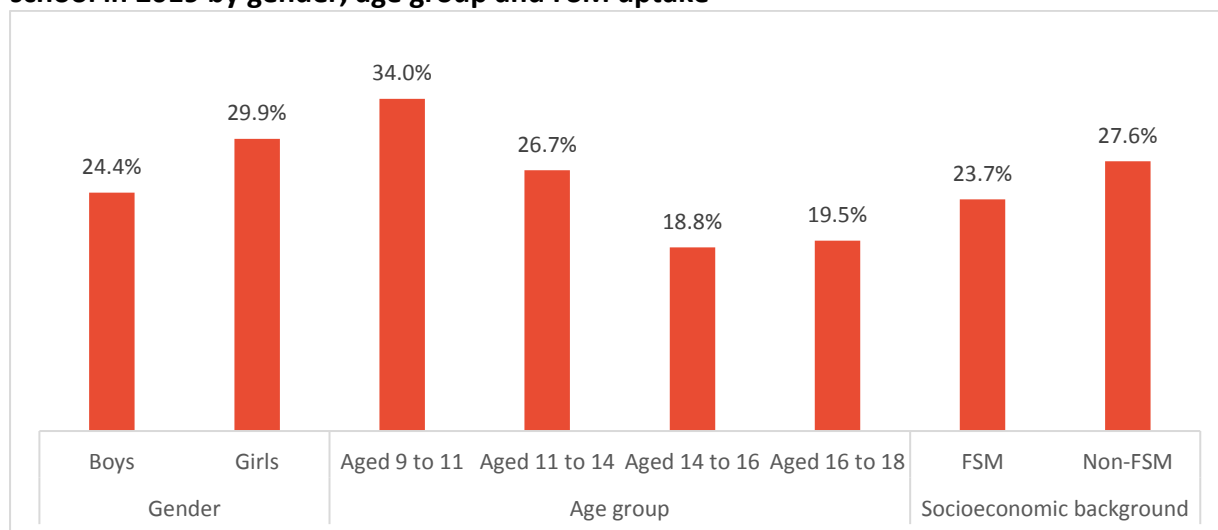
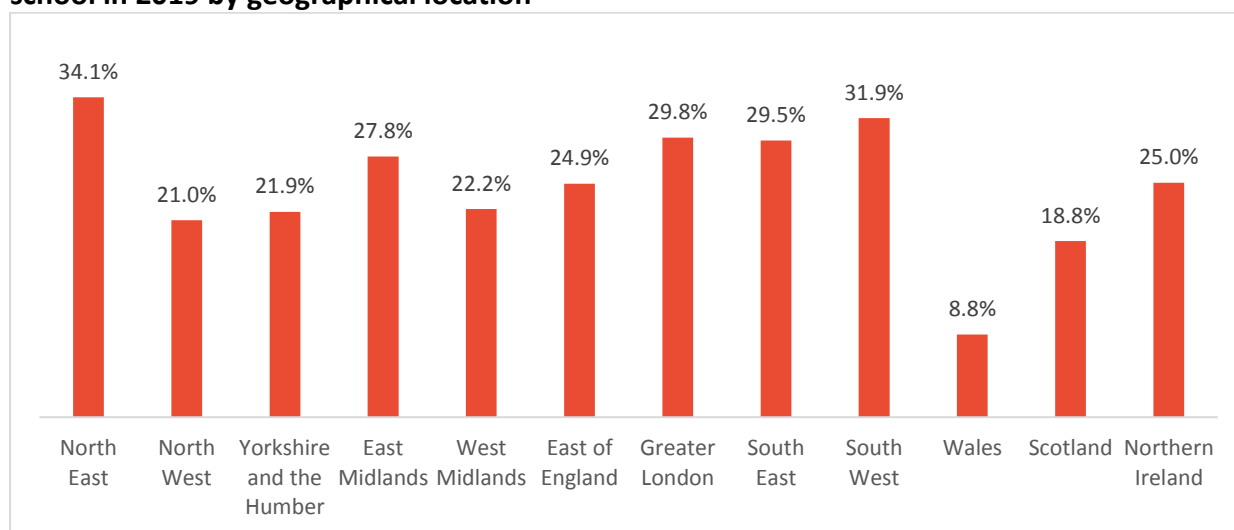


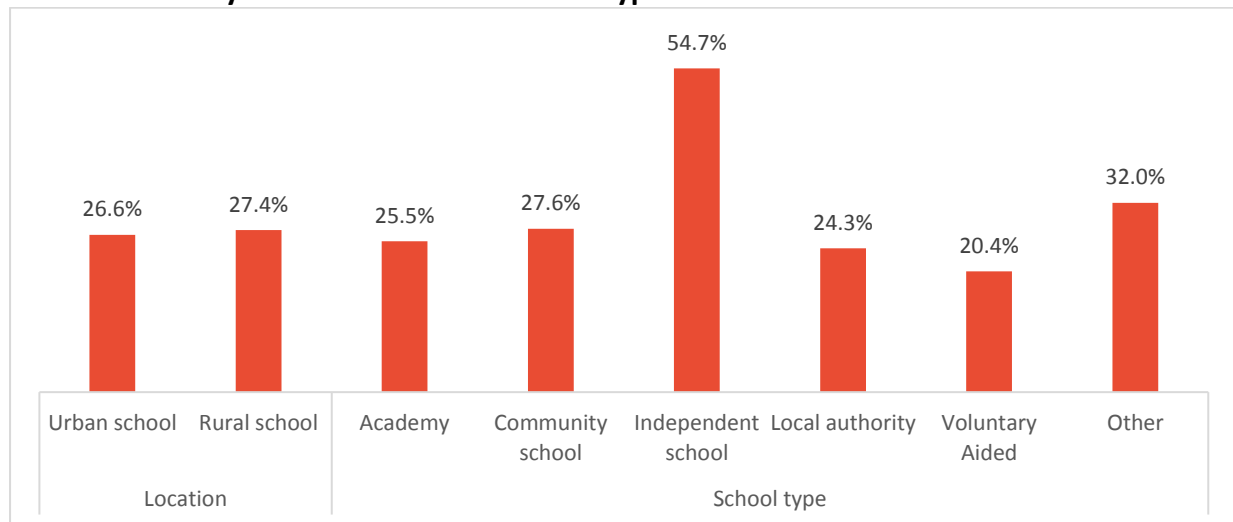
Figure 4 shows that there were some regional variations in the percentage of children and young people who said that they had a writer visit, with more children and young people living in the North East and the South West saying that they had such a visit, while children and young people living in Wales were least likely to say that they had a writer visit at school.

**Figure 4: Percentage of children and young people aged 9 to 18 reporting a writer visit at school in 2019 by geographical location**



There were no differences between rural and urban schools in whether or not children and young people reported having had a writer visit (see Figure 5). However, more children and young people attending independent schools reported having had a writer visit than children and young people attending other schools.

**Figure 5: Percentage of children and young people aged 9 to 18 reporting a writer visit at school in 2019 by school location and school type**



## Writer visits and reading skill

In 2019, we had reading skill data (from Star Reading<sup>1</sup>) for 712 pupils aged 8 to 16 along with information on whether or not they had had a writer visit (writer visit = 274; no writer visit = 438).

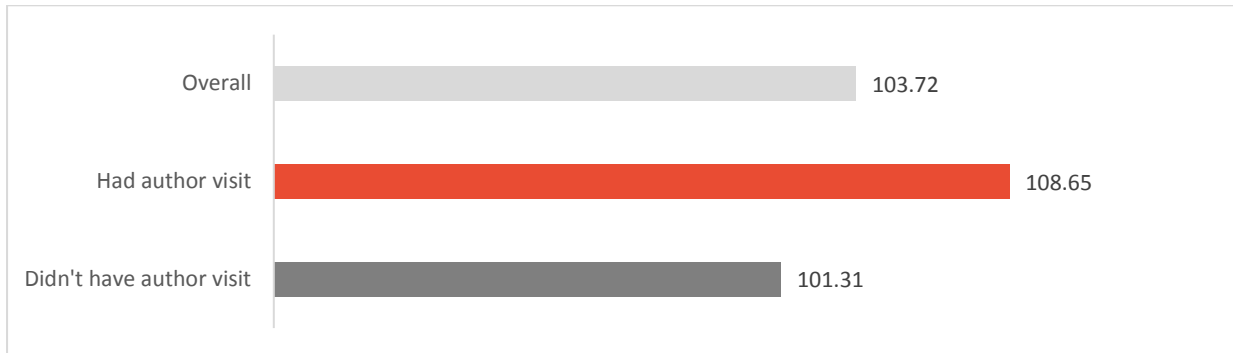
Star Reading provides standardised reading scores that take into account children’s ages and are easily interpretable. Like most other educational skill tests, it is standardised so that the average score is 100, while the spread of the scores (the standard deviation) is set for 15. This means that children who have standardised scores of 85-115 fall within the average reading skills band, while children who score below 85 have below average reading skills and children who score above 115 have above average reading skills.

As can be seen in Figure 6, children and young people who say that they had a writer visit have, on average, higher reading scores than their peers who say that they didn’t have such an experience<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.renlearn.co.uk/star-reading/>

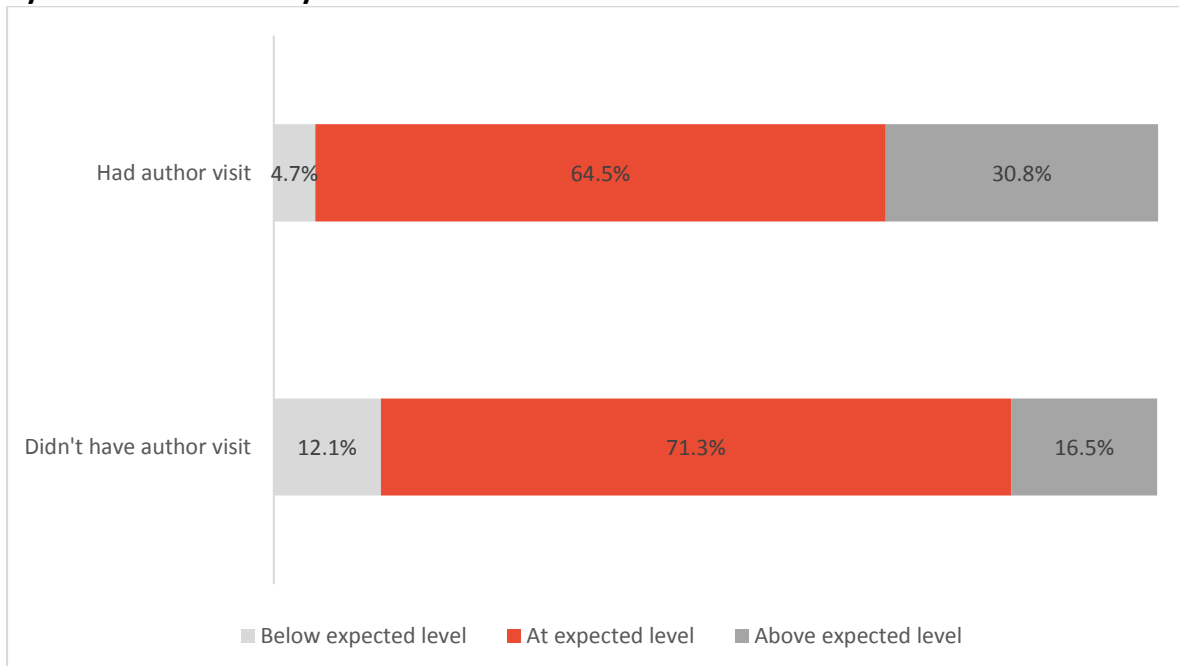
<sup>2</sup> Have a book of their own: SD = 14.86; don’t have a book of their own: SD = 12.70; t(570) = 7.583, p < .001

**Figure 6: Average standardised reading scores in 2019 by whether or not children had a writer visit**



To further compare pupils with different reading scores, we divided them into three groups based on their score: having a below average score (< 85), an average score (85 to 115) and an above average reading score (>115). As can be seen in Figure 7, nearly three times as many children who didn't have a writer visit read below the average expected for their age compared with their peers who had such a visit. Conversely, twice as many children and young people who had a writer visit read above the expected level compared with their peers who didn't have such a visit.

**Figure 7: Percentage of children reading below average, average and above average in 2019 by whether or not they had a writer visit**



It is interesting to consider the broader context for skills assessment in relation to writer visits. When comparing how likely children were to report writer visits by region in conjunction with the KS2 results (DFE, 2018) for the reading test and teacher writing assessment, there seems to be consistency (Table 1). This is especially true for the South West and North East, where children were most likely to achieve their expected level or greater depth in writing.



**Table 1: KS2 results by region and writer visits**

Region	Children reporting a writer visit	Reading test Expected level	Reading test Higher than expected	Writing teacher assessment Expected level	Writing teacher assessment Greater depth
North West	21.0%	76.0%	27.0%	77.0%	19.0%
Yorkshire and The Humber	21.9%	73.0%	26.0%	78.0%	18.0%
West Midlands	22.2%	74.0%	26.0%	78.0%	19.0%
East Midlands	27.8%	74.0%	26.0%	77.0%	20.0%
East	27.8%	75.0%	28.0%	78.0%	20.0%
South East	29.5%	77.0%	31.0%	78.0%	18.0%
London	29.8%	79.0%	31.0%	79.0%	20.0%
South West	31.9%	75.0%	29.0%	81.0%	22.0%
North East	34.1%	78.0%	29.0%	82.0%	24.0%

Although we haven't measured writing skill for this report, it is interesting to note the success of the South West and the North East in writing assessments. Particularly marked is the improvement in writing in the South West since 2016, when it was the worst performing region for writing assessment, with 70.8% of children achieving the expected level and 13.2% achieving 'greater depth'. This suggests that the intervention of schemes including Paper Nations' writer residency programme (ACE 2019) might have had an effect on writing attainment in the region and warrants further investigation.

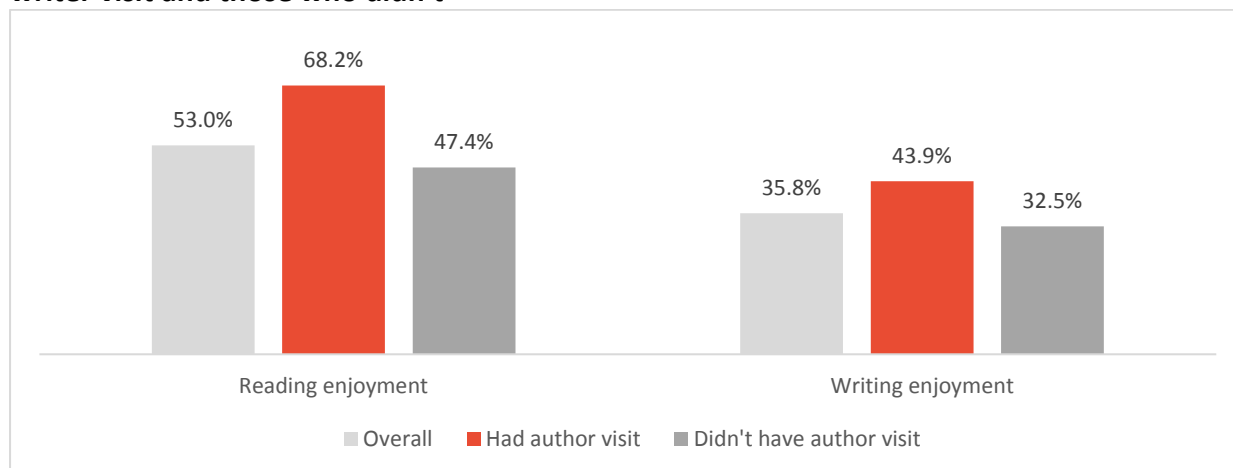
## Writer visits, reading and writing engagement

### Enjoyment of reading and writing

Overall, 1 in 2 children and young people said in 2019 that they enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot (see Figure 8). However, reading enjoyment levels are markedly higher among those who said that they had a writer visit, with nearly 7 in 10 saying that they enjoy reading. Those who didn't have a writer visit had the lowest levels of reading enjoyment.

The differences are less pronounced in terms of writing enjoyment. Overall, 1 in 3 children and young people said in 2019 that they enjoy writing either very much or quite a lot. Again, levels of writing enjoyment were higher in children and young people who said that they had a writer visit, with over 2 in 5 saying that they enjoyed writing. Again, children and young people who didn't have such a visit had the lowest level of writing enjoyment.

**Figure 8: Level of reading and writing enjoyment for sample as a whole, those who had a writer visit and those who didn't**

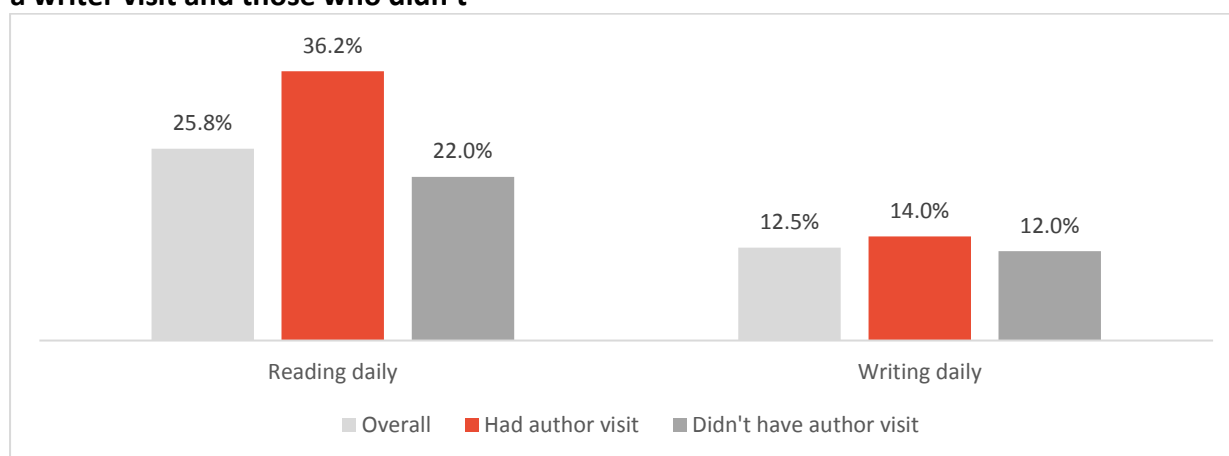


## Daily reading and writing

Overall, 1 in 4 children and young people said in 2019 that they read daily in their free time (see Figure 9). This percentage is markedly higher for children and young people who had a writer visit, with 1 in 3 saying that they read daily in their free time. Those who didn't have a writer visit were least likely to read daily outside class.

While there were differences in terms of daily reading, there was no difference in daily writing as a result of having had a writer visit, with 14% of children and young people who had a writer visit saying that they write daily in their free time compared with 12.5% overall and 12% who hadn't had a visit.

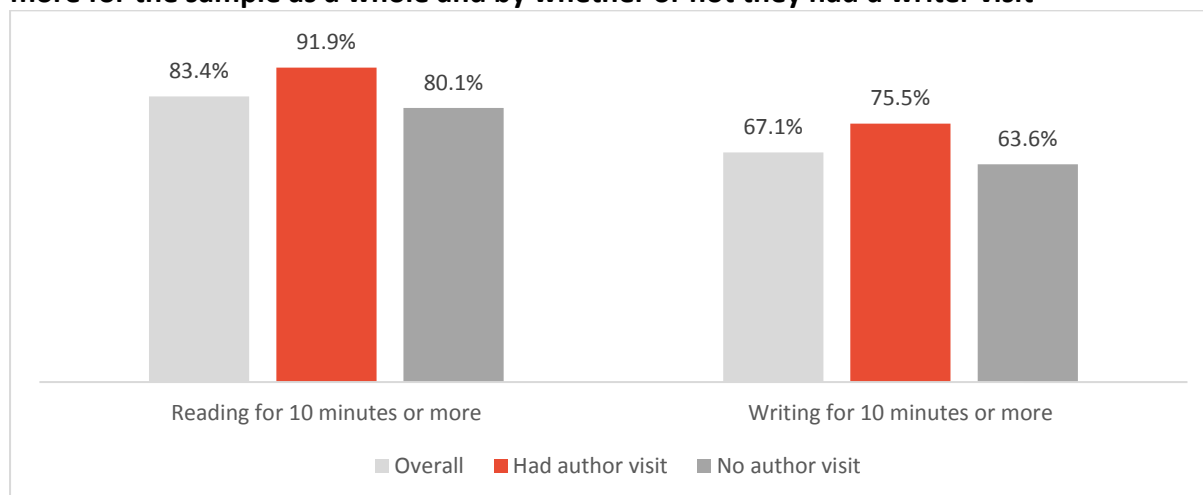
**Figure 9: Level of daily reading and writing in free time for sample as whole, those who had a writer visit and those who didn't**



## Reading and writing length

Not only are children and young people who had a writer visit more likely to read daily, they are also more likely than the sample as a whole or those who didn't have a visit to say that they read and write for 10 minutes or more (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Percentage of children and young people who read and write for 10 minutes or more for the sample as a whole and by whether or not they had a writer visit**

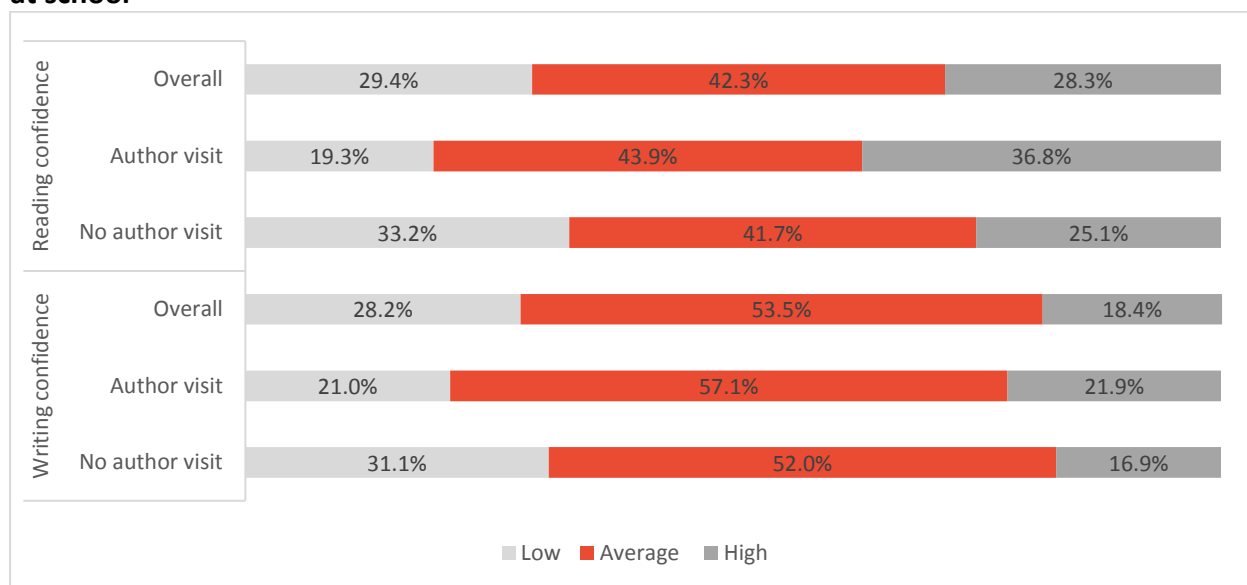


## Reading and writing confidence

Children and young people who had a writer visit are more likely to have high reading confidence compared with their peers who didn't have a visit (36.8% vs. 25.1%), who, in turn, are more likely to report low reading confidence (see Figure 11). They are also more likely to have high reading confidence and less likely to have low reading confidence compared with the sample as a whole.

Fewer children and young people who had a writer visit rated their writing confidence as low compared with their peers who had no visit (21.0% vs. 31.1%). By contrast, they were slightly more likely to rate their confidence as either "average" or "high".

**Figure 11: Percentage of children and young people reporting low, average or high reading and writing confidence for sample as a whole and by whether or not they had a writer visit at school**

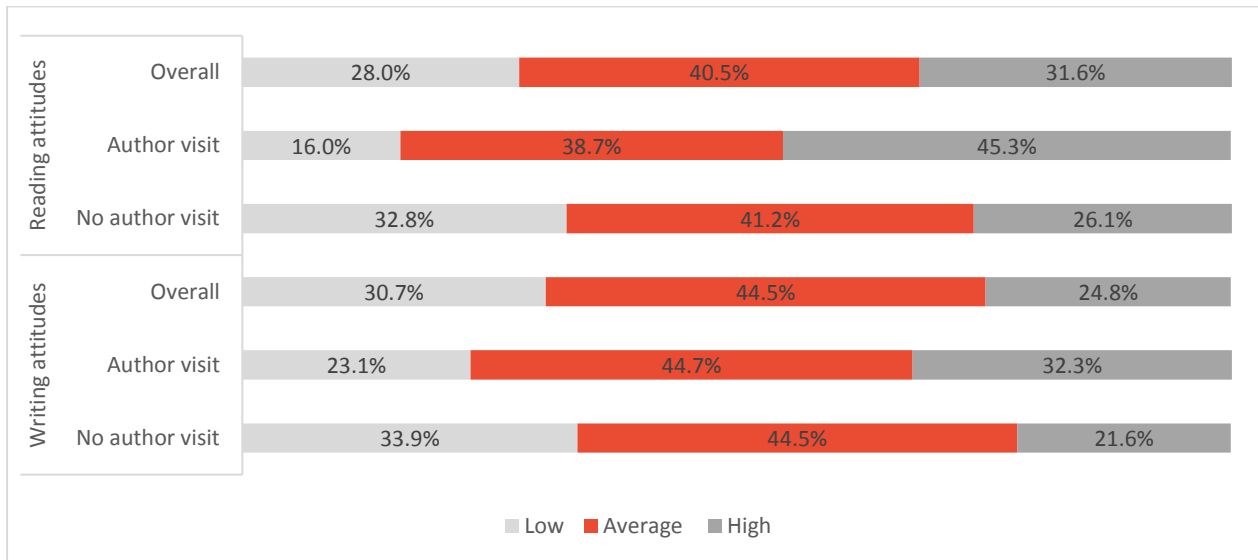


## Reading and writing attitudes

Finally, we also asked children and young people how they feel about reading and writing. Figure 12 shows that more children and young people who had a writer visit have high reading and writing attitudes compared with either the sample as a whole or their peers who didn't have a visit.

Conversely, fewer hold low reading and writing attitudes. For example, children and young people who had didn't have a writer visit are twice more likely to have low reading attitudes compared with those who did have a visit.

**Figure 12: Percentage of children and young people reporting low, average or high reading and writing attitudes for sample as a whole and by whether or not they had a writer visit at school**



The above relationships were the same, regardless of the child’s gender, age or FSM background.

## Summary and discussion

The findings in this report are very promising, especially the high proportion of our sample who reported working with a writer. However, although this might suggest an increased awareness of the value of writer visits, it is not clear that schools are more likely to offer paid opportunities to writers. A recent report published by the All-Party Parliamentary Writers Group<sup>3</sup> found that “Authors said that some schools commission fewer visits due to budgetary constraints, even when these visits can be part of a varied and interactive education.” It is also important to acknowledge that the positive impact on reading enjoyment, attitudes, skills, confidence and behaviours and writing enjoyment, attitudes and confidence are unlikely to be solely the result of a writer visit, especially where the visit has been a one off, but it does suggest that writer visits form a critical element of a rich and varied approach to literacy in the most successful schools.

What is concerning is the disparity between the children who have access to this opportunity, with the most privileged children (those attending independent schools) much more likely to work with a professional writer than their peers in state-run schools. Much media attention has been focused on school budgets and it seems likely that the lower rates of state schools working with professional writers could be due to the traditional perspective of writer visits as a ‘nice to have’ or an extracurricular activity which are most likely to be cut where finances are tight. There is clearly work to be done to support secondary schools to embed writer visits into their curriculum. The very low number of children in special schools with access to this opportunity also demands further investigation and begs the question of whether this is down

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/apwg-inquiry-calls-immediate-action-reverse-steep-decline-writers-incomes-1020611>

to a lack of demand (or budgets) from the schools or whether there are fewer writers who are equipped to work with children with special educational needs.

It is interesting to see that the North East and the South West, where pupils were most likely to have worked with writers, were among the highest performing regions for reading and writing at KS2 according to DfE data. Of particular note is the improvement in writing for the Year 6 age group in the South West where there has been a targeted intervention using writer residencies, lending weight to the findings of previous reports that longer term opportunities for children to work with writers are most effective. Our experience working with schools and writers has demonstrated that one-off writer visits are most effective when children prepare for the visit in advance (e.g. by reading an author's book or writing a first draft of a poem to be worked on during the session) and when teachers or librarians are able to build on the content of the visit after the day itself. This is only possible when there is communication between the school and the writer to agree the focus and aims for the writer's visit.

It was telling that we saw the greatest impact on children's enjoyment of reading, given that was the most commonly cited reason for having organised the visit. This, along with our experience working with schools and writers, suggests that writer visits have the greatest impact when there is a clearly identified purpose and this has been communicated between the organiser in school and the writer themselves. It is interesting to see that a high proportion of writer visits aim to encourage creative writing but that this does not seem to have translated into an increase in daily writing. The findings in this report present an argument for considering more broadly what a visit could achieve.