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Metrics for Schools and Children's Services: A Ten Year Retrospective

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Introduction

One measure of any nation's long term commitment to culture, reading and learning is surely its investment in the provision of library and information services to children. This paper describes the approach to charting one country's performance and identifies some issues of global relevance.

Providing a library service to children may be regarded as one of the most crucial aspects of cultural enrichment nurturing as it does literacy and a sense of enquiry in young people. The library offers an environment for learning and leisure through access to information in all its forms, as well as space, facilities and services centred around maximising opportunities for the child. The role of the library in social inclusion, and its importance to young people is fully recognised the newly proposed public library impact measures for the UK, which are based on a consensus on social priorities between national and local government (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2005 and Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, 2005). Of the five contextual shared social priorities addressed in the impact measures, two relate specifically to young people. They are "raising standards across schools" and "improving the quality of life for children, young people, families at risk and older people". LISU has consistently collected information on the provision of services to children and a considerable amount of valuable data has been assembled.

For the past fifteen years, LISU has been administering an annual survey of library services to schools and children. The series began with a survey of England and Wales in 1989-90 and was expanded in 1991-92 to include Scotland and Northern Ireland. The survey covers public library services for children, and the support to schools provided by schools library services. The most important area of library services to children which is not covered is that available from school libraries. The basic core of the questionnaires has remained unchanged, to allow for comparisons

over time; however some new features are introduced and others discontinued as appropriate to the circumstances of each survey.

It is important to define the precise scope of the surveys. Public library services for children are those provided by the 208 local authorities in the UK; schools library services are provided by the same authorities, although there are a number of formal co-operative arrangements in place between groups of London boroughs, unitary authorities and between counties and unitary authorities. In the most recent survey (2003-04), six London boroughs, six metropolitan districts, six unitary authorities, one county, three Welsh authorities and three authorities in Scotland had no form of schools library provision. In some cases this is a result of the ending of formal agreements between authorities.

Survey Methodology

Separate questionnaires are circulated to all public library authorities and schools library services in the UK, usually in May of each year. The initial distribution of questionnaires is carried out electronically, and has been since the 2000-01 survey. Potential respondents are contacted by electronic mail and the questionnaire is included as an attachment to the message; printed copies are provided if requested. Up to 2000-2001, questionnaires were distributed on paper by post. The introduction of electronic data gathering has made easier the processing of information by LISU. LISU achieves consistently high response rates in its regular surveys and this we attribute to the value that people place on the data in the series as well as the considerable lengths to which we go in progress chasing by email and telephone.

Some Key Results and Trends

Since the basic core of the survey questionnaires has remained relatively unchanged, it is feasible to determine in many cases trends in the statistics over the past ten years. The data quoted here have been grossed up to allow for non-respondents, and are therefore estimated totals for the whole sector.

It is, however, difficult to maintain complete comparability in a series of this kind because one is dealing with a range of dynamic factors. For example, one of many re-organisations of the British local authority system began on 1st April 1996 and this created new authorities and rearranged boundaries in others. As a result, in many cases questionnaires relating to the 1995-96 period were sent to the relevant new authorities for retrospective completion. This may have resulted in a higher level of missing and/or incomplete data for that period.

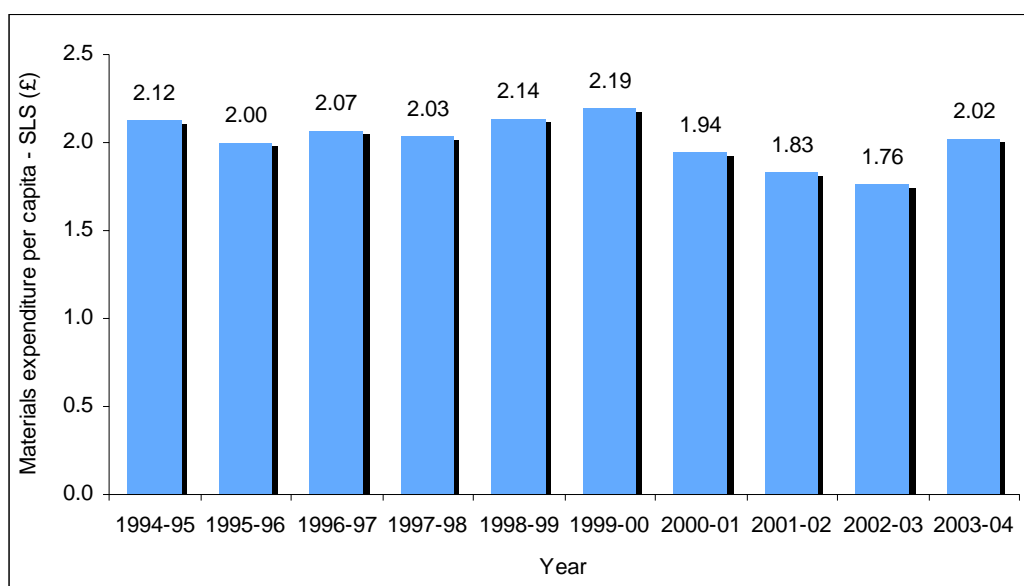
Table 1 (below) shows the response rates to each survey over the ten year period. These are commendably high, and allow LISU to assemble a good deal of reliable data and to identify trends and issues with greater confidence. The response rates have remained relatively stable across the ten-year period, showing that the re-organisation process has had no major effect on the ability and willingness of authorities to reply to the survey.

Table 1: Response rates

	PLS	SLS
1994-95	92%	93%
1995-96	92%	90%
1996-97	86%	92%
1997-98	83%	84%
1998-99	88%	86%
1999-00	82%	88%
2000-01	79%	88%
2001-02	78%	82%
2002-03	81%	88%
2003-04	85%	88%

Figure 1 below is concerned with materials expenditure per capita in schools library services. This is calculated according to the number of pupils served. The trend over the ten-year period has been one of fluctuation. It is encouraging to note that the figure increased in 2003-04. If sustained, this would go some way to making up earlier reductions in resourcing and may signal a renewed commitment to investing in information to support learning in schools.

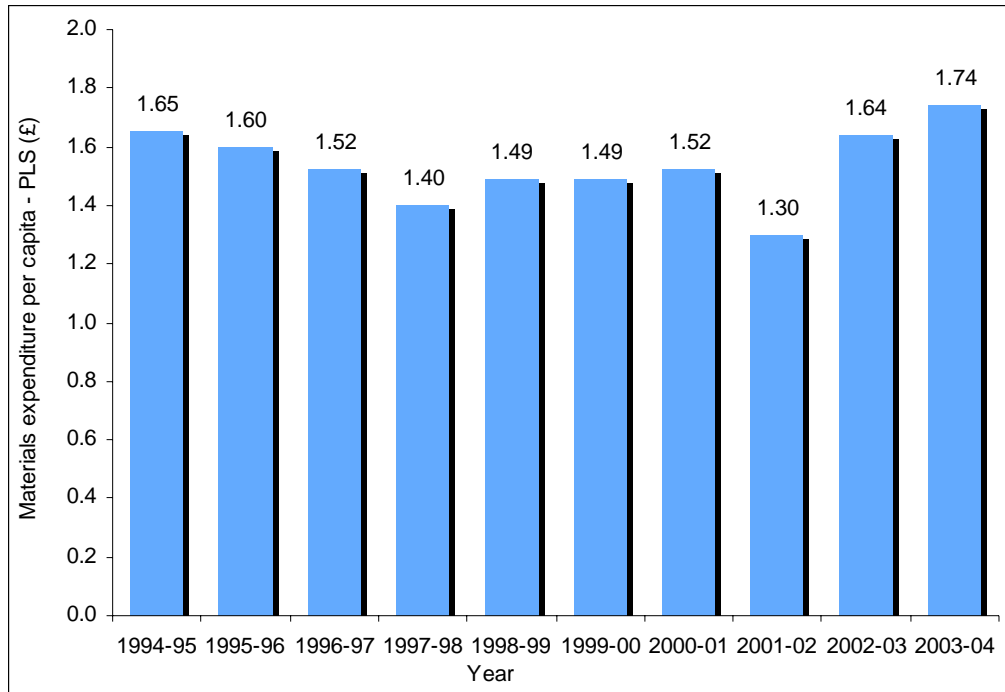
Fig 1: Materials expenditure per capita (Schools Library Services) in UK Pounds



It should be noted that metrics for levels of expenditure on materials are much higher in schools library services than in the public library service to children (see Figure 2 below). The reason for this is due more to the methods of calculation than to levels of provision. For schools library services, the basis of the per capita figures is the number of pupils served. For public library services to children, it is the potential user base, that is, all children resident in the authority, regardless of whether or not they use the service.

Figure 2 presents the trend for materials expenditure per head of the population aged 0-14 years. The level of expenditure appears to have held up well, the figure for 2003-04 being higher than that for 1994-95. This is an encouraging trend.

Fig 2: Materials expenditure per capita – (Public Library Service) in UK Pounds



If both sets of data from Figure 1 and Figure 2 are compared, however, with the trends in the UK Retail Price Index [RPI] which tracks average price inflation in the nation based upon the cost of a ‘basket’ of goods and services that a household might typically purchase, then the optimism fades somewhat. Table 2 below tracks the growth in the RPI since 1994. Just on the basis that price trends in information products mirror those of the RPI (and there is some evidence that they are greater), it is clear that the growth in resources budgets has not kept pace with inflation. It is hard to argue that the difference is entirely attributable to libraries employing more efficient purchasing methods and securing spectacular levels of discounting. On the other hand, it is readily apparent that in the High Streets of the UK, the general public have found certain popular titles more affordable through routine discounting, especially in supermarkets. As will be seen later, this may have an effect on library loans, as readers (or their parents/guardians) become buyers rather than borrowers!

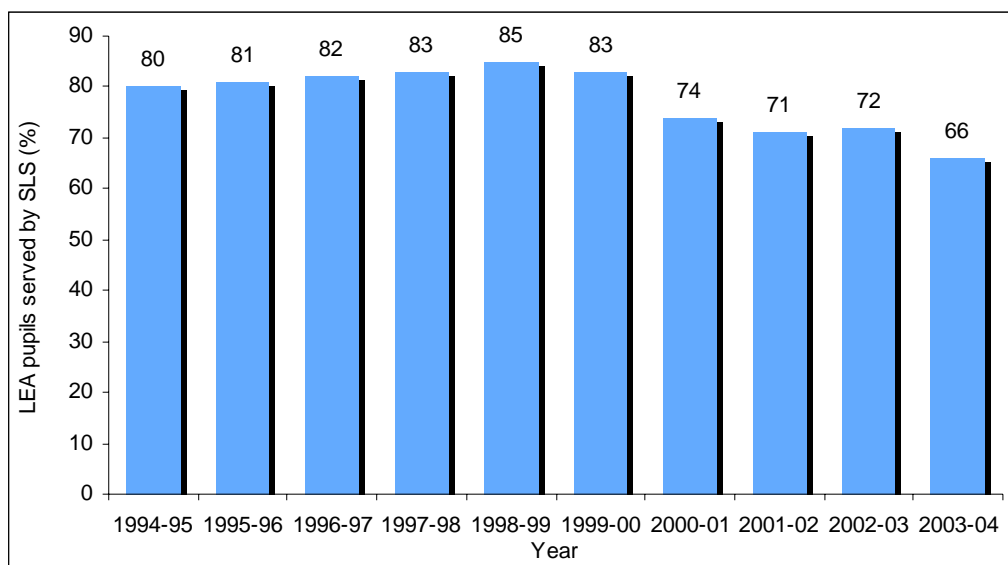
Table 2: Retail Price Index 1994-2004

Year	Retail Price Index	% increase
1994	144.1	
1995	149.1	3.5
1996	152.7	2.4
1997	157.5	3.1
1998	162.9	3.4
1999	165.4	1.6
2000	170.3	3.0
2001	173.3	1.8
2002	176.2	1.7
2003	181.3	2.9
2004	186.8	3.0

Figure 3 is concerned with the percentage of pupils served by Schools Library Services. It is apparent that the percentage was increasing slightly each year until 1998-99, and began to fall the following year to reach its lowest level of around 66% in 2003-04. Our conclusion is that this dwindling of take-up can only be the impact of the *Fair Funding* programme; the school funding system introduced by central government in 1999. The system built upon the Local Management of Schools (LMS) strategy, also introduced by central government, which focussed on increasing the level of financial delegation to schools. Key aspects of the strategy are formula funding and the delegation of financial responsibility to schools. The strategy also sets the framework for the financial relationship that operates between schools and their local education authorities (LEAs). A consequence of this kind of financial delegation has been that schools can choose for themselves whether or not to use the funds over which they have control, to ‘purchase’ a Schools Library Service. Thus we observe the dynamics of the market place entering the picture in combination with imperatives to prioritise limited budgets. In a perfect world, schools would have sufficient money not to have to choose, for instance, between funding a teaching post, or even repairing the school heating system, and subscribing to the Schools Library Service. However, the reality is that stark choices have to be made and a subscription to the Schools Library Service may be a casualty of such an approach. Market forces also permit, and even encourage schools, to consider alternative models of provision; a school may feel able to provide a comparable service from within its own resources. In this scenario, Schools Library Services have to market themselves energetically and demonstrate that they represent good value for money. The situation and the data pose certain questions which need investigation. Do children in schools which ‘opt-out’ of the Schools Library Service suffer in any way? What are the implications for schools unable to afford to use the Schools Library Service?

If the observations of the UK Chief Inspector of Schools are to be heeded, there is certainly scope for improvement in some schools. He was reported earlier this year as voicing criticism regarding the level of provision of libraries in some primary and secondary schools (Cassidy, 2005).

Fig 3: Percentage of LEA pupils served by Schools Library Service



Figures 4 and 5 are concerned with the numbers of professional library staff. Figure 4 shows an overall and currently continuing decrease in professional staff in the Schools Library Service. This is perhaps inevitable when taking into account the falling proportion of pupils served; with fewer customers to serve, the need for librarians will necessarily diminish.

An overall decrease can also be discerned in the numbers of professional staff in public libraries – see Figure 5. This is likely to be due to the widespread re-configuration of service structures which leads to staff being given extra responsibilities and therefore unable to specialise in quite the same way as in earlier times. Evidence from the survey suggests that many children’s service managers also have other roles. In addition, it can be argued that there is a decline in specialisation, due partly to a reduction in the organisations offering any sort of training for children’s librarians.

Fig 4: Total professional library staff (Schools Library Service)

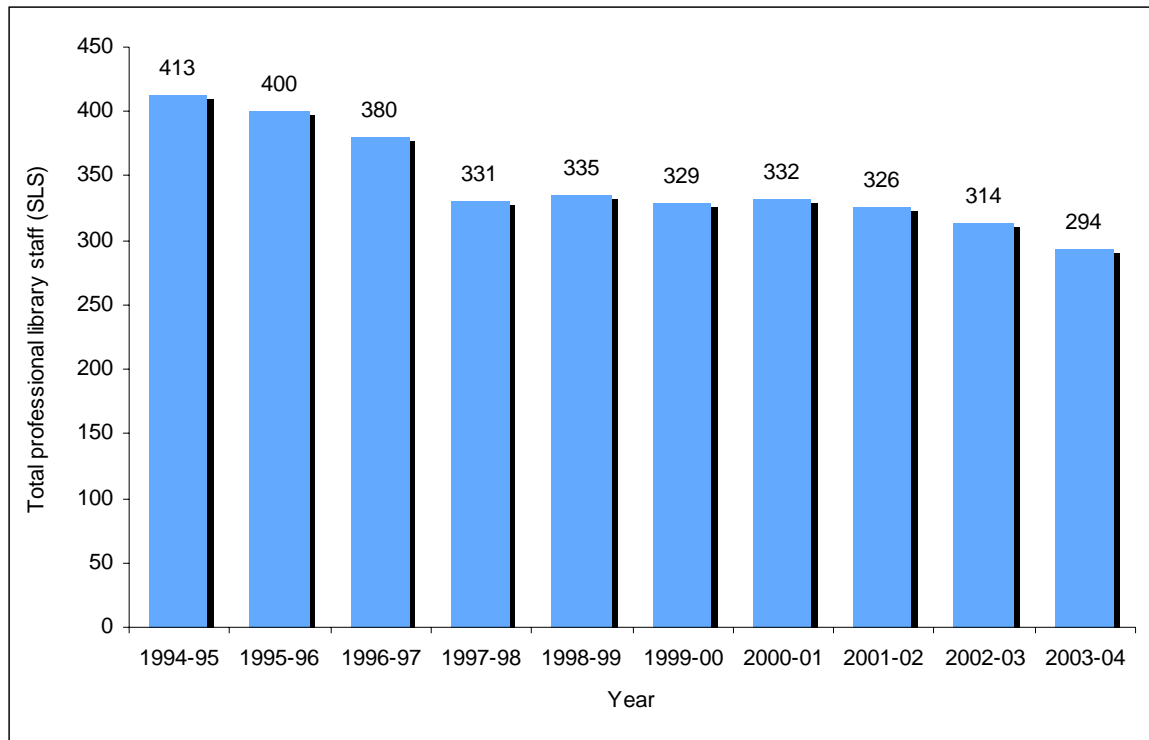
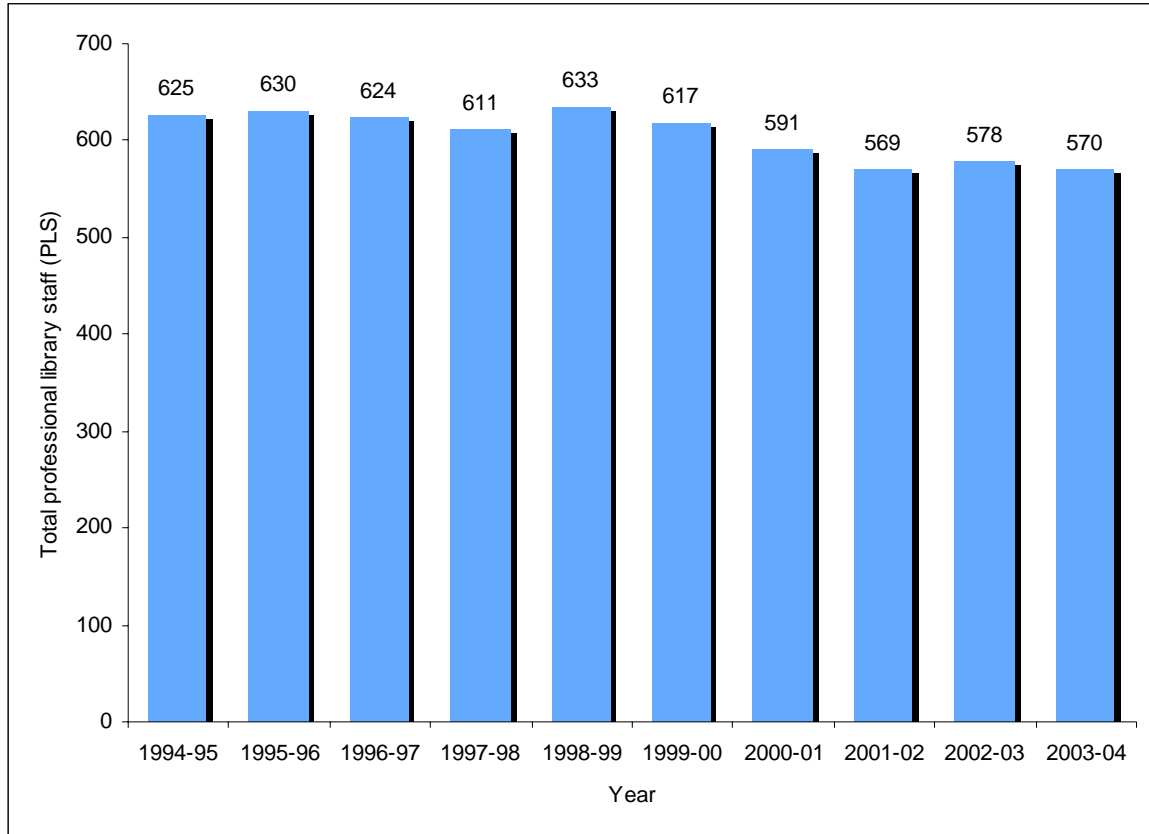
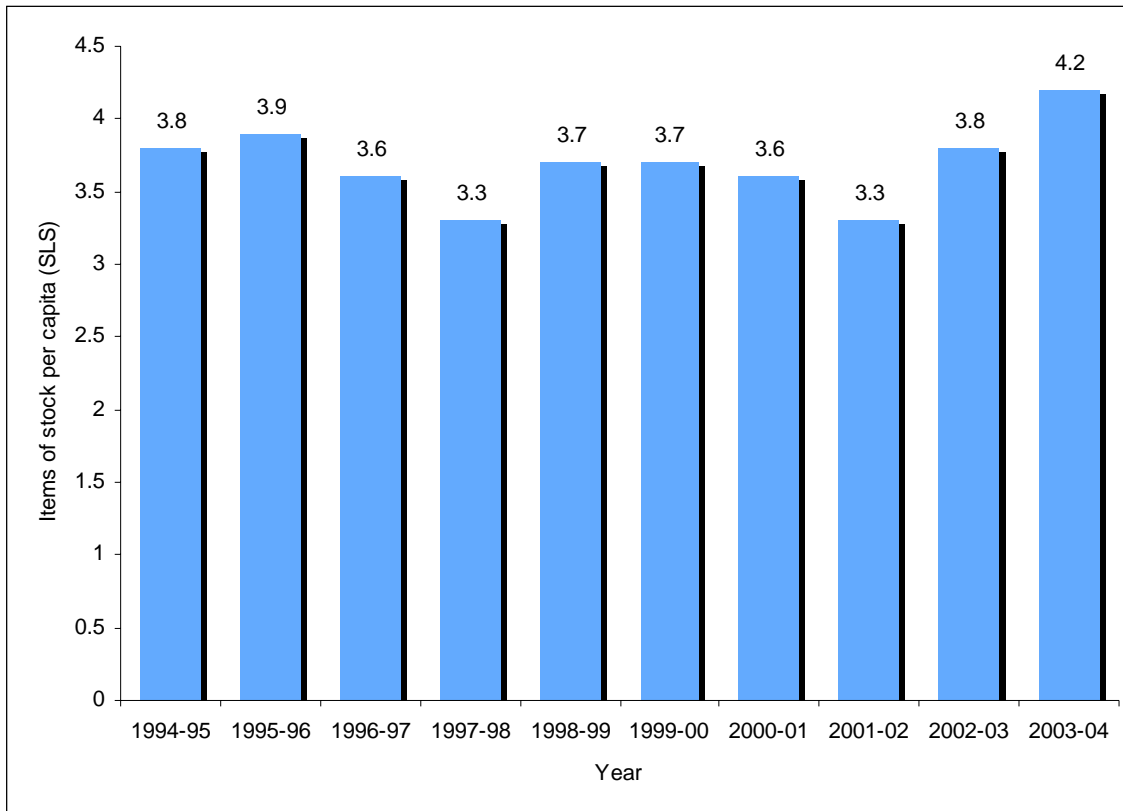


Fig 5: Total professional library staff (Public Library Service)



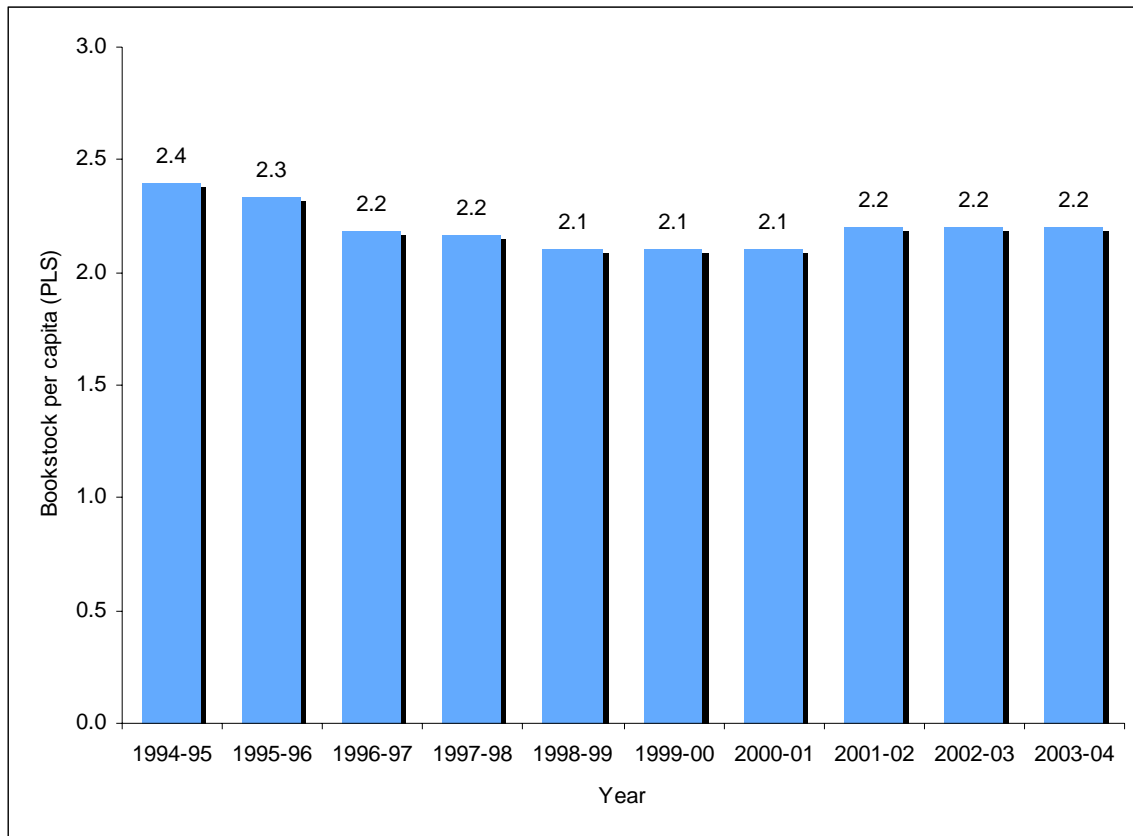
With regard to items of stock per capita in the Schools Library Service, Figure 6 shows that the figure has been steady over the ten-year period, with an encouraging rise in the most recent year. This is likely to be due to the upturn in expenditure, discussed previously (see Figure 1). It is reassuring to note in addition that book issues per capita in schools library services show a continuing and healthy use of books in schools (see Figure 11 below).

Fig 6: Items of stock per capita (Schools Library Service)



With regard to bookstock in the public library service, Figure 7 illustrates the trend over the last ten years. It can clearly be seen that this has remained fairly constant – an obviously encouraging picture, suggesting that public libraries have been able to maintain their levels of stock over the period under discussion. However, given that expenditure on new books has decreased, this could, at least in part, be attributable to reduced attention to the weeding of titles.

Fig 7: Bookstock per capita (Public Library Service)



Figures 8 and 9 are concerned with replenishment rates within both types of service – the replenishment rate is calculated as the number of additions as a percentage of total stock. It can be seen that both rates were higher in 2003-04 than they were in 1994-95, with both being subject to a certain amount of fluctuation over the ten year period. The replenishment rate is generally greater in the public library than the schools library service; this is likely to be due to the differences in the stock held by the two services. Different aspects of reading are being addressed by each service, which is reflected in the stock which they hold.

Fig 8: Replenishment rates (Schools Library Service)

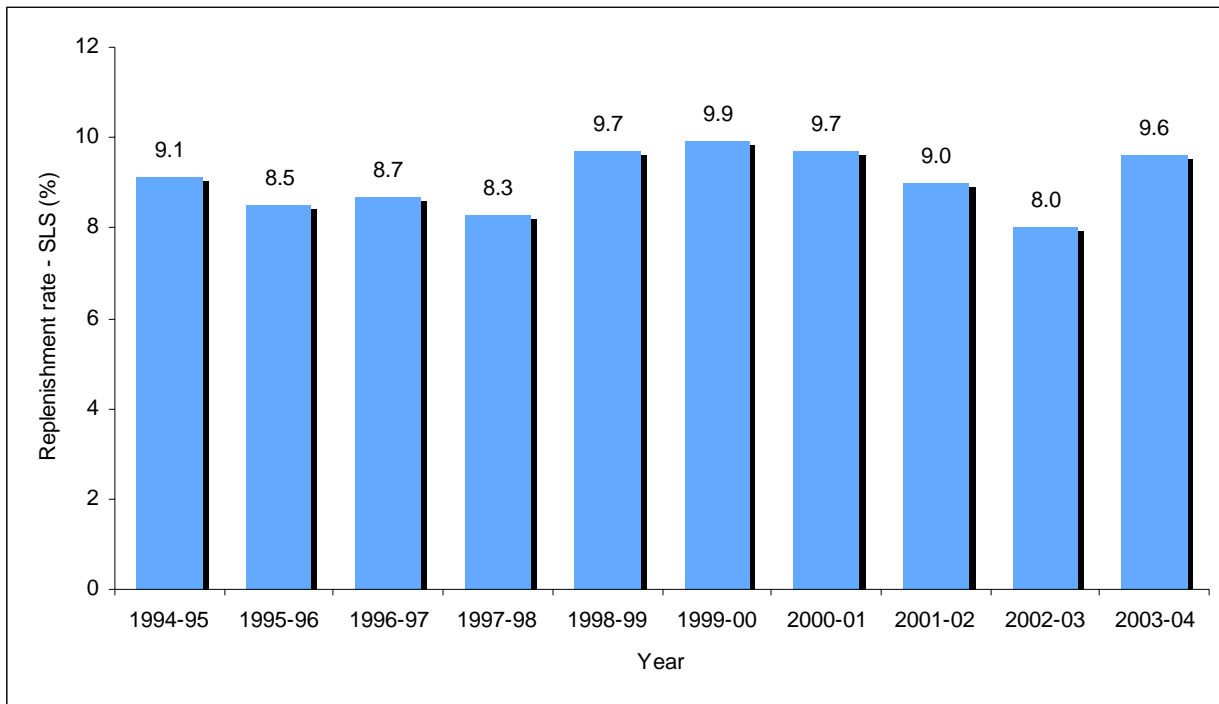


Fig 9: Replenishment rates (Public Library Service)

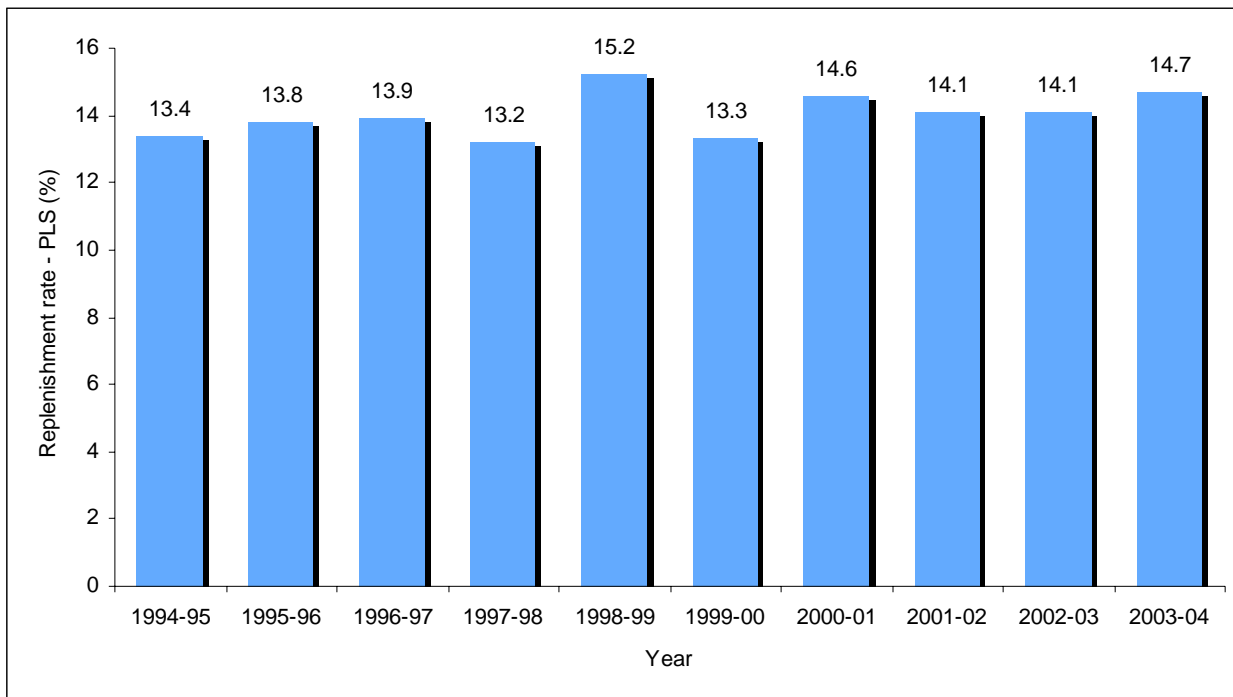


Figure 10 is concerned with the percentage of stock on loan (as at the end of the financial year) in public library services. The picture for the schools library service has not been included here, since the definition of “on loan” as applied to the survey has changed over the ten-year period, thereby limiting the comparability of data. The trend in the public library service shows little variation over time, although it was at one of its lowest levels in 2003-04. Taking into account the increase in the replenishment rate, this is unlikely to be due to a lack of newly purchased

books discouraging young readers from borrowing. It is more likely to be a reflection of the reduction in issues of children's books, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

Fig 10: Percentage of stock on loan (Public Library Service)

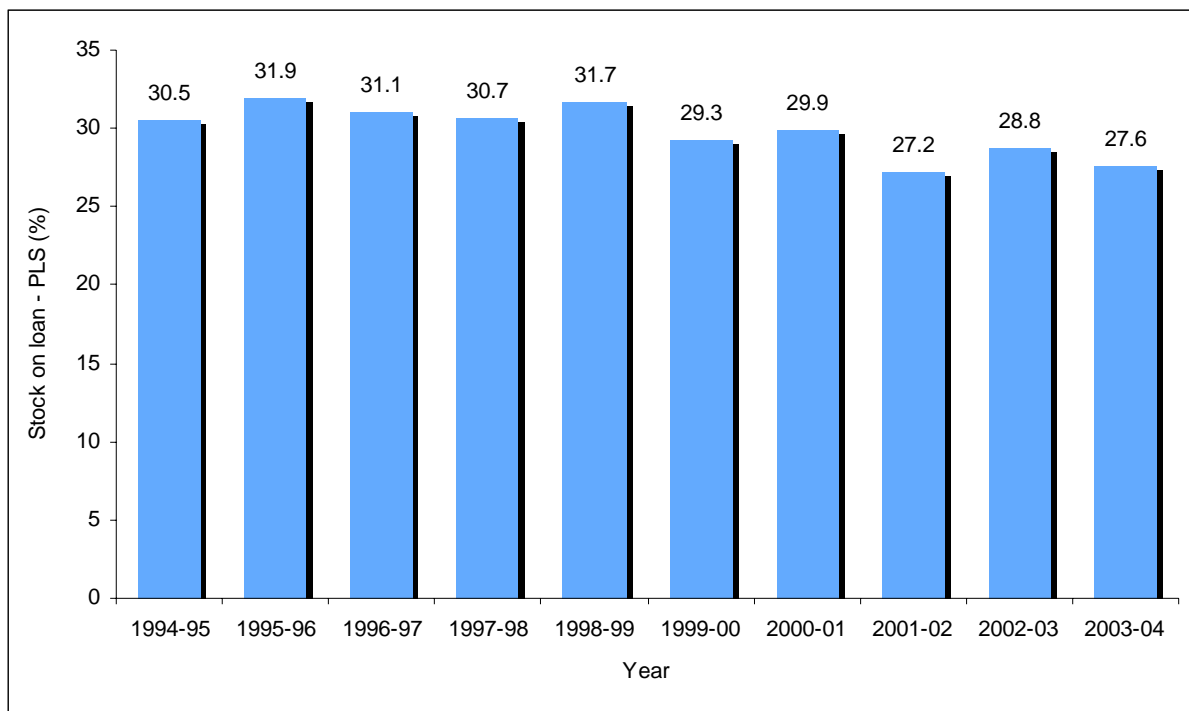


Figure 11 summarises the position with regard to book issues per capita in the schools library service. Details of this aspect of the service were first collected in 1997-98, so a ten-year picture is not available. However, it is thought worth presenting the figures which are available to give an impression of the trend over the seven year period. It should be noted that books from the schools library service are issued to schools rather than to individuals, however, the picture is encouraging. The figure shows a continuing and robust use of books in schools, and suggests that those drawing on the schools library service continue to value printed resources in addition to other complementary electronic material.

Fig 11: Book issues per capita (Schools Library Service)

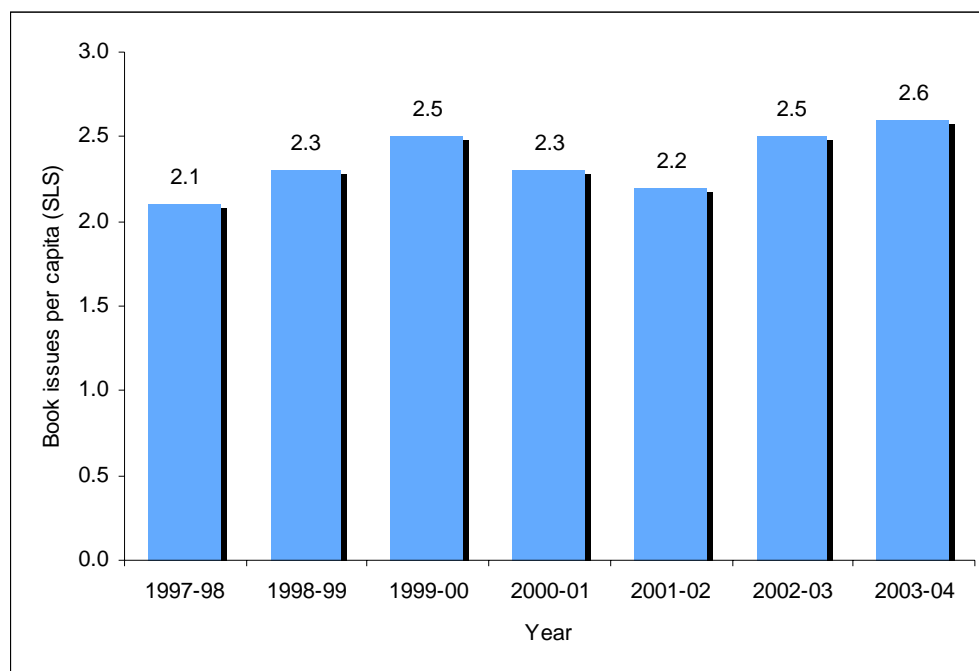


Figure 12 is concerned with book issues per capita in the public library service, and shows the trend in this measure between 1994-95 and 2003-04. It can clearly be seen that the number of book issues has decreased over the period – from 10.2 to 7.6; this represents a fall of 25%.

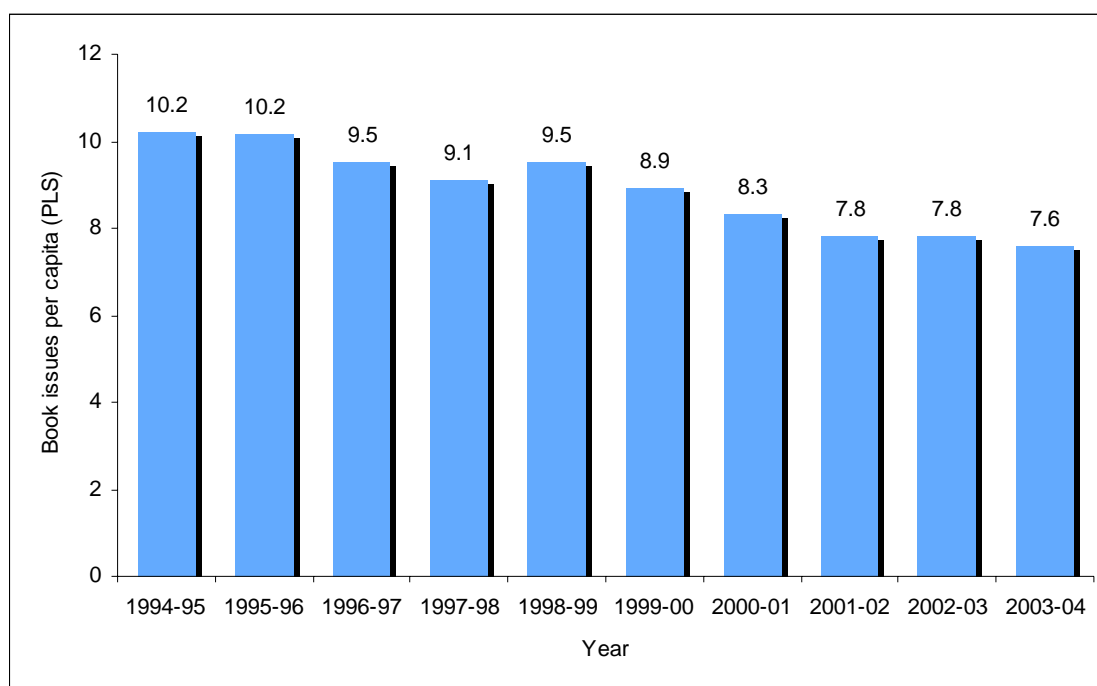
The general decline in book issues has been a topic of concern for the last few years, leading to the questions of why this is happening and whether we should be worried about it. There is currently a fairly widely held belief that children’s interest in reading is in general decline; the decrease in issues of children’s books from public libraries would seem to contribute to this view. However, various surveys of reading over the last few years have tended to contradict the idea that reading is decreasing in popularity. For example, Hall and Coles (1999) investigated children’s choices of leisure reading matter (compared to a seminal study of 1977 by Whitehead et al) and found that there had been no overall decline in the amount of book reading achieved since 1977. They also discovered that approximately 65% of participants viewed reading in a positive light, and around 96% owned their own books.

It might be argued that children’s issues in public libraries are decreasing because of alternative sources of material, principally those presented by electronic means. Of significance here is “visual literacy”, defined as “the ability to find meaning in imagery” (Yenawine, 1997). The term describes the combination of skills required to construct meaning from the enormous variety of images present in contemporary culture, and the predominance of, and children’s great interest in the visual media such as video, audio, comics and magazines, film, television and computers is said to be causing them to develop a more sophisticated level of visual literacy than they might formerly have done. The result of the increasing significance of visual literacy is that more importance is being placed on extending the definition of literacy to include the reading of electronic formats (Meek, 1991). It can also be argued that the digital world is having a “substantial” influence on printed literature for young people, leading to a transformation of form and content in the arena of texts for children which is both natural and inevitable in an increasingly electronic society (Dresang, 1997). A survey by Livingstone and Bovill (1999) found that fewer homes had books than had television sets, and even allowing for the discrepancy

in cost, “ ... no more children own books (two-thirds in all) than have their own television set.” (p 23). The appeal of computers and other media to children was in evidence from the authors’ conclusion that the position of books in children’s lives is changing, in competition with IT as a source of information, and by television as a source of narrative. The suggestion that printed books are in decline was reinforced by the study’s findings that the overall image of books was poor, and they were widely considered to be “ ... boring, old-fashioned, frustrating and as requiring altogether too much effort.” Because they are ““what your parents approve of””, books are not “trendy” (p 23). However, perhaps more encouragingly, the survey did find that many of the participants enjoyed books despite this poor image. Fifty seven per cent of respondents read books that were not for school, and on average they spent just under an hour reading on 3 to 4 days a week. A fair proportion of readers (30%) spent almost an hour a day reading books. We also note the great popularity of particular books, such as J K Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, the latest of which (*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*) has just been published. The UK sales forecast for this title was 3 million in the first week of publication, and it has been suggested that, by mid-July 2005, more than 265 million copies of the six books in the series had been sold in around 200 countries (Cronin, 2005). It could therefore be concluded that reading is not necessarily in decline, but that the type of literature which is being read is changing along with the times. Issues of children’s books from public libraries may be suffering from these effects.

The sourcing of reading material is also in transition. It is worth noting that the amount of books being bought by, and for children could be having an effect on issues in public libraries. Children’s books may have become more accessible and less expensive to buy. In 2003, purchases for children (persons aged 16 and under) accounted for 25% of all consumer expenditure on books (*Book Facts Online*, 2005). Similar figures for 1998 (*Book Facts 1999: An Annual Compendium*, 2000) show that 21% of consumer books were bought for children at that time. The data include purchases by children themselves, and although it is difficult to be sure that children read all the books which they buy or which are bought for them, this does seem to reinforce the notion that the amount of books being bought for children is not decreasing, and is in stark contrast to the decline in the number of issues of books to children in public libraries. It should, perhaps, also be noted that audio visual issues (including CD-ROM) to children from public libraries are on the increase (Creaser et al, 2004).

Fig 12: Book issues per capita (Public Library Service)

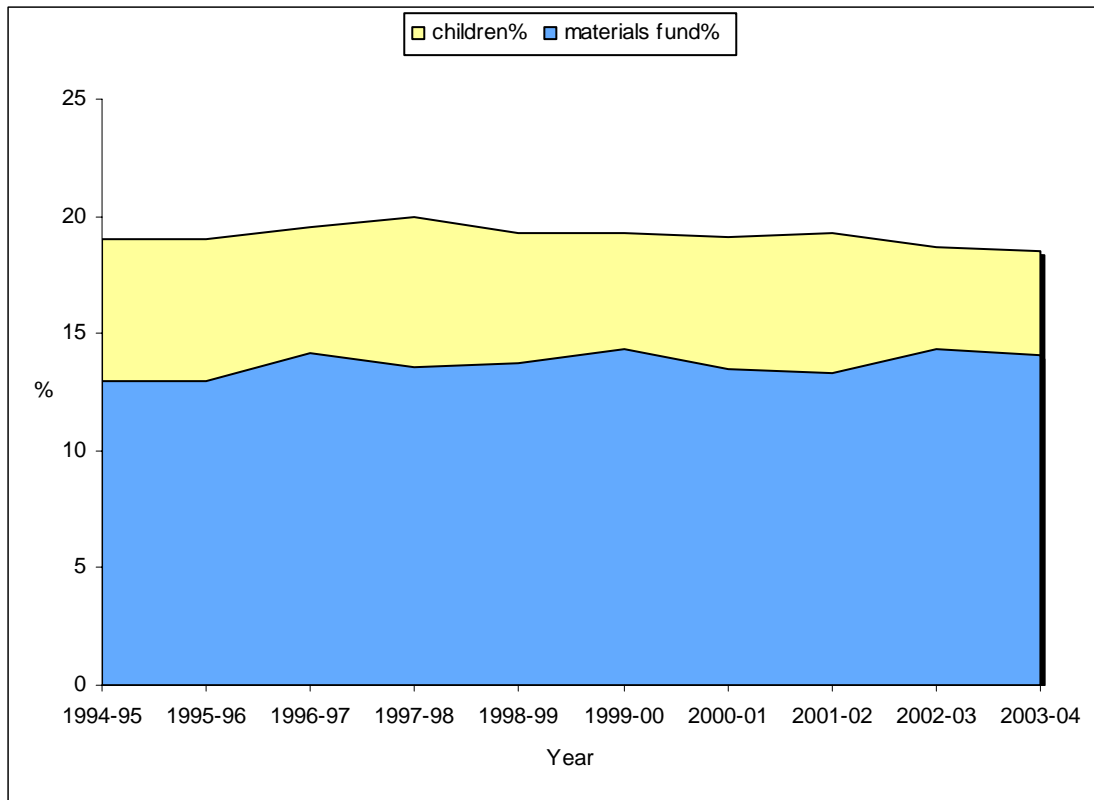


A key recommendation of the 1995 report *Investing in Children (LISC(E))* was that the proportion of the total materials budget which was spent on materials for children should reflect the proportion of children in the population. LISU began monitoring this ratio in the 1994-95 survey, so it is possible to examine the trend in this measure over the past ten years – this is shown in Figure 13. As can be seen from the graph, the figures have shown very little movement from year to year, although there have been noticeable changes over the whole period.

It should be noted that spending on non-book materials for children varies considerably between authorities. The average for the whole UK in 2003-04 is that 10% of the children's materials fund was spent on non-book materials, varying from an average of 8% in Northern Ireland to 24% in the English counties. The degree of under-reporting for this year is therefore around 1.4 percentage points, on average; the figure is likely to be similar in previous years. Note also that these averages conceal a wide variation between individual authorities, and in every sector there will be a number of authorities meeting the target on a regular basis.

It should also be remembered that special circumstances apply in some authorities such that the Library and Information Service Council (England) (LISC(E)) target is not appropriate. An obvious example is the Corporation of London, where the large daytime commuter population affects all aspects of the library service. In addition, it is significant that the proportion of the materials budget spent on materials for children is not the only figure by which to measure adequacy of library provision for children. There are many other factors which should be taken into account – the difference in average prices of adult and children's books is an obvious one. Patterns of use will impact upon the service offered, and these are different for adult and children's services. For example, the 2002-03 *CIPFA Actuals* show that every adult book is issued on average 4.6 times per year, while children's books have a lower stock turn of 3.7 issues per year.

Fig 13: Percentage of materials fund compared to percentage of children (Public Library Service)



Conclusion

A ten year review of data on library services for young people allows us to draw the conclusion that little is changing dramatically other than per capita issues of children's books in public libraries and the extent to which schools opt to take up on-site library services provided by the local authority. The last ten years have seen a remarkable change in the nature and magnitude of information media that are accessible to children and in the economics of conventional book access. The People's Network facilitates free access to the Internet and its myriad information sources. The computer has transformed the way in which children interact with each other and the wider world. The range of television available is ever-increasing. Books can be bought with the groceries at the supermarket. In this scenario, the children's library is necessarily evolving. The question is: is it doing it fast enough?

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