

Multilingual young people's reading in 2021

Anne Teravainen-Goff, Christina Clark
and
Sabine Little (University of Sheffield)

September 2021

The number of children and young people in England who speak languages other than English at home has grown in the past decade, increasing from 14.6% in 2011¹ to 19.3% in 2021². This has understandably sparked an interest in research around reading for multilingual pupils or those with English as an additional language (EAL). Indeed, much research has been conducted around EAL pupils' reading skills. Often these studies show that pupils tend to underperform on reading assessments compared with their monolingual peers³. This is particularly prevalent in terms of knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension⁴. However, studies also indicate that the reading attainment gap between EAL pupils and their monolingual peers diminishes during Key Stage 2, with multilingual children and young people catching up with their monolingual peers⁵.

It is also crucial to acknowledge that these are a varied group of children and young people with varying levels of English proficiency that impact on their literacy skills. In fact, data show that EAL pupils in Key Stage 2 who were assessed as competent or fluent in English were more likely to achieve the expected standard of reading than their monolingual peers⁶. By Key Stage 4, EAL pupils fluent in English scored higher in reading tests than their monolingual peers⁷.

At the same time, far fewer studies have explored multilingual or EAL pupils' reading engagement. One study that interviewed seven multilingual children in England showed that

¹ Average for primary and secondary schools; <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2011>

² <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>

³ Strand et al., 2015

⁴ Dixon et al., 2020

⁵ Department for Education, 2011

⁶ Ref from V1

⁷ Department for Education, 2020

multilingual children had more reasons for reading, such as practising other languages and family cohesion⁸.

Given the apparent lack of insight into the reading engagement of children and young people who speak a language other than English at home, we included a few questions in our Annual Literacy Survey, which we conducted in early 2021. 34,154 children and young people aged 8 to 18 responded to our question as to whether or not they speak a language other than English at home, in their community or with other family members. Of these, a third (33.9%, n = 11,572) said that they speak a language other than English at home.

The word cloud below shows the variety of languages spoken by the multilingual young people who took part in the survey and highlights the linguistic diversity in the UK's schools. The most commonly spoken languages are Polish, Urdu, Spanish, Bengali, French, Arabic, Punjabi and Portuguese.

Figure 1: Languages spoken by the multilingual young people



This report celebrates their diverse linguistic backgrounds and skills by focusing on their reading enjoyment, behaviours and linguistic identity. We focus particularly on 10,000 multilingual young people⁹ aged 11 to 16¹⁰ and explore how much they enjoy reading, how often they read at home and how they feel about reading multilingually. We also discuss their multilingual language identity and recognition of multilingualism, as well their experiences of bullying due to their linguistic background.

⁸ Little, 2021

⁹ 43.2% of these young people identified as boys and 52.3% as girls. 1.6% preferred to describe their gender another way. 15.5% of pupils said they receive free school meals (FSMs), which is slightly lower than the national average (18.9% in secondary schools). 41.5% of the multilingual people were from white ethnic backgrounds, 30.8% had Asian backgrounds, 7.9% had black backgrounds, 7.3% had a mixed background and 3.5% had Middle Eastern backgrounds.

¹⁰ Due to a small sample size for those aged 8 to 11 (9.7%), this report will focus only on secondary-school-aged young people.

Throughout the report, these young people will be referred to as multilingual young people, while their peers who do not speak languages other than English at home are referred to as monolingual young people.

Key findings

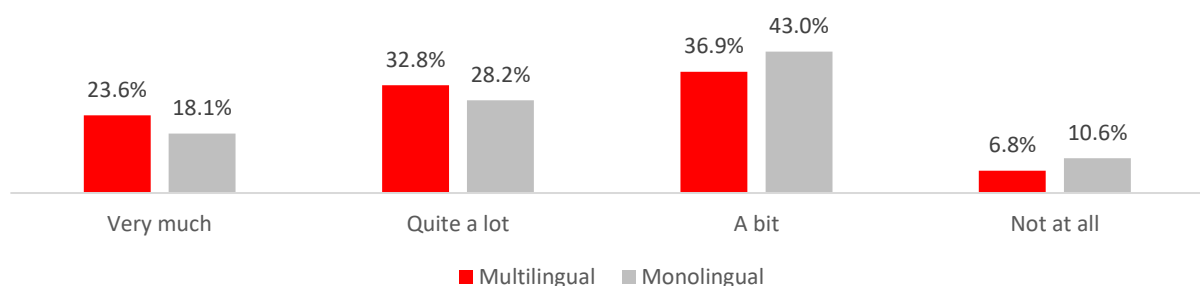
- Multilingual young people are more engaged with reading than their monolingual peers:
 - Nearly **3 in 5** (56.4%) multilingual young people say that they enjoy reading in their free time, which is higher than the percentage of their monolingual peers who say this (46.3%).
 - More also read more often in their free time compared with their monolingual peers.
 - Multilingual young people also read a greater variety of formats in their free time than their monolingual peers, both onscreen as well as on paper.
 - More multilingual than monolingual young people say that they read to learn about new things, new words and new cultures.
- For a sizeable percentage of children and young people, reading in languages other than English also unlocks their reading enjoyment, with **2 in 5** of those who said that they don't enjoy reading generally telling us that they enjoy reading in their other language.
- For many (73.6%), their other language is an important part of their identity. However, **2 in 5** (40.4%) said that they would like their multilingual skills to be more recognised in their school. At the same time, 3 in 5 (59.6%) multilingual young people feel it's more important for them to be able to read well in English than the other languages.
- While young people are equally likely to appreciate diversity in books regardless of their language background, more multilingual than monolingual young people said that reading about characters that are like them makes them feel more confident about themselves (40.9% vs. 32.3%).
 - Seeing oneself represented in what one reads or hears is particularly important for those whose multilingual skills are part of their identity.
- However, 1 in 6 (15.9%) multilingual young people also told us that they had been made fun of or bullied for speaking a language other than English. Those who have been bullied because of their language background have a lower ability to deal with problems and cope with stress, and fewer of them know where to find help if they have problems compared with those who have not been bullied.

Multilingual young people's reading engagement

Our survey shows that multilingual young people are more engaged with reading than their monolingual peers, with more enjoying reading and more reading more frequently.

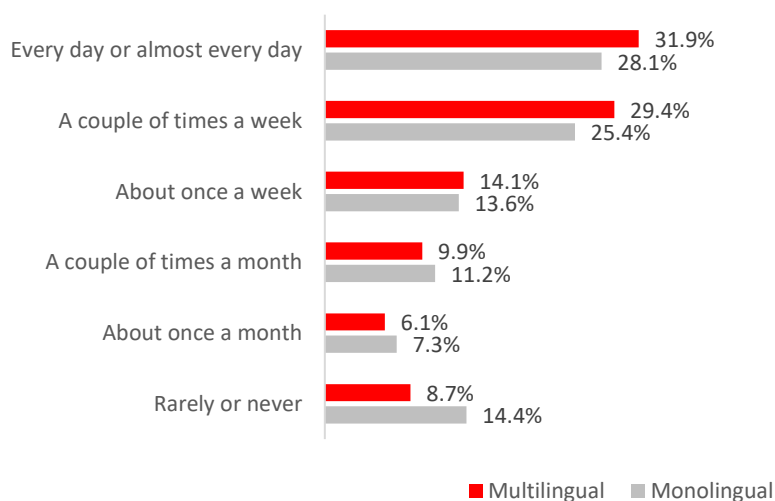
In 2021, nearly 3 in 5 (56.4%) multilingual young people said that they enjoyed reading either very much (23.6%) or quite a lot (32.8%; see Figure 2). This is higher than the percentage of their monolingual peers who enjoyed reading either very much or quite a lot (46.3%)¹¹.

Figure 2: Reading enjoyment of multilingual young people and their monolingual peers



Not only are more multilingual young people enjoying reading compared with their monolingual peers, slightly more of them also read in their free time either daily (31.9% vs. 28.1%) or a couple of times a week (29.4% vs. 25.4%; see Figure 3). Conversely, fewer multilingual than monolingual young people say they rarely or never read in their free time (8.7% vs. 14.4%).

Figure 3: Reading enjoyment of multilingual young people and their monolingual peers

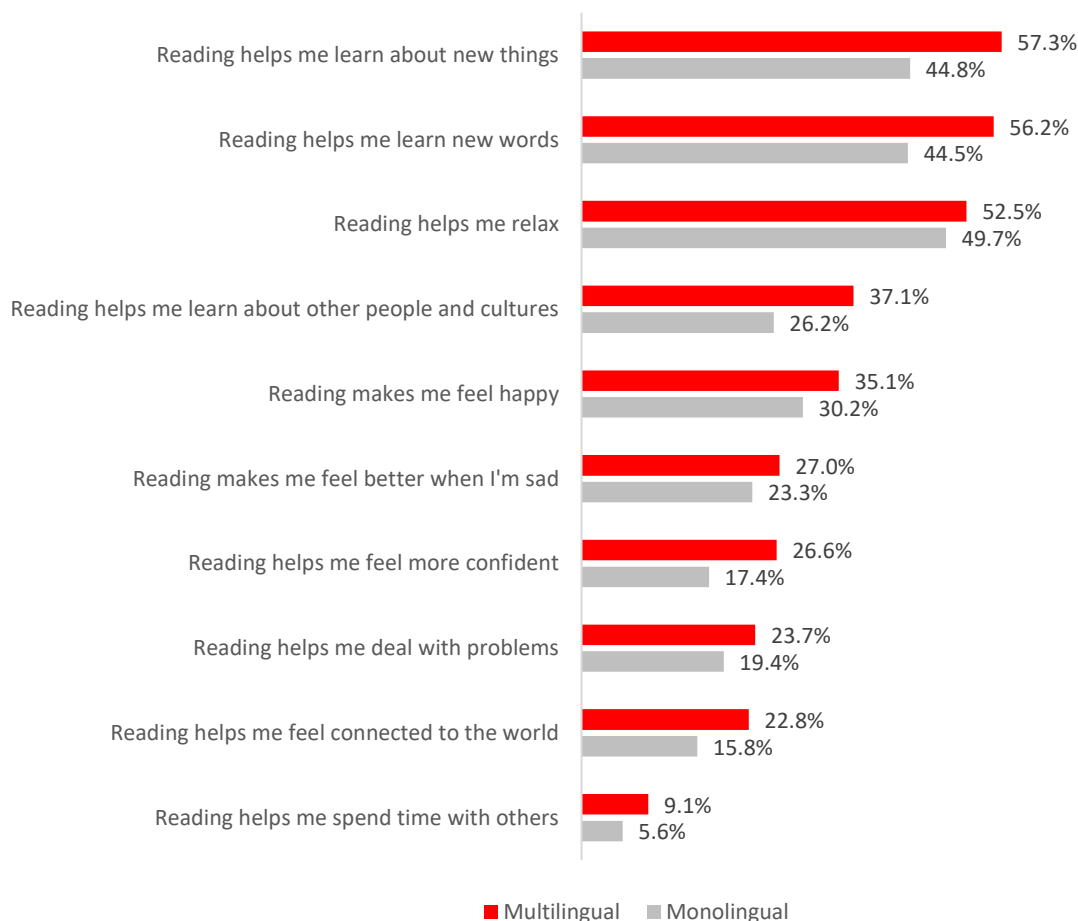


¹¹ This pattern is similar regardless of gender and FSM background.

We also asked multilingual young people how they feel about reading in the other languages they speak. While 2 in 3 (66.1%) said that they find speaking their other language easier than reading it, more than 2 in 5 (44.7%) said they read for fun in the other languages they speak (see Figure 4). Indeed, for many, reading in a language other than English opens up a world of reading, with 2 in 5 (40.2%) of those who say that they generally don't enjoy reading enjoying reading in their other language.

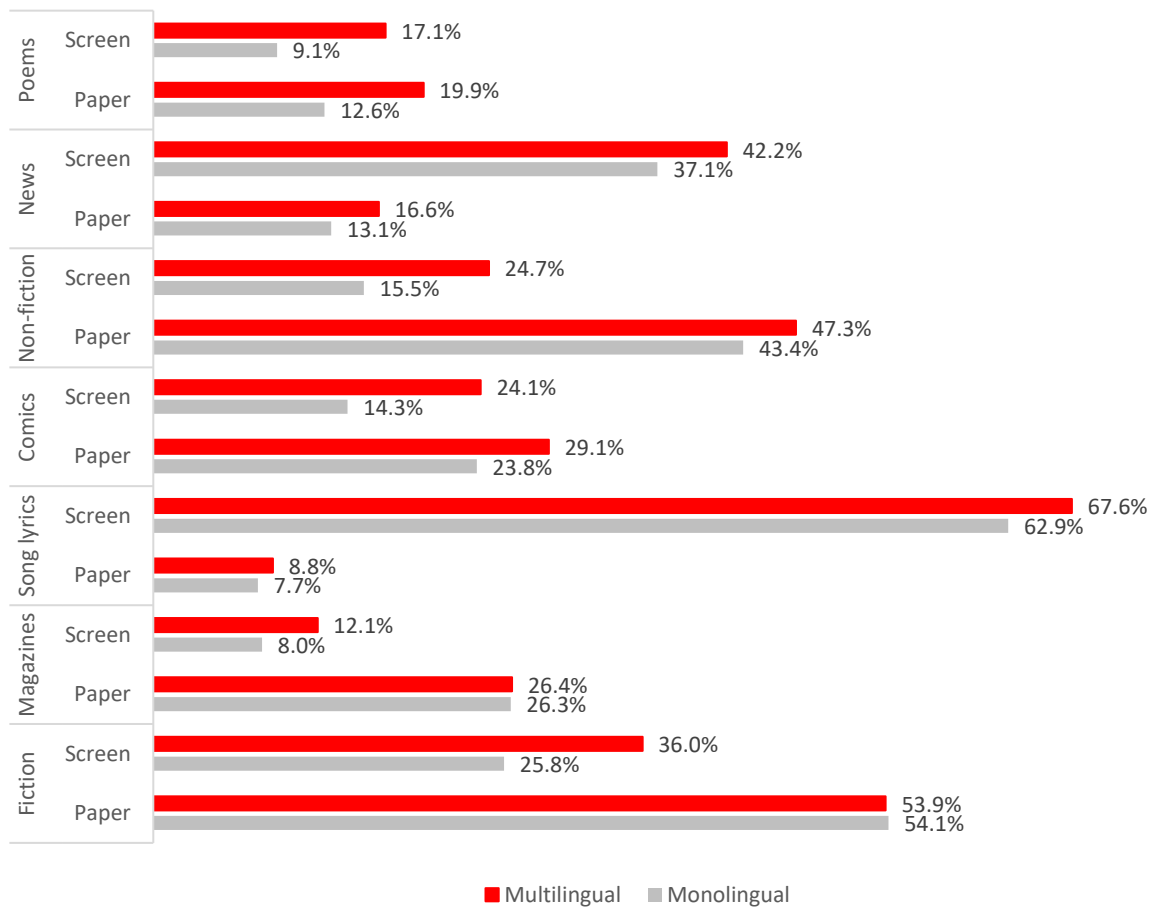
When asked why they read, more multilingual than monolingual young people said that they read because it helps them learn new things or new words (see Figure 4). More also said that they read because it helps them learn about other people and cultures, to become more connected to the world and more confident.

Figure 4: Reasons for reading by whether or not they speak a language other than English



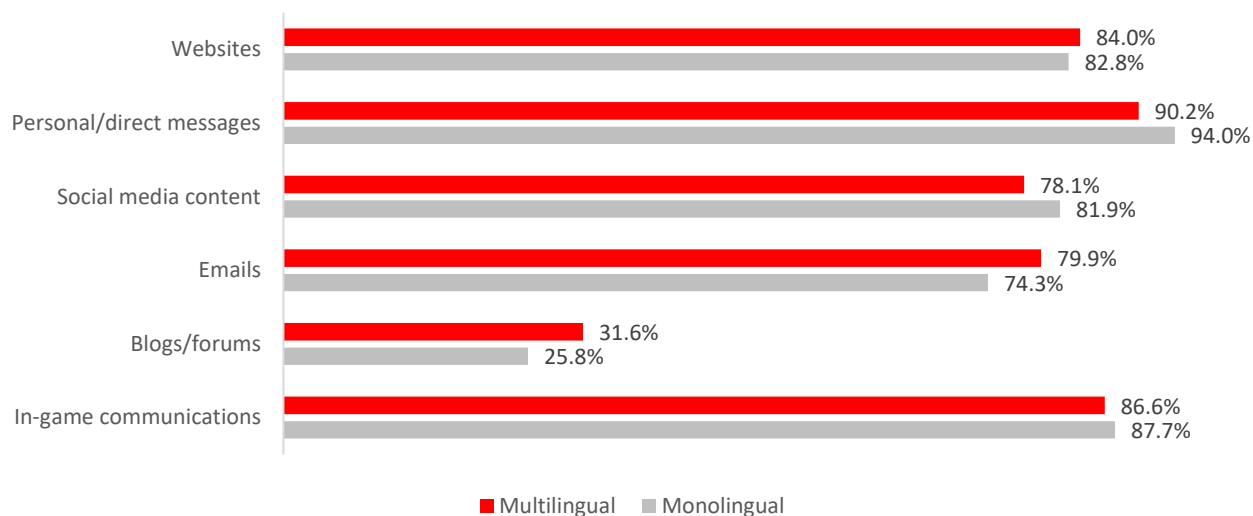
With the exception of fiction and magazines on paper, more multilingual young people also read a greater variety of materials across either screen or paper than their monolingual peers (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Percentage of multilingual and monolingual young people reading a variety of formats either on screen or on paper



The picture was slightly more mixed regarding exclusively digital reading choices (see Figure 6), with more multilingual than monolingual young people saying that they read emails and blogs/forums. By contrast, slightly more monolingual than multilingual young people said that they read personal/direct messages (e.g. text messages, WhatsApp, Instagram) and social media content.

Figure 6: Percentage of multilingual and monolingual young people reading a variety of exclusively digital formats



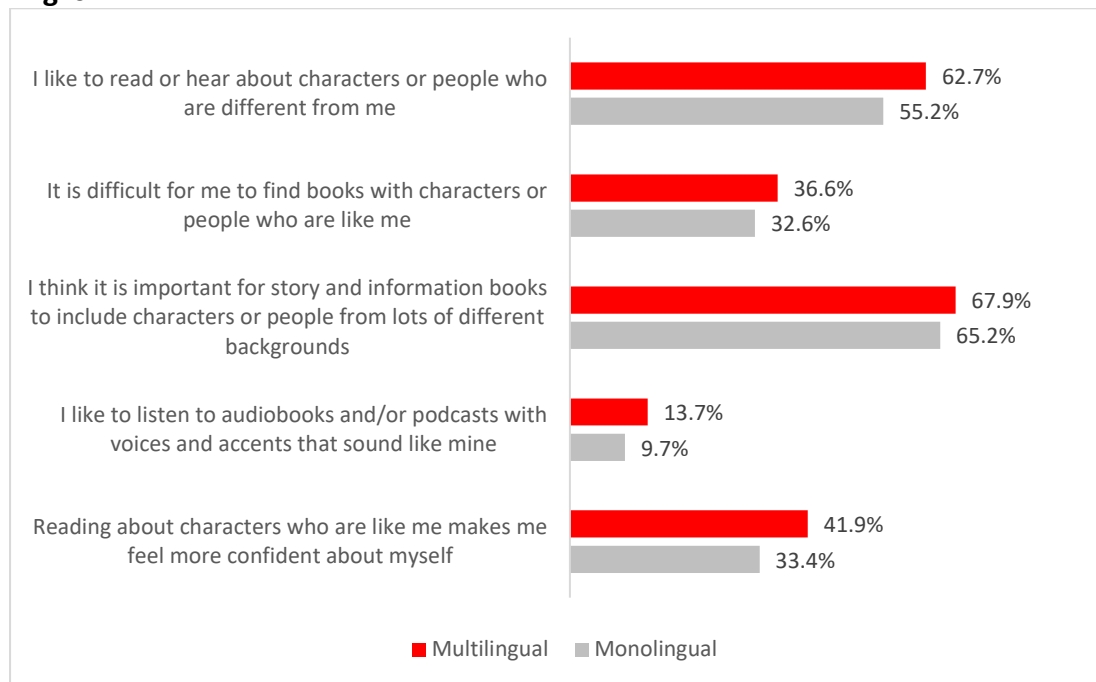
Multilingual language identity, recognition and diversity

Speaking English and another language is an important part of the identity of 3 in 4 (73.6%) multilingual young people. However, for a sizeable percentage of them, more could be done to acknowledge their other language, with 2 in 5 (40.4%) saying that they would like to see their multilingual skills more recognised at school.

Meanwhile, 3 in 5 (59.6%) multilingual young people also feel it's more important for them to be able read well in English than the other languages. It is possible that these young people feel their literacy skills in multiple languages are not necessarily valued in society, sending a message that English is more important.

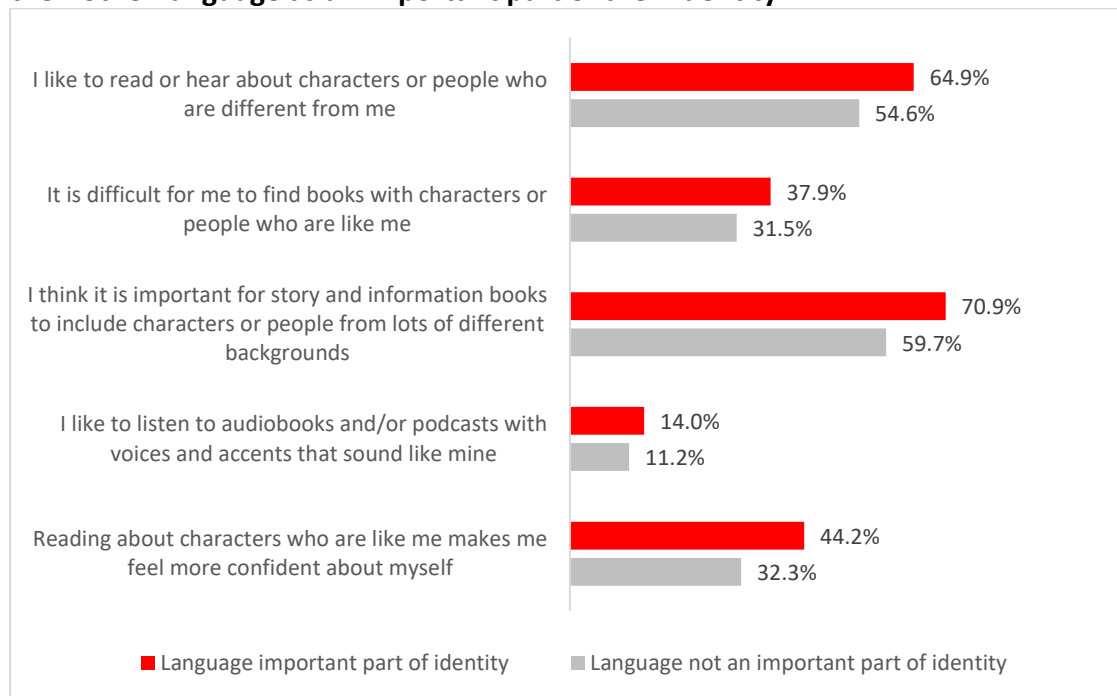
We also explored the relationship between young people's multilingual identities and how they feel about diversity in books. Interestingly, when we compare those who speak multiple languages with their monolingual peers, the differences were generally only slight (see Figure 7), indicating that young people are equally likely to appreciate diversity in books regardless of their language background. However, more multilingual than monolingual young people said that reading about characters who are like them makes them feel more confident about themselves (40.9% vs. 32.3%). Slightly more multilingual than monolingual young people also said that they like to read or hear about characters or people who are different from them.

Figure 7: Views about diversity in books by whether or not they speak a language other than English



However, seeing oneself represented in what one reads or hears is particularly important for those whose multilingual skills are part of their identity. Figure 8 shows that more of those multilingual young people who feel their other language is an important part of their identity feel that reading about characters like them gives them confidence compared with those who do not see their other language as an important part of their identity (44.2% vs. 32.3%). More of them also enjoy reading or hearing about characters or other people who are different from them (64.9% vs. 54.6%) and more find it important for books to include characters or people from lots of different backgrounds (70.9% vs. 59.7%). More also feel that it is difficult to find books with characters who are like them (37.9% vs. 31.5%).

Figure 8: Multilingual young people’s views about diversity in books by whether they see their other language as an important part of their identity

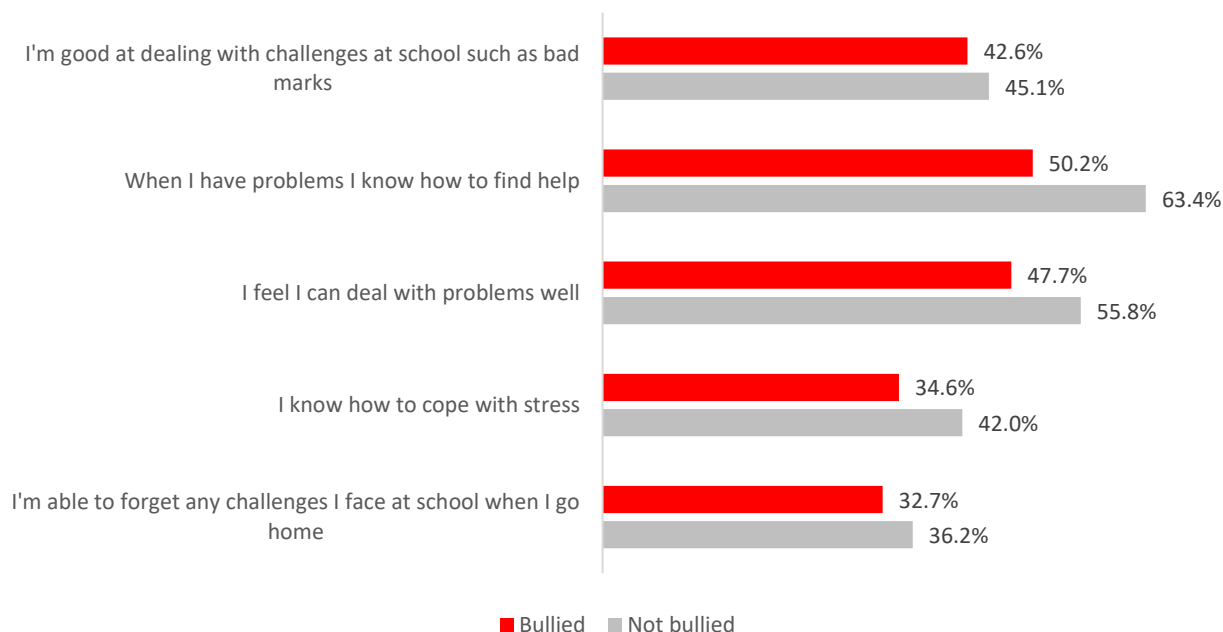


Multilingual young people’s experiences of bullying and resilience

Finally, we also explored multilingual young people’s experiences of bullying and their resilience. One in 6 (15.9%) multilingual young people told us they have been made fun of or bullied because they speak English and another language. Sadly, this may have a negative impact on how multilingual young people value their language skills. Indeed, more of those who have been made fun of or bullied because of the language they speak would like to see their multilingual skills recognised at school compared with those who haven’t had this experience (63.6% vs. 35.7%).

Being made fun of or bullied because of one’s language background is also linked to lower resilience, i.e. the ability to cope with stress and solve problems in their personal lives. As Figure 9 shows, those multilingual people who have been bullied because of their language background have a lower ability to deal with problems (47.7% vs. 55.8%) and cope with stress (34.6% vs. 42.0%). In addition, fewer of them know where to find help if they have problems (50.2% vs. 63.4%).

Figure 9: Multilingual young people’s resilience by whether or not they have been bullied because of their language skills



Discussion

We have seen that more young people who speak multiple languages enjoy reading and read daily than their monolingual peers. This indicates that rather than focusing on what multilingual young people lack in terms of reading, emphasis should be put on supporting their reading enjoyment and behaviours. This is particularly important given that we have seen that 2 in 5 multilingual young people who don’t generally enjoy reading say they read for fun in their other language. Thus, we should recognise that young people’s reading attitudes and behaviours might vary across languages, and we should be careful not to categorise them as reluctant readers if they do not enjoy reading in English.

This report also indicates that there is still work to be done to support and celebrate multilingual language skills. In particular, 2 in 5 multilingual young people would like to see their linguistic skills recognised more in school, indicating that multilingualism could be more integrated into everyday life in schools. Moreover, 3 in 5 multilingual young people find it more important to be able to read well in English than in their other language, again suggesting that we should be celebrating and emphasising multilingual literacies more. While strong reading skills in English are evidently important, these do not have to be developed at the expense of other languages, and multilingual young people should be supported to develop both. This support could be done in the form of sharing information with parents, access to books and other reading materials in multiple languages, and creating a strong ethos of multilingual literacies being celebrated alongside English.

Worryingly, we also saw that 1 in 6 multilingual young people have experiences of bullying because of their language background. This may have an impact on how they perceive their language skills, and our report also indicates that experiences of bullying are linked to lower resilience. Approaches to tackle bullying should consider the form of bullying based on language background.

Our sincere thanks to all of the schools who, despite really challenging times, participated in our survey this year. We couldn't do it without you!

About the National Literacy Trust

Our charity is dedicated to improving the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of those who need it most, giving them the best possible chance of success in school, work and life. We run Literacy Hubs and campaigns in communities where low levels of literacy and social mobility are seriously impacting people's lives. We support schools and early years settings to deliver outstanding literacy provision, and we campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians, businesses and parents. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy and drive our interventions.

Literacy is a vital element of action against poverty and our work changes life stories.

Visit www.literacytrust.org.uk to find out more, donate or sign up for a free email newsletter. You can also find us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter.

Copyright

© National Literacy Trust 2021. You may report on findings or statistics included in this report if you accredit them to the National Literacy Trust.

Suggested reference for this report is: Teravainen-Goff, A., Clark, C. and Little, S. (2021). Multilingual children and young people's reading in 2021. London: National Literacy Trust.

We will consider requests to use extracts or data from this publication provided that you:

- Acknowledge that the content is the work of the National Literacy Trust and provide appropriate references in any publications or accompanying publicity;
- State that any views expressed are yours and not necessarily those of the National Literacy Trust.