

Multilingual young writers in 2021

Bilingual and multilingual young people aged 11 to 18 and their writing engagement

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Introduction

Little is known about the literacy engagement of multilingual children and young people because research in the field to date has tended to focus on their learning opportunities (Langeloo et al., 2020) and literacy development (Jessner et al., 2021) instead. However, knowing about their reading and/or writing enjoyment, frequency, confidence or habits can provide key focal points for intervention and support, and are therefore clearly important to investigate.

We first started to explore the literacy engagement of multilingual young people in 2021 when we published research that focused on their reading enjoyment, behaviours and attitudes¹. This research showed that more multilingual young people enjoyed reading and more read in their free time compared with their monolingual peers.

This report builds on this work by focusing on multilingual young people's writing. We used data from our 2021 Annual Literacy Survey, in which 42,502 children and young people aged 8 to 18 from 117 UK schools participated.

33.9%² of children and young people who took part in the survey said they spoke a language (or languages) other than English at home, in their community, or with other family members. We used this question to define multilingualism: for the purposes of this report, a multilingual young person is one who said they speak a language other than English. Due to a small sample

¹ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/multilingual-young-peoples-reading-in-2021/>

² N = 11,572

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size for those aged 8 to 11 (9.7%), this report will focus only on secondary-school-aged young people aged 11 to 18³.

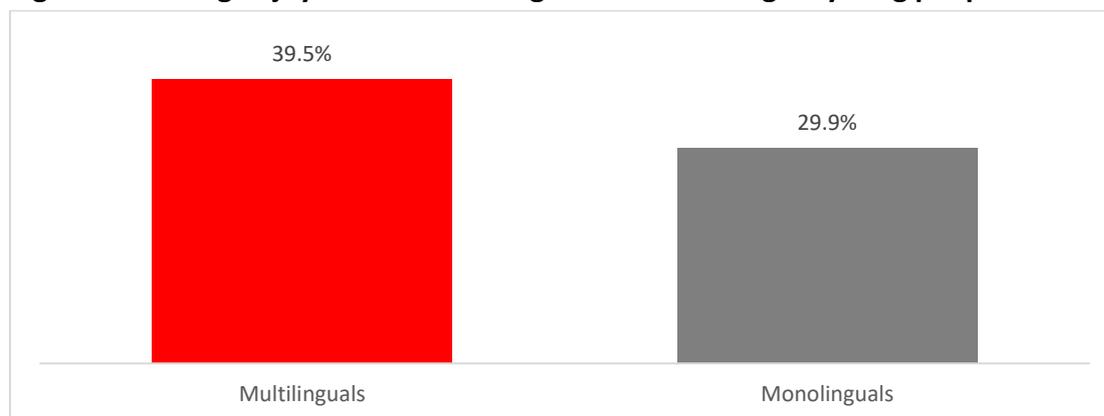
Key findings:

- More multilingual young people are engaged writers:
 - 39.5% of multilingual young people said they enjoy writing, compared with 29.9% of their monolingual peers.
 - 2 in 5 (41.2%) multilinguals said that they write every day or a couple of times a week compared with nearly 1 in 3 (31.6%) monolingual young people.
- More multilingual young people feel positive about writing, with more of them saying that writing is cool compared with their monolingual peers (37.0% vs. 25.1%). Half (50.1%) also said that they carry on writing even when they find it difficult compared with just over 2 in 5 (43.0%) monolingual young people.
- More multilingual young people than their monolingual peers said that they engage in writing as a form of self-expression. For example, more of them said they write because it helps them feel more creative (55.7% vs. 45.6%), express their ideas and imagination (52.9% vs. 42.6%) and their thoughts and feelings (47.0% vs. 39.0%).

Writing enjoyment and frequency

We first wanted to know how much young people enjoy writing and whether this differs by whether or not they speak another language. Our data show that more multilingual young people enjoyed writing compared with their monolingual peers, with 2 in 5 (39.5%) multilinguals saying that they enjoyed writing compared with less than 1 in 3 (29.9%) monolinguals (see Figure 1).

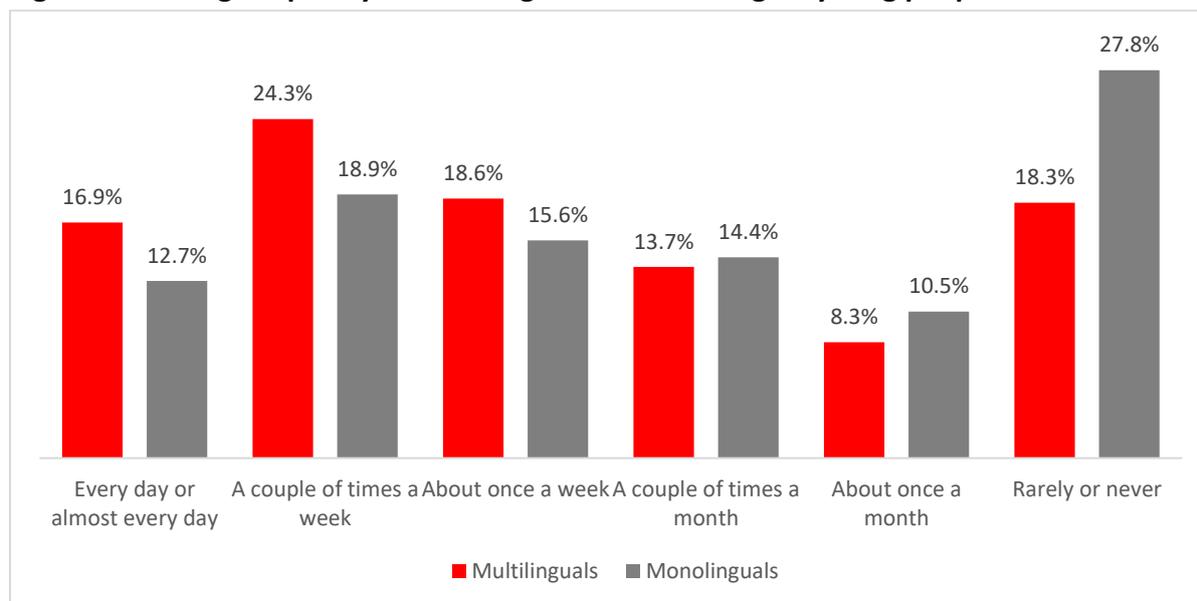
Figure 1: Writing enjoyment of multilingual and monolingual young people



³ N = 10,000

Not only do more multilingual young people enjoy writing than their monolingual peers but more also wrote something in their free time that wasn't for school. As Figure 2 shows, more multilingual young people said they write every day or almost every day (16.9% vs. 12.7%), or a couple of times a week (24.3% vs. 18.9%) compared with their monolingual peers. In contrast, more monolingual young people said they rarely or never write (27.8% vs. 18.3%).

Figure 2: Writing frequency of multilingual and monolingual young people

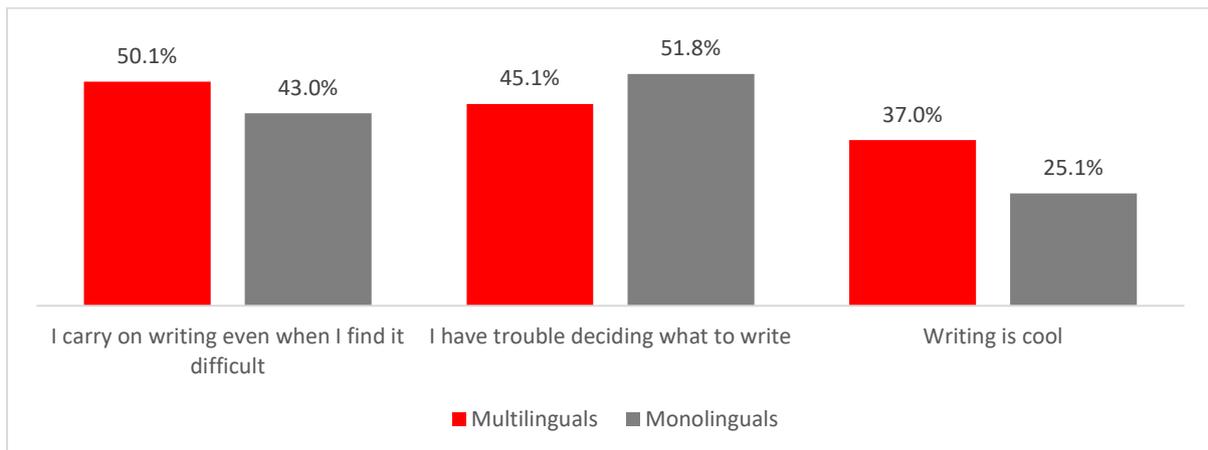


It is interesting to note that the differences in writing enjoyment and frequency reflect the differences we found in terms of reading in our earlier research (Teravainen-Goff et al., 2021), where we saw that more multilingual young people enjoyed reading (56.4% vs. 46.3%) and more read weekly outside class (75.4% vs. 67.1%) than their monolingual peers.

What young people think about writing

We were also interested to know whether writing attitudes differ between multilingual and monolingual young people. As shown in Figure 3, half (50.1%) of multilingual young people said they carry on writing even when they find it difficult compared with just over 2 in 5 (43.0%) monolinguals. Fewer multilingual young people said they have trouble deciding what to write than their monolingual peers (45.1% vs 51.8%). Finally, nearly 2 in 5 (37.0%) multilinguals said that writing is cool, compared with 1 in 4 (25.1%) monolinguals. Overall, this suggests that multilingual young people had more positive attitudes towards writing than their monolingual peers.

Figure 3: Writing attitudes of multilingual and monolingual young people

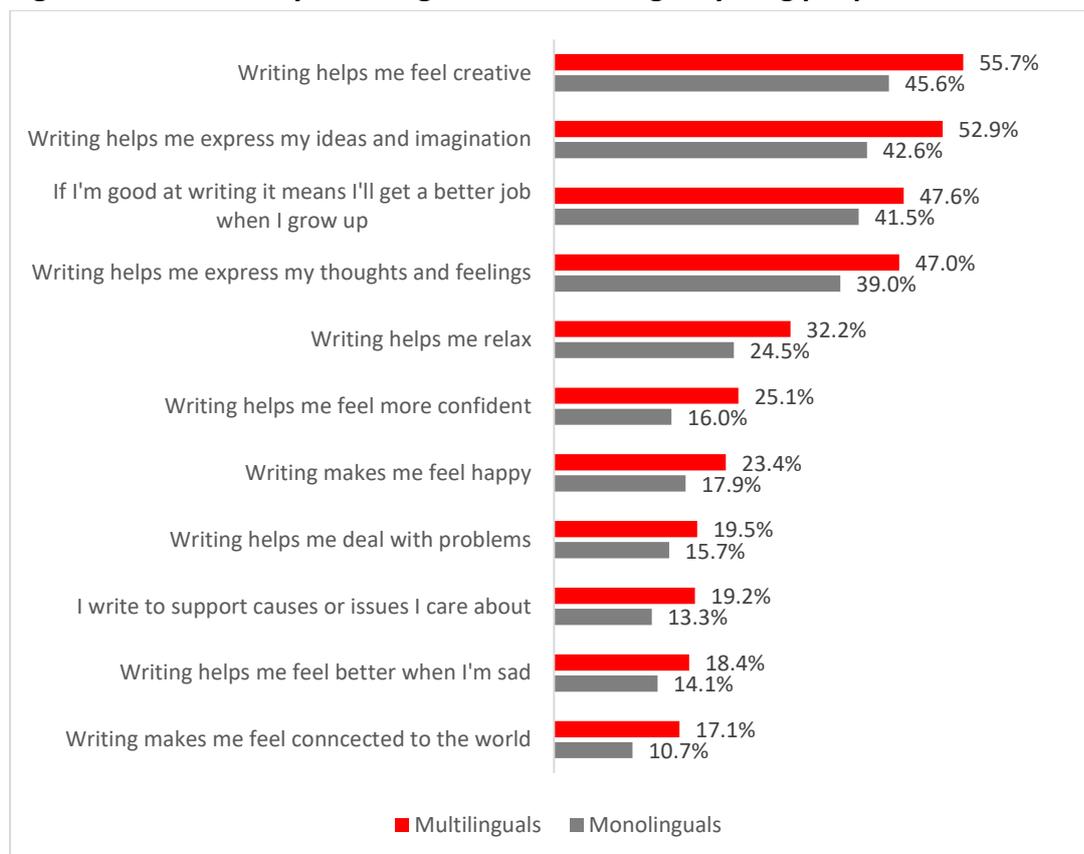


Why do young people write?

Our data also show that young people have different reasons for writing based on their linguistic background. As shown in Figure 4, more multilingual young people than their monolingual peers said that they engage in writing as a form of self-expression. For example, more of them said they write because it helps them feel more creative (55.7% vs. 45.6%), express their ideas and imagination (52.9% vs. 42.6%) and their thoughts and feelings (47.0% vs. 39.0%). Indeed, over 2 in 5 (42.3%) multilingual young people said they write about characters or people who inspire them compared with nearly 1 in 3 (32.3%) monolingual young people.

Additionally, more multilingual young people referenced the wellbeing benefits of writing. For example, more multilinguals write because it helps them relax (32.2% vs. 24.5%) or because it makes them feel happy (23.4% vs. 17.9%). The differences were slightly smaller between the percentage of multilinguals and monolinguals who felt that writing helps them deal with problems (19.5% vs. 15.7%) or makes them feel better when they are sad (18.4% vs. 14.1%).

Figure 4: Reasons why multilingual and monolingual young people write



Discussion

This short report has shown that multilingual young people were more engaged writers, with more multilingual than monolingual young people saying that they enjoy writing, as well as more multilingual young people writing more frequently in their free time. More of this group also highlighted the importance of creativity when asked why they write.

These findings complement those from our earlier research (Teravainen-Goff et al., 2021), which showed that multilingual young people were more engaged readers than monolingual young people. One explanation for this could be the increased exposure and access to reading and writing material for those who are fluent in more than one language, which may prompt literary creativity.

To our knowledge, our research is the first in the field to highlight the clear differences in literacy engagement between monolingual and multilingual young people. Going forward, we hope our research will encourage further interest in the literacy enjoyment, frequency, confidence and habits of multilingual young people. In addition to higher engagement in reading and writing, our findings have shown that speaking another language in addition to English is an important part of the identity of many multilingual young people, with many also

saying that they would like to see their multilingual skills more recognised at school (Teravainen-Goff et al., 2021). There is therefore a clear need for interventions that recognise and support multilingual skills in schools.

References

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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!

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