

## Seeing yourself in what you read

### Diversity and children and young people's reading in 2020

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We conducted our latest Annual Literacy Survey between January and mid-March 2020. This Annual Literacy Survey was our most popular to date, with 58,346 children and young people aged 9 to 18 from 315 UK schools participating.

This year we also asked a few questions to explore the extent to which children and young people see themselves represented in what they read or hear and what is important to them in terms of diversity. These questions were designed to see to what extent they feel it is important that story and information books include characters of people from lots of different backgrounds and whether they find it difficult to find books with characters or people who look like them.

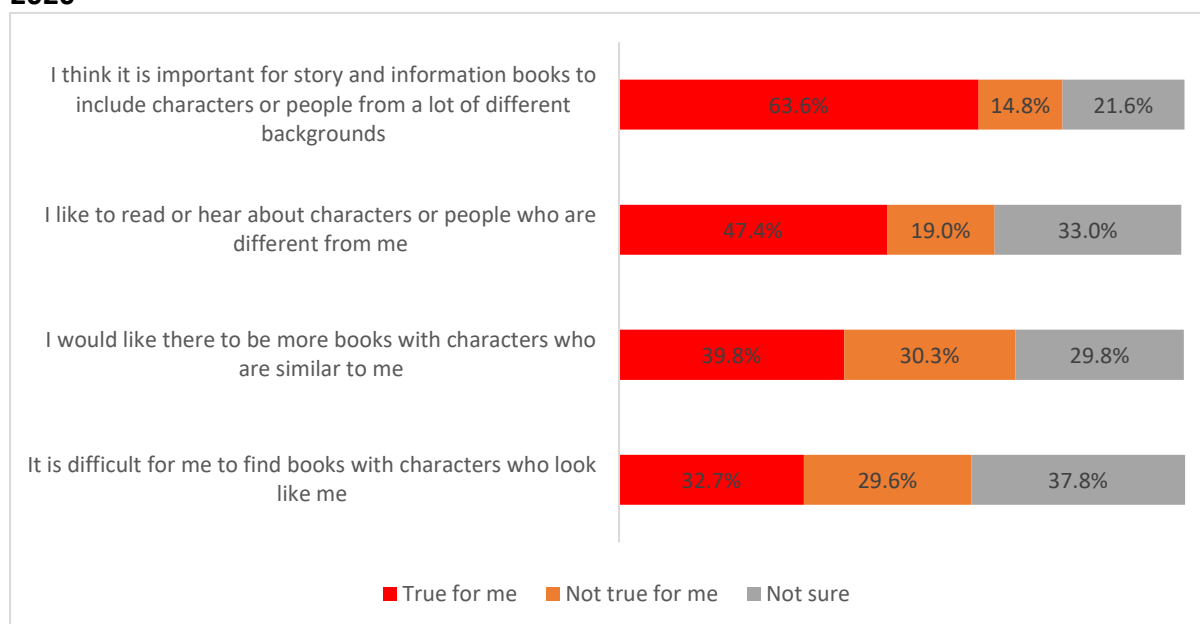
#### Key findings:

- 32.7% of children and young people aged 9 to 18 say that they don't see themselves in what they read, and 39.8% would like more books with characters who are similar to them.
- More children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds than White backgrounds say that they don't see themselves in what they read (40% vs. 30.5%). This is particularly true for children and young people from Black ethnic backgrounds.
- More children and young people who receive free school meals compared with those who don't say that they don't see themselves in what they read (37.3% vs. 31.9%).
- Twice as many children aged 9 to 11 compared with their peers aged 14+ say that they don't see themselves in what they read.
- The issue of representation was particularly salient for children and young people who describe their gender not as a boy or girl, with 44.3% of these children and young people saying that they struggle to see themselves in what they read compared with 32.7% of boys and 32.5% of girls.

While diversity in children’s books has been explored from a number of different perspectives (see e.g. [BookTrust, 2019](#); [CLPE, 2019](#)) to our knowledge this will be the first large-scale exploration of the issue focusing on UK children and young people's own voices and experiences. Commentators on this topic have noted that for some, books act as mirrors to affirm a reader’s own identity ([Bishop, 1997](#)) while for others, books can act as maps that help readers to seek their place in the world ([Myers, 2013](#)). A new study from [CLPE \(2020\)](#) indicated that 10% of children’s books contained characters from an ethnic minority, half of which (5% overall) were a main character. While this represents a year on year improvement – in 2018 only 4% contained an ethnic minority main character and in 2017 it was just 1% – this is still far from representative of the UK school population of ethnic minority children, which currently represent 33.5% (CLPE, 2020:7).

More than 3 in 5 children and young people in our research agreed with the statement that it is important to read books from a range of backgrounds, and nearly half said that they liked to read stories with characters who are different from them (see Figure 1). However, as Figure 1 also shows, a considerable percentage, namely 1 in 3 children and young people, said that they struggle to find representation of characters that are like them, which could impact on their broader engagement with reading and its associated benefits.<sup>1</sup> Nearly 2 in 5 also said that they would like to see more books with characters who are similar to them.

**Figure 1: Children and young people’s perceptions of diversity in what they read or hear in 2020**



Indeed, seeing themselves in books can have direct benefits for young readers: CLPE (2020, p. 3) comments that

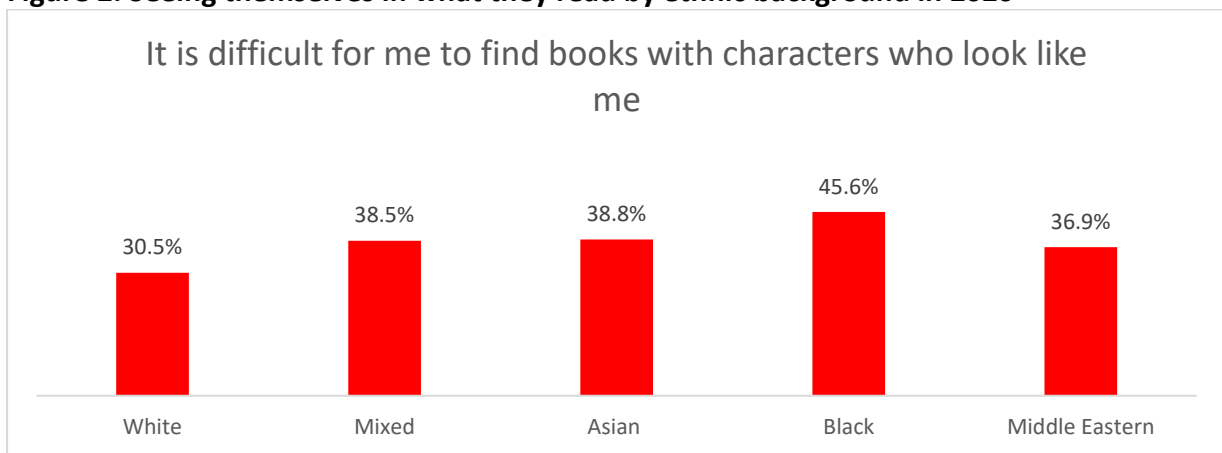
“...[we] know that learning to read is a social process, to be successful you need to connect with your reading material, you need to be able to see yourself, in some way, in what you read. The under-representation of Black, Asian or

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, <https://www.booktrust.org.uk/globalassets/resources/represents/booktrust-represents-diversity-childrens-authors-illustrators-report.pdf>

minority ethnic characters means that readers from a range of backgrounds do not always have the opportunity to make those connections”.

Indeed, such under-representation of ethnic minority characters is certainly clear from our own study, which found that 40% children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds said they struggled to see themselves in the books they read, compared to 30.5% of those from White British backgrounds<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, our survey suggests that children and young people from Black ethnic backgrounds in particular struggle to see themselves in what they read (see Figure 2) compared with other ethnic backgrounds.

**Figure 2: Seeing themselves in what they read by ethnic background in 2020**



While the growth in titles year-on-year is encouraging, it is also important to consider the content of these stories and ensure that representation is not tokenistic or superficial. The CLPE (2020: 16-17) report notes that:

“...[e]thnic minority characters in these books should have license to go on the adventure of a lifetime or stay at home and nurse a star as in the case of Corrinne Averiss' *My Pet Star* [...] As human beings, there are some key universal similarities that bind us but there are also key distinctions in our lived experiences. A book can serve as a stimulus for exploring points of difference, providing recognition and affirmation for readers who can identify and invaluable insight for those who may not.”

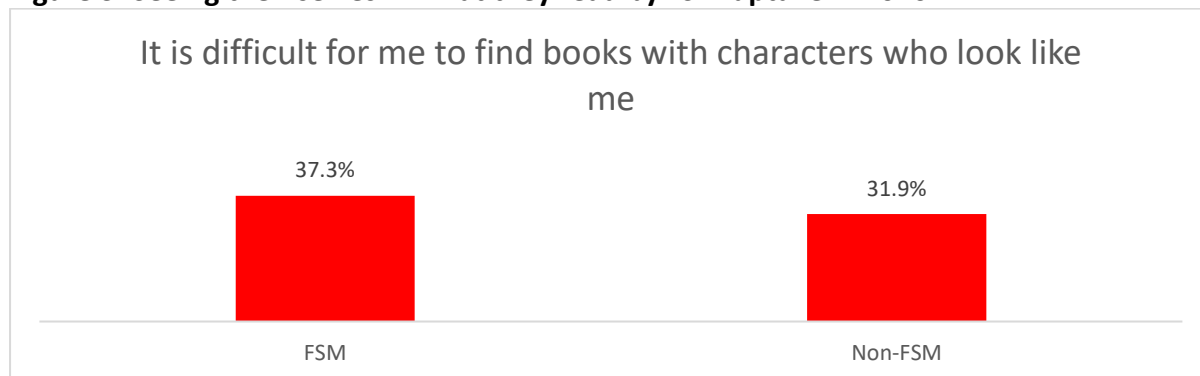
It is interesting to note that more children and young people in receipt of free school meals (FSMs)<sup>3</sup>, our proxy of socioeconomic background, say they struggle to see themselves in books than those not in receipt of FSMs (see Figure 3). CLPE's 2020 report notes that “[t]here was a 9.5% increase in books featuring social justice themes, with these titles making up 29.5% of the submissions. This may be as a result of a general trend towards a larger volume

<sup>2</sup> We had ethnic background data from 72.4% (n = 42,220) of our total sample. Most of the pupils came from White ethnic backgrounds : 75.6% (n = 31,932); BAME: 24.4% (n = 10,288), with this being made up of pupils from Mixed ethnic backgrounds (6.4%; n = 2,720); Asian ethnic backgrounds (11.7%; n = 4,957); Black ethnic backgrounds (5.0%; n = 2,116), and pupils from Middle Eastern ethnic backgrounds (1.2%; n = 495).

<sup>3</sup> We had FSM data from 99.2% (n = 57,908) of our total sample. 9.6% (n = 5,624) pupils told us that they receive FSMs; 80.5% (n = 46,986) said they didn't. 7.5% (n = 4,367) didn't know, and 1.6% (n = 931) didn't want to say.

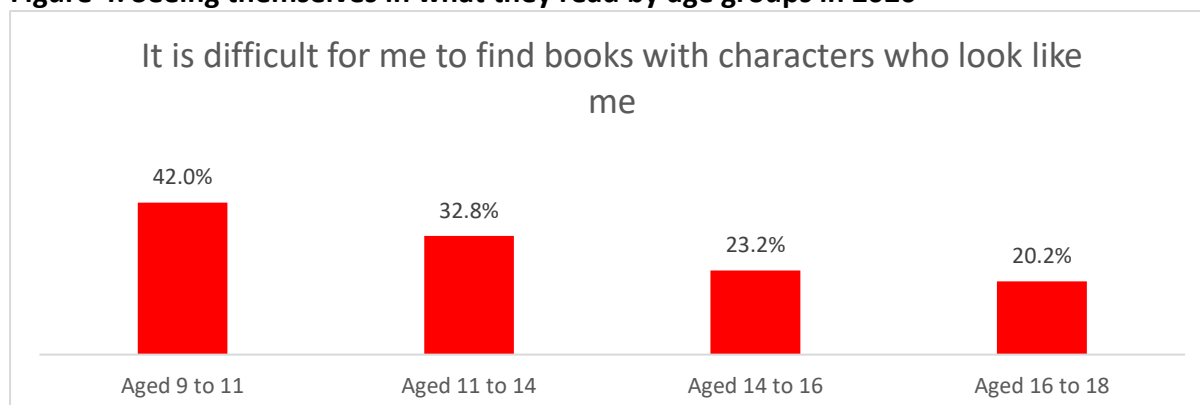
of social justice-themed books being published” (CLPE, 2020:7). However, the report also goes on to say that 20% of the submissions under this category were focused on the environment, suggesting perhaps that other issues around social justice, for example unemployment and poverty, are less of a focus.

**Figure 3: Seeing themselves in what they read by FSM uptake in 2020**



There were also differences by age<sup>4</sup>, with nearly twice as many children aged 9 to 11 saying that they struggle to see themselves in what they read compared with their older peers aged 14 and older (see Figure 4). While there is more research to be done into how books for different age groups compare when it comes to diversity, there may be some tentative suggestions that young adult publishers are leading the way in this regard.<sup>5</sup> However, it is important to recognise the significance of this finding. Discussing ‘middle grade’ writing, that is, books aimed at children aged 8 to 12, the CLPE report comments that “channelling the right voice and tone in a way that hooks the reader and isn’t patronising whilst shaping a narrative that holds their attention is tremendously challenging” but also that “[b]ooks for this age range have a crucial role to play in the reading journeys of young readers” (CLPE, 2020, 15). This significant difference therefore suggests that more work needs to be done in differentiating and focusing on diversity not just across types of protected characteristics but across age groups, too.

**Figure 4: Seeing themselves in what they read by age groups in 2020**

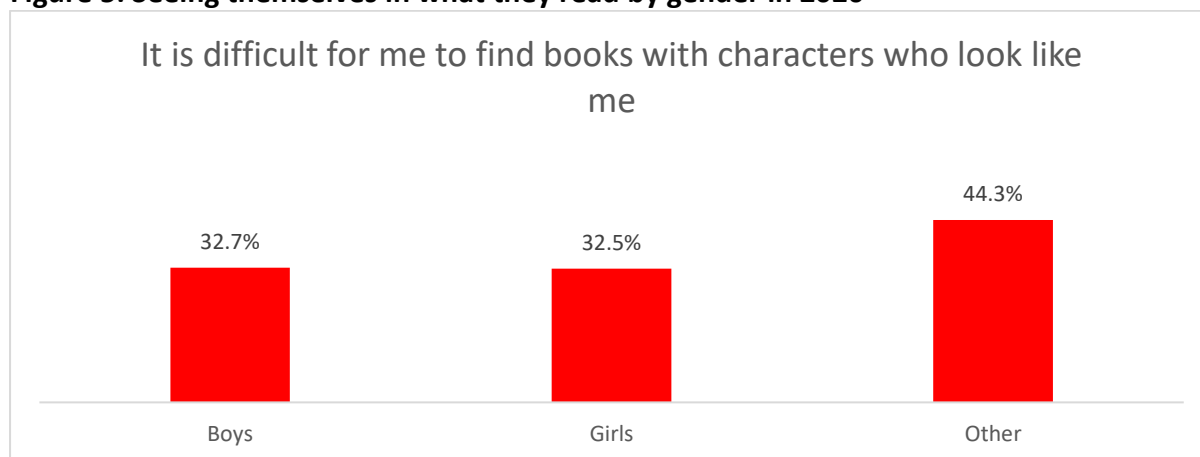


<sup>4</sup> We had age group data from 99.6% (n = 58,115) of our total sample. 18.4% (n = 10,708) were aged 9 to 11; 62.8% (n = 36,521) were aged 11 to 14; 14.7% (n = 8,571) were aged 14 to 16, and 4% (n = 2,315) were aged 16 to 18.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, [‘YA Publishing Widens Its Lens’](#), [‘YA fiction is leading the way for Black representation, but the fight for diversity is far from over’](#)

Our research suggests that 1.5% of children and young people describe their gender as different to boy or girl<sup>6</sup>. While we don't know how this compares to other figures, we know that Stonewall estimates the number among the general population to be around 1%.<sup>7</sup> Our research has found that those children and young people who identify their gender as 'other' are more likely than those who identify as male or female to struggle to find themselves represented in the books they read (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Seeing themselves in what they read by gender in 2020**



This could be a particular issue for those struggling with their gender identity or suffering discrimination or bullying. Katie Sciorba, in her exploration of picture book representations of gender-variant males, comments that a common trope in these books is that "gender variance is fraught with shame and alienation" and that these issues are resolved either with heteronormative solutions or with the protagonist becoming a hero in order to gain acceptance (Sciorba, 2017, p. 291). Also, though, she notes the importance of recognising the impact of feelings of alienation where they occur, and that a wide range of books are needed to help young people address and manage these issues. She quotes Leyland, Lewison and Harste (2013, p. 179):

"We worry that kids who are struggling with issues of racism, gender identification, violence, physical abuse, verbal abuse, or religious persecution may not have access to books that can provide images of other kids who are in similar circumstances to their own. In other words, those students who are most vulnerable have the least chance of reading books that could be helpful in dealing with difficult issues that are present in their lives."

Likewise, there is a lack of information about what proportion of children's books feature non-binary or non-conforming protagonists, although in recent years many media outlets have

<sup>6</sup> 45.8% (n = 26,031) children and young people who identified themselves as boys, 52.7% (n = 29,913) who identified themselves as girls and 1.5% (n = 833) who identified themselves as "other" answered questions about diversity. The remaining 2.7% (n = 1,569) pupils didn't want to tell us their gender.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/truth-about-trans#trans-people-britain>

worked to foreground important titles (see, for example, [BookTrust](#); [Huffington Post](#)). This suggests that there is a growing commitment to the issue, but space for further research.

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### 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.

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