

Seeing yourself in what you read: diversity and children and young people's reading in 2022

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For many, one of the joys of reading is the insight into others' lives, experiences and ways of being that the reader is given access to through books and stories, including others who may be very different to oneself. At the same time, seeing aspects of yourself in the characters and people featured in books and stories can illustrate to all readers that "the lives of people like you are worthy of being told" ([Myers, 2014](#)). In addition, such characters and people can also encourage and inspire, as readers "create, through the stories they're given, an atlas of their world, of their relationships to others, of their possible destinations" (ibid.). Researchers began to monitor the extent to which children from diverse backgrounds were represented in US children's books in the mid-1980s¹. More recently, studies have also started to explore diversity, ethnic and gender representation in UK children's books.

The most recent CLPE report indicates a positive trend in representation of minority ethnic characters in children's books, but notes that while the percentage featuring minority ethnic characters has risen from just 4% in 2017 to 20% in 2022, there is some way to go before books are truly reflective of the UK population ([Centre for Literacy in Primary Education \[CLPE\], 2022](#)). Similarly, BookTrust found that the percentage of children's book creators increased from 4% in 2007 to 11.7% in 2021 ([Ramdarshan Bold, BookTrust, 2022](#)), and that author visits and diverse and inclusive books had a positive impact on children's reading engagement and motivation to write their own stories ([Booktrust, 2022](#)) but there is more to do. This research provides vital information into representation in children's books; however, fewer studies have examined this topic from the perspective of young readers.

To contribute to the evidence base in this area, we first included questions on diversity and reading in our Annual Literacy Survey in early 2020. This research found that 1 in 3 (32.7%) children and young people aged 9 to 18 said they didn't see themselves in what they read, and this percentage increased for younger children, children from ethnic minority backgrounds, children from lower income homes and those who preferred to describe their gender as other than 'boy' or 'girl' ([Best et al., 2020](#)). More recently, our research found that more girls who don't enjoy reading say they find it difficult to find books with characters or people who are like them, compared with girls who enjoy reading ([Picton et al., 2021](#)). Increasing the availability and visibility of diverse books may therefore have the potential for supporting reading engagement in some children and young people.

¹ <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/literature-resources/ccbc-diversity-statistics/books-by-about-poc-fnn/>

We revisited diversity and reading in our latest Annual Literacy Survey, including questions exploring whether diversity in what they read is important to children and young people; whether they see themselves represented in what they read or hear; and to what extent this is associated with age, gender, socioeconomic background and ethnicity. The survey reached 62,193 children and young people aged 8 to 18 participating from schools in England, Scotland and Wales, and 48,672 answered questions on diversity and reading. We hope that the findings presented below will build on our previous research by highlighting how children and young people feel about diversity and reading in early 2022.

Key findings

- In 2022, **3 in 5** (61.1%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said it was important for books to include characters or people from lots of different backgrounds. More girls than boys agreed with this statement (69.0% vs. 51.7%), and more children and young people from a Black than from a White ethnic background (68.6% vs. 60.4%).
- More than **1 in 2** (55.0%) children and young people said that they like to read or hear about characters or people different from themselves. However, less than 1 in 2 (47.4%) boys agreed with this statement, compared with around 3 in 5 girls (61.1%).
- **2 in 5** (38.9%) children and young people agreed with the statement, “Reading about characters that are like me makes me feel more confident about myself”. More children from the youngest age group agreed, with 1 in 2 (53.1%) 8 to 11-year-olds agreeing, compared with 37.2% of 11 to 14-year-olds, 32.1% of 14 to 16-year-olds and 37.1% of 16 to 18-year-olds.
- While just **3 in 10** (30.8%) boys said reading about characters like them made them feel more confident, this increased to more than **2 in 5** (45.6%) girls.
- In addition, more children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds than from White backgrounds agreed that reading about characters like them made them feel more confident. More than 2 in 5 children and young people from Asian (45.9%), Middle Eastern (44.7%) and Mixed (41.7%) ethnic backgrounds agreed with this statement, increasing to nearly **1 in 2** (48.9%) of those from a Black ethnic background. This compares with **2 in 5** (36.7%) children and young people from a White ethnic background.
- However, **2 in 5** (38.9%) children and young people say that they find it difficult to find books with characters or people like them, increasing to **1 in 2** (53.1%) children aged 8 to 11.
- Notably, while just over **1 in 3** (34.9%) children and young people from White backgrounds say they struggle to see themselves in what they read, this increases to nearly **1 in 2** (45.2%) children and young people from Black ethnic backgrounds.
- More than **2 in 5** (42.5%) of those receiving FSMs report finding it difficult to see themselves in books compared with just over **1 in 3** (35.2%) of their peers who do not receive FSMs.
- More children and young people who struggle to see themselves in books said they write about characters or people like themselves compared with those who do not

find it difficult (35.0% vs. 23.4%). More also write about characters or people with similar experiences to them (37.8% vs. 24.7%).

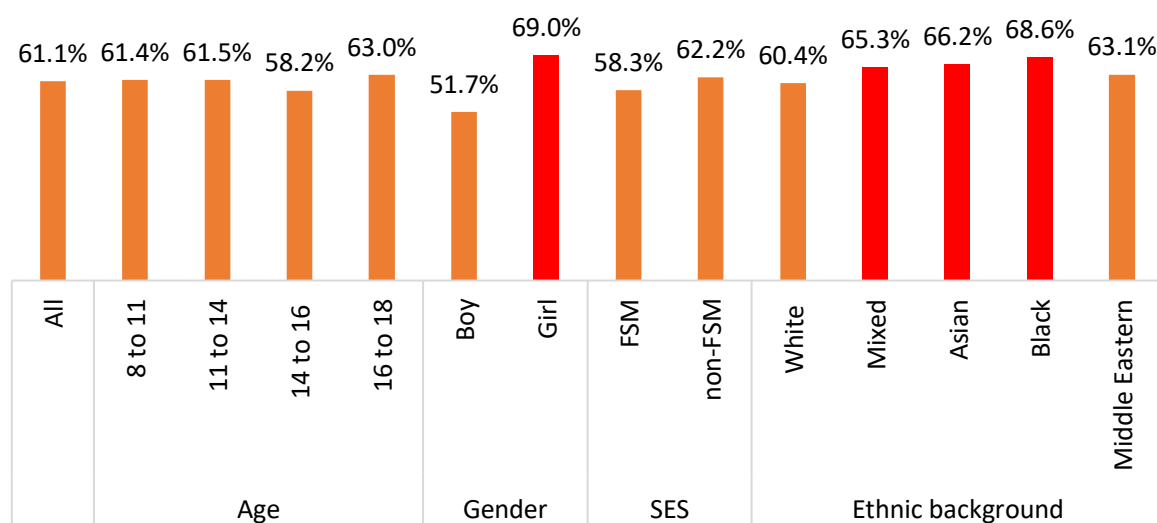
- Such findings suggest that more children and young people who find it difficult to find books about people or characters like them are addressing this within their own writing. If this creativity is recognised, we can look forward to a more promising future in which many more children get to see themselves in books.

Findings in more detail

Children’s perceptions of the importance of diversity in children’s books

As a starting point, we were interested to find out if the children and young people we surveyed believe it is important for books to include characters or people from lots of different backgrounds. More than 3 in 5 (61.1%) children and young people responding to our survey agreed that it was (a slight decrease from 2020, when 63.6% agreed). There was little difference by age group² or socioeconomic background³, but some difference in relation to gender and ethnic background⁴⁵ (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1: Percentage agreement with “I think it is important for story and information books to include characters or people from lots of different backgrounds” by age, gender, socioeconomic background and ethnicity in 2022



² Age group data indicated that 14.1% (n = 9,369) of our total sample were aged 8 to 11; 64.8% (n = 40,325) 11 to 14; 15.9% (n = 9,913) 14 to 16, and 4.2% (n = 2,586) 16 to 18.

³ 14.9% (n = 9,274) of children and young people said they receive free school meals (FSMs, a proxy for socioeconomic background)³ (lower than the national average of 20.8%, see: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>); 74.9% (n = 46,586) said they didn't receive FSMs, 8.8% (n = 5,482) didn't know, and 1.4% (n = 851) would rather not say.

⁴ We had ethnic background data from 71.0% (n = 44,231) of our sample. Most (72.1%) indicated that they came from White ethnic backgrounds (n = 31,879); followed by Asian (15.0%; n = 6,654); Mixed (6.1%; n = 2,682); Black (5.5%; n = 2,415) and Middle Eastern ethnic backgrounds (1.4%; n = 601).

⁵ Children and young people were invited to indicate their gender from the following options: 'Boy', 'Girl', 'I would rather not say' and 'I describe myself another way'. 48.3% (n = 30,024) of the sample identified themselves as girls; 45.8% (n = 28,473) as boys, 2.8% (n = 1,756) selected 'I would rather not say' and 3.1% (n = 1,940) of respondents selected 'I describe myself another way'.

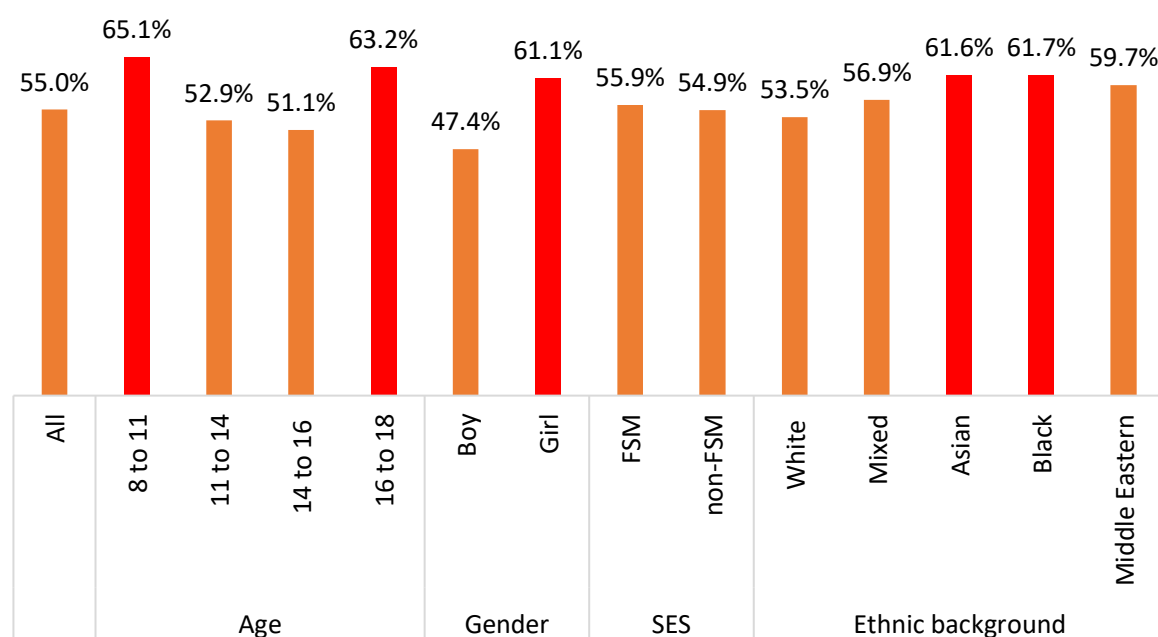
For example, while 3 in 5 (60.4%) children and young people from a White ethnic background agreed, this increased to nearly 7 in 10 (68.6%) children and young people from a Black ethnic background. The biggest difference related to gender, however; just 1 in 2 (51.7%) boys felt it was important for books to include people from lots of different backgrounds, compared with nearly 7 in 10 (69.0%) girls; a difference of more than 17 percentage points.

Diversity and reading enjoyment

More than half (55.0%) of the children and young people responding to our survey said that they liked to read or hear about characters or people different from themselves. This represents an increase of 7.6 percentage points on responses from 2020, when 47.4% of children and young people said this. Interestingly, more children and young people from the youngest and oldest age groups agreed with this statement, with nearly 2 in 3 (65.1%) 8 to 11-year-olds agreeing and more than 3 in 5 (63.2%) 16 to 18-year-olds, compared with closer to 1 in 2 young people aged 11 to 14 (52.9%) and 14 to 16 (51.1%, see **Figure 2**).

Again, however, the most significant difference related to gender, with less than 1 in 2 (47.4%) boys agreeing with this statement compared with around 3 in 5 girls (61.1%). There was less difference in relation to children and young people from different ethnic backgrounds, although fewer children and young people from a White ethnic background agreed that they like to read or hear about characters or people who are different to them than any other ethnic background. For example, while 1 in 2 (53.5%) of those from a White ethnic background agreed with this statement, 3 in 5 children and young people from Asian (61.6%) and Black (61.7%) ethnic backgrounds agreed.

Figure 2: Percentage agreement that “I like to read or hear about characters or people who are different from me” by age, gender, socioeconomic background and ethnicity in 2022



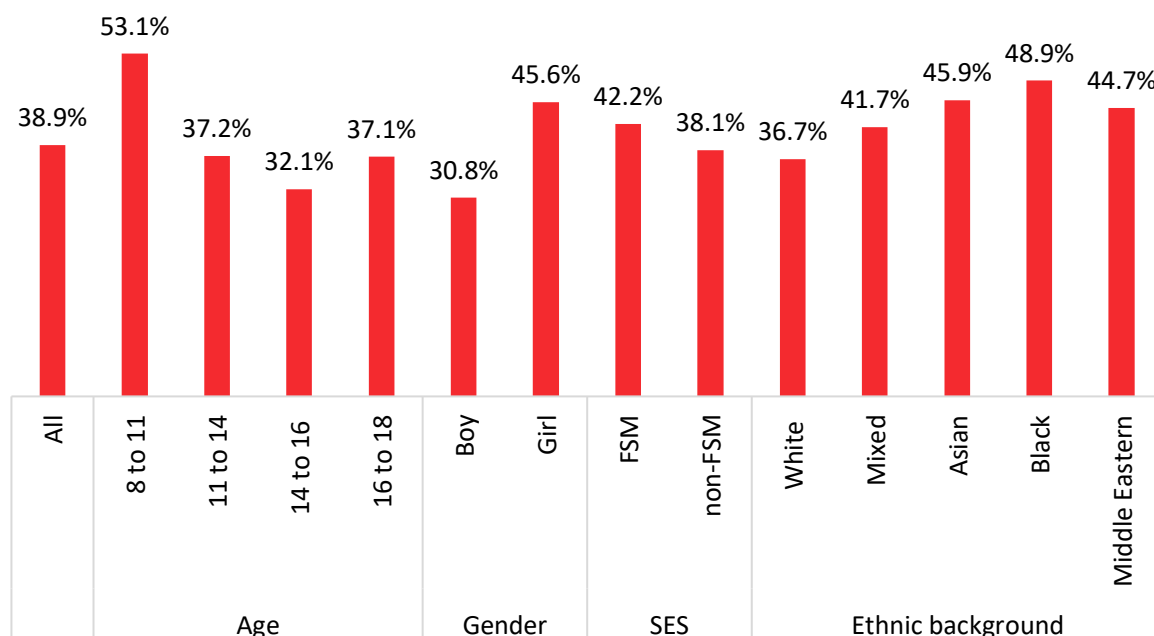
Representation and confidence

Recognising the importance of representation for ensuring that all children and young people feel that people like them belong in books⁶, we asked if reading about characters that were ‘like them’ helped children to feel more confident about themselves. 2 in 5 (38.9%) children and young people overall agreed with this statement (see **Figure 3**).

This increased to around 1 in 2 children in the youngest age group, with 53.1% agreeing compared, for example, with under 2 in 5 (37.2%) of those aged 11 to 14. Interestingly, while 3 in 10 (30.8%) boys agreed that reading about characters like them made them feel more confident, this increased to more than 2 in 5 (45.6%) girls. While more children and young people who receive free school meals (FSMs) agreed that seeing characters like themselves helped them feel more confident, the difference between this group and their peers who do not receive FSMs was only slight (42.2% FSM vs. 38.1% non-FSM).

However, significantly more children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds agree that reading about characters like them made them feel more confident. While around 2 in 5 (36.7%) children and young people from a White ethnic background agreed, this increased to nearly 1 in 2 (48.9%) of those from a Black ethnic background; a difference of more than 12 percentage points.

Figure 3: Percentage agreement that “Reading about characters that are like me makes me feel more confident about myself” by age, gender, socioeconomic background and ethnicity in 2022



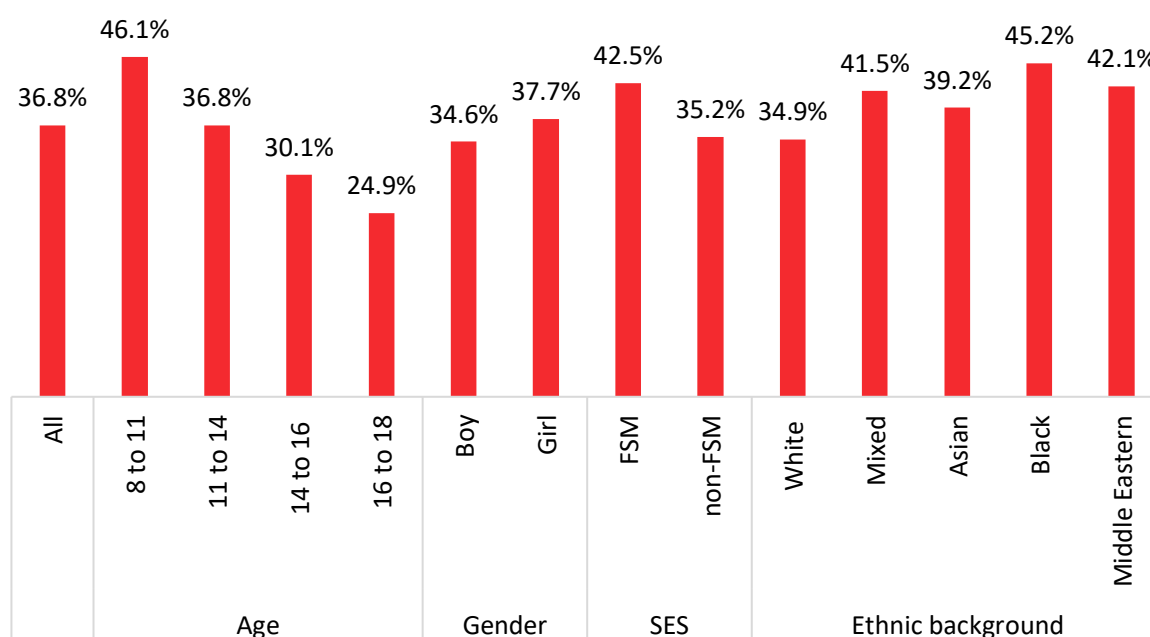
⁶ See, e.g. CLPE (2020), *Reflecting Realities*: <https://clpe.org.uk/clpes-reflecting-realities-survey-ethnic-representation-within-uk-children%E2%80%99s-literature-published>

Overall, these findings emphasise the essential role of ‘seeing yourself in a book’ for building confidence in children, but particularly children of primary school age and those from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Finding books about people like you

Following on from asking about the influence of representation on children and young people’s confidence, we were interested to learn whether children and young people found it difficult to access books with characters or people “like them”⁷. Responses broadly echoed those to the previous question on representation and confidence, with similar differences found in relation to age, gender, socioeconomic background and ethnic background (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Percentage agreement with statement “It is difficult for me to find books with characters or people that are like me” by age, gender, socioeconomic background and ethnicity



For example, more children aged 8 to 11 said that they find it difficult to find books with characters or people that are like them compared with their peers in older age groups. Indeed, while more than 1 in 2 (53.1%) children aged 8 to 11 struggled to see themselves in what they read, the percentage of young people in older age groups became progressively lower, with just 1 in 4 (24.9%) of 16 to 18 year-olds saying this was the case for them. This

⁷ As a note, this question was adapted slightly from the one we used in 2020, when children were asked specifically about characters or people who “look like them” (rather than “are like them”). This means responses from 2020 and 2022 can’t be compared.

may reflect the increased availability of diverse titles for older age groups⁸, an increased ability to locate diverse books as children get older or a combination of both.

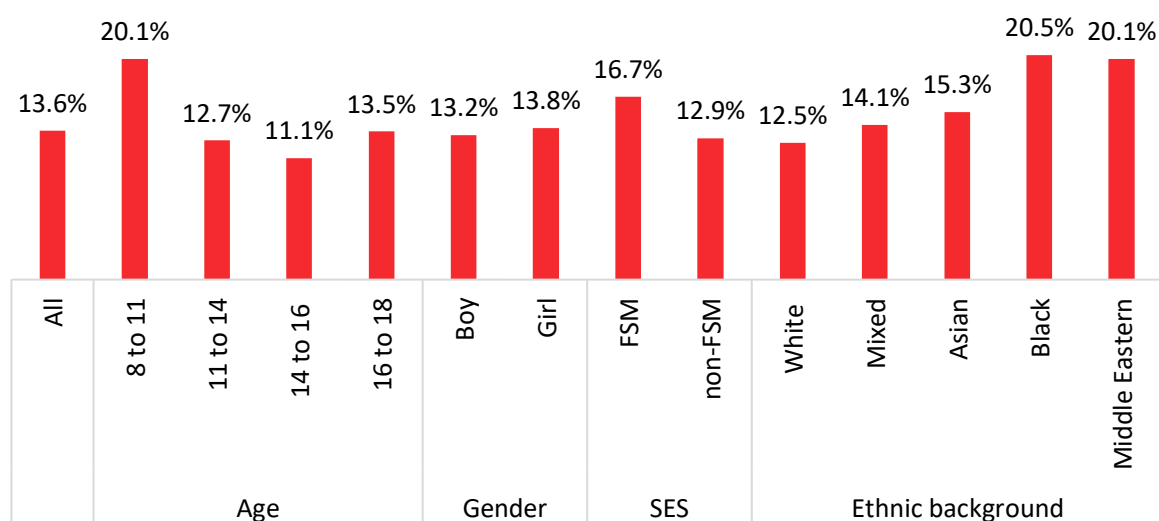
A fairly similar percentage of boys and girls find it difficult to find books with characters or people like them (34.6% and 37.7% respectively). However, more than 2 in 5 (42.5%) of those receiving FSMs report finding it difficult to see themselves in books compared with just over 1 in 3 (35.2%) of their peers who do not receive FSMs. This indicates that finding books with people like them may be more of a challenge for children from lower income backgrounds.

Responses to the previous question indicated that more children and young people from minority ethnic backgrounds said that reading about characters like them makes them feel more confident. Unfortunately, more children and young people from these backgrounds also said they struggle to find books with characters or people like them. While 1 in 3 (34.9%) of children and young people from White backgrounds said they find it difficult to find books with characters or people like them, this increases for children from Mixed (41.5%), Asian (39.2%) and Middle Eastern (42.1%) ethnic backgrounds, with the highest percentage of children and young people coming from Black ethnic backgrounds (45.2%).

Diversity in audiobooks and podcasts

Acknowledging the increasing popularity of audiobooks and podcasts, we included a new question relating to the diversity of accents and voices on these formats in our survey this year. Interesting, just 13.6% of children and young people agreed with the statement “I like to listen to audiobooks and/or podcasts with voices and accents that sound like mine” (see Figure 5), while 45.0% disagreed with this statement and 31.3% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 5: Agreement with statement “I like to listen to audiobooks and/or podcasts with voices and accents that sound like mine” by age, gender, socioeconomic background and ethnicity in 2022



⁸ See, e.g. ‘YA fiction is leading the way for Black representation, but the fight for diversity is far from over’

Some differences were found in relation to agreement by age, ethnicity or socioeconomic background, but these were generally slighter than differences found in responses to other questions. For example, more children from the youngest age group agreed that they liked to listen to voices and accents like their own, with 1 in 5 (20.1%) saying this, compared with around 1 in 8 (12.7%) children aged 11 to 14.

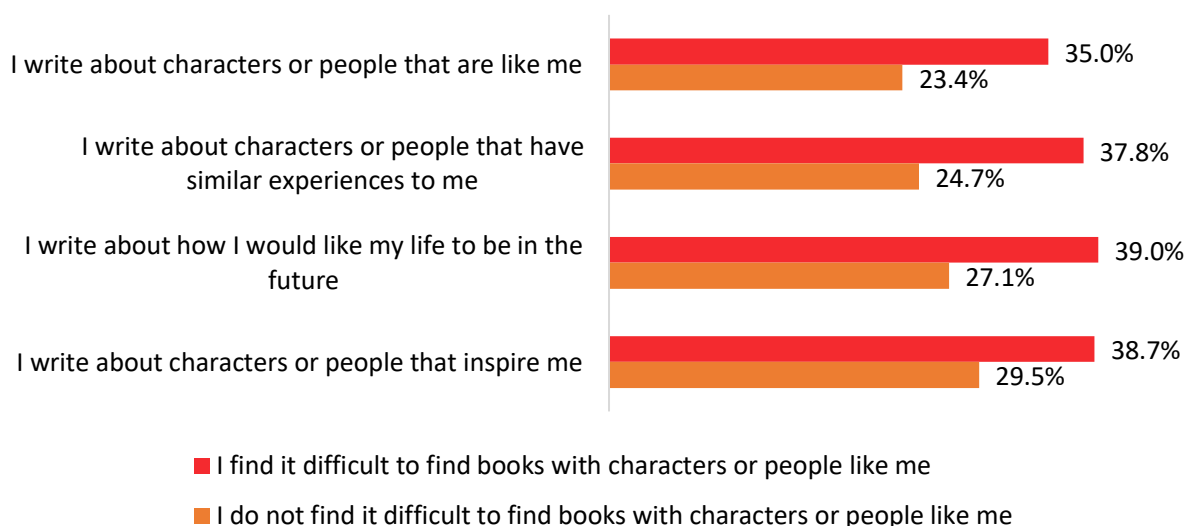
In addition, a slightly higher percentage of children and young people who receive FSMs agreed with this statement (16.7% vs. 12.9%). Finally, around 1 in 5 children and young people from Black (20.5%) and Middle Eastern (20.1%) ethnic backgrounds also said they like to listen to voices and accents like their own, compared with (for example) 1 in 8 (12.5%) of those from White backgrounds.

Diversity and writing

Finally, we were interested to see if more children and young people who say they find it difficult to find books about people or characters like them might choose to write about characters or people like them.

This does appear to be the case; while more than 1 in 3 (35.0%) children and young people who find it difficult to see themselves in books said they choose to write about characters or people like themselves, this decreases to less than 1 in 4 (23.4%) of those who do not find it difficult to see themselves in books (see **Figure 6**). Similarly, while nearly 2 in 5 (37.8%) children and young people who find it difficult to find books about people or characters like them said they write about characters or people with similar experiences to them, this decreases to 1 in 4 (24.7%) children and young people who do not struggle to find books about people like them.

Figure 6: Agreement with statements about writing by whether children and young people find it difficult to find books with characters or people like them in 2022



Differences could also be seen in relation to aspirations and inspiration. Again, 2 in 5 (39.0%) children and young people who find it difficult to find books about people or characters like

them say they write about how they would like their life to be in the future, however, this is only the case for 1 in 4 (27.1%) who do not find it difficult, and very similar percentages can be seen with regard to writing about characters or people that inspire you.

These findings suggest that more children and young people who find it difficult to find books about people or characters like them are addressing this directly within their own writing. In addition, more of this group of children and young people write both about their personal aspirations and about the people who inspire them. If this creativity among children and young people from groups that are currently under-represented in books and stories is recognised, we can perhaps look forward to a more promising future in which many more children are able to see themselves in books.

Discussion

Books offer us the chance to learn both about ourselves and about the lives of others. It is heartening to see that 3 in 5 children and young people believe it is important for books to include characters or people from lots of different backgrounds, while more than half of the children and young people we surveyed in 2022 said they enjoy reading or hearing about characters or people different from themselves.

More importantly, our 2022 survey shows that many children found that reading about characters like them made them feel more confident about themselves, and this was particularly the case for children from minority ethnic backgrounds. Notably, however, these children and young people were also most likely to say they struggled to find books with characters or people like them. As in 2020, these findings suggest that more could be done to include characters representing a broad range of backgrounds and ethnicities, particularly in titles for younger children, and to better signpost titles that reflect the everyday environments and experiences of young readers. As noted in the previous Children’s Laureate Charter, “Every child has the right to ...see themselves reflected in a book” ([BookTrust, 2019](#)).

Encouragingly, recent reports suggest that the percentage of children’s books containing characters from ethnic minorities is increasing year-on-year ([CLPE, 2022](#)). However, there is still some way to go when children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds make up 33.6% of the school population in England⁹. A growing number of campaigns, programmes and resources are raising awareness of the importance of diverse books, bringing authors and illustrators of colour into schools and highlighting diverse titles for children to schools and families¹⁰. We look forward to exploring the impact of these efforts on children and young people’s reading and writing in years to come.

⁹ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>

¹⁰ See e.g. [BookTrust Represents](#), [Letterbox Library](#), Penguin Random House’s [Lit in Colour](#), [The Black Curriculum](#), [Knights Of](#) and many others

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.

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