

WHAT CAN TEACHERS LEARN FROM MULTILINGUAL CHILDREN?

OUR RESEARCH

We spoke to 27 children and 8 members of staff from four primary schools to explore how children described their experiences of being multilingual in primary school. The children were from very different schools, which allowed us to explore how children’s experiences may differ according to the context and environment they are in.

Participating schools	High no. of multilingual	Low no. of multilingual
High no. of languages other than English spoken	School 1 School 2	
Low no. of languages other than English spoken	School 3	School 4

WHAT DID CHILDREN SAY?

“when I speak Turkish with my friends since they know the same language it’s like we have a connection and we understand each other”

“it’s good and bad, but mainly good to speak a different language because you’re, like, different and that’s a good thing.”

“during RE, when we learn about Sikhism and stuff, I get to show all my classmates like what the words are and what things are called and how to say them.”

“I’ve always had the idea in my head of we learn everyone’s languages. But I’ve never told my teacher about it.”

“if you speak your home language in school or something like that, you’ll feel more comfortable because you usually speak it at home.”



OUR FINDINGS

- **Most children had positive experiences.** They were generally happy in school and enjoyed using their home languages with friends and teaching others.
- **School context influenced children's experiences.** Children in schools with fewer multilingual children described some negative experiences such as feeling lonely and less comfortable using their home languages in school.
- **Children often acted as translators for peers and parents.** They saw this as a positive experience, however, it was unclear whether they had a real choice in taking on this responsibility.
- **Teachers' practices were important.** Children appreciated when teachers learned a few words of their home language and took steps to show that it was valued in the classroom.
- **Children overall wanted more opportunities to use their home languages in school.** The extent to which home languages were recognised varied by school ethos, the number of EAL pupils, and the diversity of languages spoken.

WHAT DOES OTHER RESEARCH SAY?

The definition 'EAL' covers significant variation in children's experiences, such as their proficiency in both English and their other language; levels of literacy in their other language; and factors such as immigration status and previous schooling experiences (Anderson et al., 2016; Sharples, 2023).

Multilingual children's learning trajectories may differ from their peers; they may initially have lower academic attainment, but catch up to their monolingual peers by the end of secondary school (Filippi et al., 2024).

Multilingual children's friendships can be an important part of their experiences in school, both with those with the same home language and others (Liu & Evans, 2016; Welply, 2017).

Teachers can play an important role in mediating the role of negative social discourses around immigration for children, and teachers' positive attitudes towards their EAL students can be important factors in the creation of a supportive environment for EAL children (Chen, 2007).



HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT MULTILINGUAL PUPILS IN YOUR CLASSROOM?

Know the languages spoken by the children in your classroom. Talk to parents, carers and families about how confidently children can understand, speak, read and write in these languages.

Bear in mind that being multilingual or designated as EAL does not necessarily mean that a child will have lower English proficiency.

Provide dual language books or audiobooks. [Mantra Lingua UK](#) are a leading supplier of texts and resources in a range of languages.

Encourage children to connect with others who speak the same language in school. Provide time and space for these crucial social opportunities.

Be careful not to rely on children to bear the burden of translation for peers or parents. There are now many apps that provide real-time translation.

Develop strategies, approaches and resources to specifically benefit children with English as an Additional Language. [The Bell Foundation](#) are a leading voice in this area and their website will support you in developing practice in your classroom.

Allow and encourage children to think, talk, read and write in other languages to support their wider literacy learning. AI can be utilised to support translation, so that learning can be assessed.

Raise the profile of other languages and literacy ‘in translation’. Share books translated from other languages and show how well-known English books are translated in co-editions.

Give time and support to new language learners through a silent period, where they may not wish to speak, as they are taking in the new language before developing conversational competence and confidence.

Reduce undue pressure on these children to ‘catch up’ in timeframes that don’t match the time it takes to develop first conversational, then academic competency.

Be careful not to label or define EAL children as having SEND, before they have had the requisite time to develop language competencies.



HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT MULTILINGUAL PUPILS IN YOUR SCHOOL?

Designate an EAL lead in your school who can provide or signpost support and resources for staff and be the voice of and for EAL children in your school. EAL Leaders can find support, resources and guidance by joining NALDIC, the EAL Subject Association.

Consider whether the languages spoken by the children and cultures and backgrounds of the families are visible and celebrated in the school, for example in signage around the school, in translating information for children and families, in resources for children.

Develop opportunities for children and parents who speak the same language to build communities within your school. Children and parents involved might volunteer to support translation or resource making within the school.

Draw on the expertise of multilingual parents to help you to understand how other languages differ from English in terms of elements such as; the speech sounds of the language, how phonetically regular these languages are, differences in grammatical structures, differences in print and how this is presented, and knowing songs and stories which are familiar to children in other languages.

FURTHER RESOURCES

The Bell Foundation - <https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/>

NALDIC - <https://naldic.org.uk/>

Mantra Lingua - <https://uk.mantralingua.com/>

British Council - <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/resources>

EAL Academy - <https://theealacademy.co.uk/resources/>

World Stories - <https://worldstories.org.uk/>



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