

## Exploring the impact of World Book Day on the reading lives of children in the UK 2019-2021

*Helping children to feel part of the world of reading and  
that reading is part of their world.*

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This report, commissioned by World Book Day, explores the impact of World Book Day on the reading lives of primary-aged children in the UK. It aims to capture children's perceptions of how the event supports their reading opportunities and how the book choice and ownership facilitated by World Book Day influences their developing reading identities. It shows how World Book Day welcomes children into the world of books and reading in two ways: by helping all children become book owners, many for the first time, and by supporting many other activities and experiences essential for building life-long readers.

The National Literacy Trust has extensive experience in conducting research with children and young people. Our previous research has highlighted the many benefits of reading for enjoyment, from associations between book ownership and reading enjoyment and attainment<sup>1</sup> to the links between children's reading engagement and mental wellbeing<sup>2</sup>. The impact of World Book Day is explored through data drawn from many sources, including the National Literacy Trust's Annual Literacy Survey and Nielsen surveys of parents on their perceptions of their family's involvement with World Book Day<sup>3</sup>. In 2019, we were commissioned by World Book Day to complement this with qualitative data gathered through a series of focus group discussions with children aged 8 to 11, to provide a more comprehensive and holistic picture of the role of World Book Day in the reading lives of children across the UK.

While the COVID-19 pandemic affected the planned methodology for this study, we were able to combine findings from our baseline focus groups with quantitative and qualitative data drawn from large-scale online surveys over periods of national lockdown. Taken together, findings present a powerful picture of the many ways in which World Book Day has a unique

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<sup>1</sup> <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/gift-reading-childrens-book-ownership-2019/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/mental-wellbeing-reading-and-writing/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.worldbookday.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/WBD2020-IMPACT-REPORT-1.pdf>

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and meaningful influence on children's reading engagement at a key point of their development, as they become more independent and autonomous readers.

The children we spoke with enjoyed reading for many reasons, for example, some said it helped them relax and others that it allowed them to imagine other lives. Encouragingly, many were able to share positive experiences of borrowing books from school and public libraries. However, not all children had access to libraries or the chance to visit a bookshop. Children highly valued the opportunity to exchange a World Book Day token for a brand-new book. As one child said, "I just want to treasure it, as I never get things that are new."

World Book Day was also a much-anticipated date in the calendar for children who described waiting for World Book Day to get a long-awaited book by a favourite author or to have the chance to discover a new favourite author or series. The research also found that World Book Day stimulated rich and varied discussions around favourite books and book characters, particularly among classmates and friends. These discussions deepened children's engagement with reading, both by encouraging them to reflect on their reading and by giving them insights into peers' reading discoveries and preferences. Indeed, many children's first association with World Book Day was the opportunities it offered to gain reading inspiration. Along with the benefits of book ownership (such as the opportunity to swap books with friends) and the potential discovery of a new favourite author or series, the inspiration gained from these discussions shows that the impact of World Book Day can last long beyond the day itself.

Children's comments also afforded insights into how World Book Day activities work alongside book ownership, book choice and book talk to enhance children's engagement with books. For example, many said they found reading inspiration from the costumes of friends taking part in dressing up activities. Others enjoyed imagining themselves "in the shoes" of the character they had chosen. It was also interesting to see how the challenges of the most recent World Book Day, the first to take place within an official lockdown period, were met with creativity by teachers and families. Many devised 'hybrid' activities (with digital and non-digital elements) or made links with culturally relevant themes, such as popular TV series. Children's enthusiasm for 'Masked Readers' and 'Great British Book Offs' showed how World Book Day activities can help books and reading be seen as a fun and relevant part of the broader media ecosystem.

We hope that this exploratory approach and the findings to date can inform current and future practice by highlighting the aspects of World Book Day that have the most impact on lifelong reading enjoyment and engagement from a child's point of view. It is clear that World Book Day makes a significant and meaningful contribution to enriching children's reading lives at a critical point of their development, as they move from learning to read to exploring their personal reading preferences and identities as readers. Reading enjoyment levels have declined in recent years, and the gap in attainment between children from lower and higher-income homes grows wider. At such a time, initiatives that promote book choice and ownership while bringing an important social element into children's reading lives have an essential role in encouraging new generations of readers.

## Key findings

Data in this report is drawn from six focus groups reaching 50 children aged between 8 and 11 in schools serving areas of disadvantage in Glasgow, Hastings, Manchester and Middlesbrough in late 2019, and three surveys of children in early 2020 (n=8,457), late spring 2020 (n=3,451) and early 2021 (n=2,389).

### Findings from baseline focus groups in 2019

- Reading plays an important role in the lives of most of the children we spoke with in focus groups. Many enjoy reading as it helps them relax and broadens their horizons, allowing them to imagine other lives and what they might like to do in the future.
- Encouragingly, most of the children we spoke with had good access to books they could borrow and positive experiences of school and public libraries. However, some children lacked access to a local library, and several had never visited a bookshop.
- Children's comments suggested that making books financially accessible supported or widened their reading experiences by allowing them to choose a book that matched their interests or through the discovery of a new favourite author or series.
- World Book Day tokens also increased children's sense of books being 'special' and their subsequent pride in being a book owner. As one child said, "I just want to treasure it because I never get things that are new."
- Nearly 3 in 10 (28%) children aged 8 to 11 receiving free school meals said the book they 'bought' with their World Book Day token had been the first book of their own.
- World Book Day opened up other benefits of being part of the 'world' of book ownership for children, such as being able to keep, reread or swap their new books, indicating that the benefits of World Book Day extend beyond the day itself.

### Findings from the late spring 2020 'literacy under lockdown' survey

The second phase of the research allowed us to explore these themes further through an online survey carried out in May and June 2020. Many children had positive memories of their experiences of World Book Day, which took place a few weeks before school closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Children's recollections of World Book Day highlighted the social nature of the events and the positive impact of knowing that the celebration was classroom or school-wide. In the words of one child, "It made me feel happy because everyone was doing it!"
- The different aspects of World Book Day combined to re-engage children with reading. One child told us, "World Book Day was an extremely fun day where everyone got to choose a new book to try out and from then I started to like reading much more."
- World Book Day was associated strongly with venturing beyond usual reading choices for many children, supporting them in developing their reading identities. As one child said, "World Book Day made me want to move out of my comfort zone."
- Seeing friends who had dressed up as was an important source of reading inspiration for many children, giving them ideas for new titles to try based on friends' decisions to dress as a character who had interested them.

- Primary-aged children were more likely than those aged 12 or older to think World Book Day was fun and helped them to enjoy reading more. However, almost half of older children felt World Book Day encouraged them to try reading something new.

### Findings from early 2021 survey

The third phase of the research is based on data from our Annual Literacy Survey 2021, which took place between January and March 2021. Due to the timing of the survey, most children referred to their experience of World Book Day in the previous year; however, some responded after World Book Day 2021, when the event coincided with a period of lockdown.

- More than half (54.7%) of children aged 8 to 11 said that they read more books as a result of taking part in World Book Day, and 3 in 10 (30.5%) read more with their parents/carers. 1 in 5 (18.8%) children receiving free school meals said the book they had 'bought' with their World Book Day token was the first book of their own.
- Our research into literacy during the first lockdown<sup>4</sup> found a revived interest in reading for enjoyment, and World Book Day supported this. One child said, "I mostly enjoyed picking a book I wanted to read because this year I have read more than I ever have."
- Activities such as dressing up encouraged children to reflect on their reading by considering book characters that inspired them. Comments such as, "I like how you can be whoever you want and get to be in that character's shoes" also showed how dressing up could support a deeper engagement with the world of books and stories.
- Another key theme in 2021 related to activities linked to popular culture. These allowed World Book Day activities to be integrated into a broader media ecosystem familiar to many children, with typical comments including, "I loved dressing up into different *Marvel* characters for a TikTok." Other activities featured 'blended' approaches, such as using digital platforms to share stories, quizzes and author videos.

Taken together, findings from this research show how World Book Day forms a highly influential part of many children's reading lives, playing a unique role in supporting several aspects of children's developing identities as readers simultaneously. Findings from surveys build on those from focus groups by showing that World Book Day provides a much-anticipated focal point in the year when children know they will be able to enjoy fun, social reading activities with their peers; spend time talking about books and reading; and explore and experiment with their reading preferences. World Book Day tokens provide a vital foundation for these activities by giving all children regular experiences of choosing books to suit their interests or expand their horizons. This is especially important for children whose opportunities are limited by their family's financial background or access to libraries and bookshops. World Book Day gives all children the sense not only that books are for everyone, but that the many other essential experiences around reading (such as choosing, owning and talking about books with friends) are for everyone. The long-term value of these experiences for building a child's identity as a reader should not be underestimated.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-reading-in-2020-before-and-during-the-covid-19-lockdown/>

## Introduction

World Book Day was created in 1995 to celebrate books and encourage young people to read, with the first World Book Day taking place in the UK and Ireland two years later<sup>5</sup>. Celebrated annually on the first Thursday in March, it is known for fun, book-themed events in schools, libraries and other community settings that often include children dressing up as favourite book characters and other reading-related activities. A fundamental part of World Book Day is that it offers children the opportunity to exchange a token for a free book or a discount on a full-price book or audiobook. For nearly 3 in 10 (28%) primary school-aged children eligible for free school meals, the book they chose with this token in 2020 was the first book of their own<sup>6</sup>. World Book Day itself happens within the context of a wider campaign promoting reading for pleasure, which has most recently emphasised the benefits of sharing stories<sup>7</sup>.

## Methodology

As mentioned, this research project aimed to complement existing quantitative data demonstrating the impact of World Book Day with more qualitative data gathered through a series of focus group discussions with children aged 8 to 11. Focus groups and interviews were scheduled to occur at three time points in 2019 and 2020 (see **Figure 1**), with initial data on children's diverse reading experiences collected between November 2019 and January 2020.

**Figure 1: planned timeline for qualitative data collection**



As indicated in the timeline, the second stage of qualitative data collection hoped to revisit children in the weeks immediately following World Book Day 2020, to find out how they had been involved and to what extent they felt it had supported or benefited their prior reading. However, school closures from late March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic prevented face-to-face school visits and obstructed alternative forms of gathering post-event data as schools prioritised urgent preparations for closures in the period concerned.

This affected our ability to conduct the research using the planned methodology. The approach to gathering data was adapted from focus group discussions to inviting children to comment on their experiences of World Book Day as part of large-scale national literacy surveys. We therefore included questions about World Book Day in our

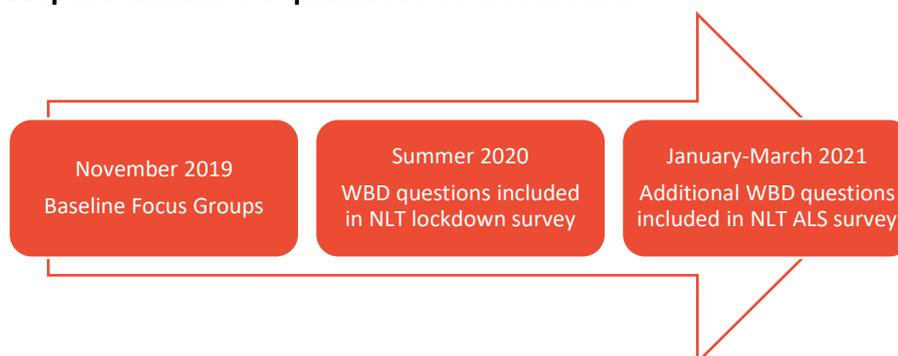
<sup>5</sup> <https://www.worldbookday.com/about-us/history-2/>

<sup>6</sup> National Literacy Trust Annual Literacy Survey, 2020

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.worldbookday.com/share-a-million-stories/>

*Literacy during lockdown* study in summer 2020 and again, in response to further educational disruptions, in our Annual Literacy Survey in January 2021 (see **Figure 2**). Due to the timing of this survey, most children referred to their experiences of World Book Day in the previous year; however, some responded after World Book Day 2021, when the event coincided with a period of lockdown.

**Figure 2: adapted timeline for qualitative data collection**



While this was not the preferred design, it proved to be an effective way to capture children's thoughts about World Book Day, which were of particular interest in a year when education and access to books were so disrupted. We combined findings from our baseline focus groups with quantitative and qualitative data drawn from these surveys, including a thematic analysis of children's comments. Together with key findings evidenced through large-scale surveys, it is hoped that this data will provide valuable insight into the immediate and longer-term influence of participating and celebrating World Book Day on children's wider reading habits and experiences.

## Phase 1: Baseline focus groups

To explore the role that World Book Day plays, or does not play, in children's reading experiences in more depth, six schools were invited to host a series of focus group discussions before and after World Book Day 2020<sup>8</sup>. While only pre-World Book Day sessions could take place due to subsequent school closures, findings provided a valuable baseline to inform the research piece and provided context for later survey responses. All schools were located in National Literacy Trust Hub areas, known to be areas of high literacy need, and each was invited to select a group of between six and 10 children aged between 8 and 11. 50 children were consulted in total, including children of different genders, reading attitudes and experiences.

This research explores how increased access to books supports children's reading and how World Book Day might promote and encourage reading through improving children's experience of book choice and ownership, reading attitudes and behaviours and experience of fun, literacy-related activities. Children's views on these topics, gathered in baseline focus

<sup>8</sup> The following schools were involved in each location: Glasgow: St Michael's Primary School; Hastings: Robsack Wood Primary Academy; Manchester: Longsight Community Primary, Mount Carmel RC Primary School and St. Peter's Catholic Primary School; Middlesbrough: Newham Bridge Primary School

groups in late 2019 and reported below, are contextualised with findings from our Annual Literacy Survey in early 2020, which reached 58,346 pupils aged 9 to 18. Of these respondents, 45,856 answered questions about World Book Day, of which 8,547 responses were from primary schools (children aged 8 to 11, the focus of this research).

## Children’s experience of book choice and ownership

Research has shown that having a choice in what they read, and having books of their own at home, has a positive influence on children’s reading engagement<sup>9</sup>. However, National Literacy Trust surveys indicate that children from low-income households are more likely to say they don't have any books of their own at home than those from higher-income backgrounds (9.3% vs 6%)<sup>10</sup>. In 2020, we found that 1 in 7 pupils (13.8%) said that the book they 'bought' with their World Book Day book token had been the first book of their own. However, among children receiving free school meals at KS2, this number increased to nearly 3 in 10 (28%).

Perhaps reflecting that the schools visited were situated in areas of financial disadvantage, almost all children in the baseline focus group discussions felt that the token was a valuable part of World Book Day. The main reasons children gave for this was that it reduced the cost of books for themselves or their family:

“...if you don’t have enough money for one ...you could say to your mum, can I get this one? It’s a pound off it.”

“...they are a very good idea because if there’s this book that you want, but you can’t afford it or your parents just won’t let you get it unless it’s for free, then you can get this token and say, well, now I can get any book for free, so I might as well get one.”

“...it’s better to get a book token so then you don’t have to spend as much money or your parents don’t. They’d be happy to take you because they don’t have to spend any money.”

However, other children felt that the token could simply persuade someone to try a book due to the discount, and that this could potentially motivate further purchases:

“Basically, in my opinion, it helps more people to read because if people find out that there’s discount off books, they might try one. And if they like it they’re going to continue buying more.”

Notably, findings from the Annual Literacy Survey carried out in early 2020 bear this out, with more than 2 in 5 (41%) children and young people who had taken part in World Book Day activities saying that they had bought more books as a result. Indeed, children taking part in the focus group discussions shared that having a token to exchange had not only encouraged them to try something new, but inspired them to read more titles by those authors,

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<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Clark and Phythian-Sence (2008), *Interesting Choice*, London: National Literacy Trust

<sup>10</sup> Clark and Picton (2019) *Book ownership, literacy engagement and mental wellbeing*, London: National Literacy Trust

highlighting how World Book Day had helped them to discover and develop themselves as readers.

“When I got one of the World Book Day ones and read it, it made me want to read other books after I read...it’s that one there [Clare Balding]. I’ve read her horse one...”

**“I just want to treasure it because I never get things that are new.”**

Other aspects that children valued about their World Book Day token included the opportunity to own a brand-new book of their own, the chance to choose and keep a book that matched their interests or expand the variety of books they had to choose from at home:

“I think it’s a good idea because ...whenever I get something new I just want to treasure it because I never get things that are new.”

“I got this token. I decided to spend it on a chess book so I could hone my chess skills. I’m still pretty good at it today, but I forgot one of my special moves which I taught myself from [the] book.”

“Yeah, because the more books you get ...you’ve got more choice, the more you want to read. Like it encourages you. “

Again, responses to the Annual Literacy Survey in 2020 suggest that having an increased choice of books as a result of World Book Day encouraged children to read more. More than half (52.9%) of children and young people who had taken part in World Book Day said that they read more as a result.

In addition, several mentioned keeping, rereading or swapping their books with family and friends, a privilege associated with book ownership. This allowed them to read their chosen title at their own pace, to reread it and to share it with other children, demonstrating that the benefits of book ownership as a result of World Book Day can often extend beyond the day of the event itself:

“I prefer having my own books. I take a long time to read, so when it comes to when they’re due [and] ...I haven’t finished the book, I want to read it.”

“...if you have a book, once you finish it you can like keep it and sometimes if you want to go over it again and read more you can.”

“After I read the book, I just wanted to keep reading it and reading it. Like five or six [times].”

“I’ve lent it from my cousin.”

It is also important to consider children's comments about the books chosen as part of World Book Day within the context of their access to books more generally. All children taking part in focus groups had access to a school library, but only some were able to visit a public library

or bookshop. Of these children, many were keen to share their very positive experiences around borrowing or buying books:

“I get so many books, and then I can read to my grandma ...and I have my own library card to use it on.”

“When you get into a shop where there’s just books you want to buy something. If there’s only one book you can buy it’s basically impossible to choose which book because there’s about ten of them you like.”

Unfortunately, this was not universal. A significant number of children in focus groups did not have easy access to a local public library, and several had never visited a bookshop:

“There’re no libraries next to my house, they’re all like in the town or something.”

“I’ve never been to a bookshop.”

For these children, World Book Day presents a particularly valuable opportunity to practise choosing, and experience owning, a book.

### **Children’s experiences of World Book Day**

“It’s a day where we all celebrate books.”

Reflecting Annual Literacy Survey findings showing that 95.9% of children aged 9 to 18 had heard of World Book Day, all of the children in the focus groups were aware of World Book Day and had a clear idea of what it involved. Comments were unanimously positive and suggested that children were comfortable and familiar with the concept:

“We’ve all heard of it. We’ve all done it.”

“It’s a day where we all celebrate books.”

“You have it every year.”

“It’s to dress up and have fun enjoying your books.”

Three-quarters (75.2%) of Key Stage 2 respondents to the Annual Literacy Survey had taken part in a World Book Day activity in 2019, and (despite many months having passed since the previous year’s World Book Day) most children were able to share memories and experiences of the event in focus group discussions. Many of the children had happy memories of dressing up or of other events, particularly those that had involved families or trips out of school:

“I remember last year I was Pippi Longstocking. She [mum] put like these wire things in for my plaits.”

“...they [teachers] asked them [children] if like their parents wanted to come in and then they could read to them and wear a badge. In their language, their mother language, in their tongue.”

“We went to the library. It’s an exciting place.”

“It was absolutely the best day of my life. Of my life.”

One group of children recalled having been to a large-scale (Share a Story Live) event, and had memories not only of choosing one of the first books of their own, but of having it signed by the author:

“And also one of the first books I got it was from a Manchester reading thing and I got it signed!”

In addition, as focus groups took place in the months before World Book Day 2020, many of the children shared their excitement about their forthcoming events, including new Share a Story Live events. Plans being made by schools helped to build a sense of anticipation and excitement about books among many children:

“...on 5<sup>th</sup> March my class is going on a trip and which is to [...] books that we're going to buy and we're going to get those books.”

“Nobody can steal my book, my Tom Gates book. I really want it.”

### Children’s experiences of reading

Focus groups further sought to explore how the opportunities extended by World Book Day, such as book choice and ownership and celebratory events, fit into children's wider reading lives. For example, we were interested to learn whether and how World Book Day affected children's reading enjoyment and behaviour.

Our large-scale Annual Literacy Survey in early 2020 found that more children and young people who took part in World Book Day activities in 2019 said that they enjoy reading compared with their peers who didn't take part (57.1% vs. 40.9%). Furthermore, more said that they read daily in their free time (38.5% vs. 26.1%). When children in focus groups were asked whether they enjoyed reading, many spoke in terms of how reading made them feel:

“It calms your mind – you forget what time it is.”

Indeed, National Literacy Trust research has shown that reading is associated with mental wellbeing (Clark and Teravainen-Goff)<sup>11</sup>. At the same time, across several of the focus groups, children expressed a strong sense of a 'time and a place' for reading, with many expressing a dislike for reading immediately after a busy day at school, after which they prefer to relax by watching TV, playing video games or socialising:

“I sometimes don’t like to read because ...whenever there’s a friend on like my PS4 ...I want to talk to them for a bit and play some games with them.”

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<sup>11</sup> <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/mental-wellbeing-reading-and-writing/>

“...generally when you read it takes you to a new... - when you’re tired, your imagination can’t take you to a new world.”

Others described finding it hard to read when they were “in a place where you can’t concentrate”, emphasising the importance of a quiet space for reading, alongside access to books.

### Sharing stories

Studies have demonstrated the value of sharing stories for encouraging children to read for enjoyment themselves (see, e.g. Egmont, 2020)<sup>12</sup>. Our Annual Literacy Survey found that more than 1 in 4 (26%) children and young people who took part in World Book Day activities in 2019 said they read more with their parents. We were also keen to explore children’s experience of sharing stories in our baseline focus groups. Not all children regularly read at home with their families, and those that did were more likely to describe reading independently or with siblings than with parents. Classmates and friends were more often mentioned as a source of books, encouragement and reading inspiration:

“I read to my little sister. So ...whenever she goes to nursery, she knows how to read.”

“I got this book for my birthday ... *Stories for Boys Who Dare to Be Different* and I gave it to someone in my class ...because I ...read through it and some of the stuff is ...really interesting.”

“You know ...the Captain Underpants series? Me and my mate made our own characters.”

Finally, many children were keen to tell us how they had been inspired by the content of books they read, mainly when they were able to read about characters like (or unlike) themselves, and how stories had helped them to imagine other lives:

“...the book I’m reading now called *Llama United*. It’s made me want to move onto a farm because a lot of the great stuff in the book.”

“I felt like Greg Heffley [*Diary of a Wimpy Kid*] because like his brother always gets him in trouble and that’s like me.”

“I read *Wonder* and I’ve watched the movie and it made me cry ...because I felt sorry for Augie ...the main character, and I actually felt like if I was a student of that school I would have actually helped him”

“...where the characters ...haven’t had so much money and they’ve not had as much stuff ...finishing the book, I feel grateful for what I’ve had.”

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.egmont.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Stories-and-Choices-Paper-with-Project-Conclusion-23-02-2020.pdf>

## Summary of findings from baseline focus groups

Findings from the first phase of the qualitative research, combined with the Annual Literacy Survey 2020, show that World Book Day holds an important place in many children's reading lives. The themes emerging from focus group discussions provide valuable insight into how World Book Day engages children in reading for enjoyment by supporting book choice and ownership. Furthermore, it builds a sense of anticipation, fun and excitement around books and helps children discover and develop their reading identities.

For many of the children we spoke to, an essential part of World Book Day was that the token made books more affordable and accessible for children from lower-income backgrounds. For these children, the value of an opportunity to choose and keep a brand-new book of their own should not be underestimated - as one child said, "I just want to treasure it because I never get things that are new." World Book Day played a crucial part in bringing books into their homes that they could share with younger family members, and later, friends. Taken together, we can see that such outcomes play a vital part in helping all children feel part of the world of books and reading.

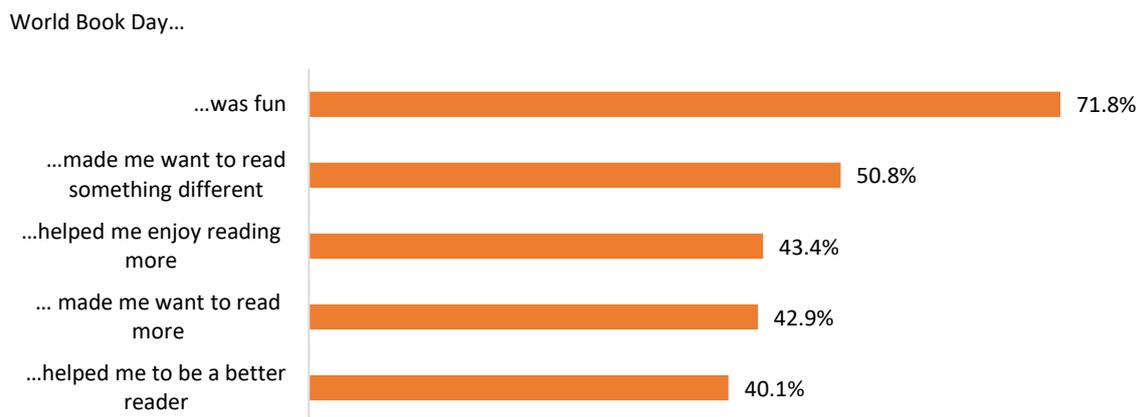
## Phase 2: World Book Day and children's reading during the first lockdown

The second phase of the research aimed to build on themes arising from the first step in capturing the impact of World Book Day on the reading lives of children in the UK. Five questions about World Book Day were included in a survey carried out over May and June 2020, during the first period of lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Alongside questions designed to gather quantitative information, respondents who remembered taking part in World Book Day were invited to tell us more about what they did on World Book Day and what they liked best in an open-text format. 4,141 pupils aged 9 to 18 responded to the survey, of which 3,451 answered questions about World Book Day. Of these, 243 were from primary schools.

### World Book Day and reading attitudes

Just over half (52.8%) of children and young people remembered taking part in World Book Day, which had taken place in the weeks just before school closures in late March 2020. Those who had remembered taking part in World Book Day 2020 were invited to agree with a series of statements (see **Figure 3**).

**Figure 3: Agreement with attitudinal statements and World Book Day**



More than 7 in 10 of children overall felt World Book Day had been fun, and more than half (50.8%) agreed that it had motivated them to try reading something different. Just over 2 in 5 children agreed that it had helped them enjoy reading more, made them want to read more or helped improve their reading skills.

To better capture the experiences and opinions of children who remembered taking part in World Book Day, those who told us they had taken part were invited to tell us more about what they had done and what they liked best in an open-text format. Responses were themed and analysed, and highlights are presented below.

For children aged 8 to 11, the most frequent responses to the question about what they liked most about the day included dressing up, new books and reading (see **Figure 4**). Other words mentioned often included 'fun' and 'friend', indicating the importance of the social aspect of the event.

**Figure 4. Words appearing most frequently in the 2020 survey in response to the question 'What did you do on World Book Day, and what did you like best?'**



**“I absolutely loved World Book Day ...I honestly waited for [it] all year round to dress up!”**

For many schools, families and children, World Book Day is synonymous with dressing up, and more than half (55%) of children's comments mentioned dressing up as their favourite aspect of the day. As well as finding dressing up fun, children's comments indicated that it had benefits for their imagination and could even inspire wider reading:

“I absolutely loved World Book Day, I loved wearing a costume and dressing up as my favourite characters! I honestly waited for [it] all year round to dress up.”

“I loved dressing up [on] World Book Day and feeling like a special character from a great book.”

“I enjoyed most playing with my friends acting as our characters.”

“When people dressed up as different characters, it made me want to read more books.”

“I saw their characters and was like ‘his character looks cool’ which makes me want to read the book and see if the book was good.”

However, it is important to note that not all children enjoyed dressing up on World Book Day, preferring to focus on reading-related activities. Indeed, 3 in 10 comments related to activities such as book swaps, author visits and other creative ways of celebrating reading:

“I don't like dressing up on World Book Day.”

“At school, it's always a competition who has the best outfit - the kids with more money to spend have always better costumes. I think World Book Day should be about reading and not about dress up.”

“At school we had an author come in and talk about his new book, we heard the first chapter and asked him some questions! I loved it!”

**“I liked when we got to buy new incredible books!”**

Increasing book ownership is an essential aim of World Book Day, and research shows that this can have many benefits for children. For example, children who have a book of their own are three times more likely to read above the level expected for their age (12.0% vs 4.2% - see [Clark & Picton, 2018](#)).

3 in 5 (61.4%) of survey respondents remembered getting a World Book Day token, which can be exchanged for a World Book Day title or a discount on another book or audiobook. Of children who'd received a token, just over a quarter (26.3%) said they'd used it to choose a World Book Day book and just over a third (35.1%) said they'd put it towards the cost of another book. Free-text comments indicated that World Book Day tokens were regarded highly by many children and that being able to keep a book had been a favourite part of World Book Day for many respondents:

“I like getting the vouchers... and I also liked getting the free books from World Book Day.”

“On World Book Day I looked and read new books and I loved the fact that I got new books.”

“I liked when we got to buy new incredible books!”

**“It made me feel happy because everyone was doing it!”**

A thematic analysis of comments showed that having a regular day in the year to celebrate reading created a sense of anticipation for many children, provided keen readers with reinforcement and added an important social element to books and reading:

“I feel as though if you have a set day in the world where it’s World Book Day – it just helps you to concentrate on reading and you want to feel good like that every day so you try reading more often.”

“World Book Day made me feel very excited.”

“It was an amazing day where you could celebrate reading and I absolutely love reading.”

“It made me feel happy because everyone was doing it!”

Indeed, in keeping with the World Book Day campaign theme of sharing stories, enjoying the opportunity to take part in social reading practices such as discussing favourite titles was highlighted by many children:

“I like how people shared their favourite book which made me discover many new and different authors.”

“[I] dressed up as an astronaut and shared with my classmates my favourite book about the solar system.”

**“World Book Day made me want to move out of my comfort zone and read or try reading things I have never wanted or tried reading before.”**

Indeed, after comments on activities such as dressing up and exchanging tokens for books, the strongest theme emerging from children's recollections of World Book Day was the extent to which it introduced them to new authors, titles and genres:

“World Book Day let us see how many different types of books there were for grabs and that made me very excited.”

“World Book Day made me want to move out of my comfort zone and read or try reading things I have never wanted or tried reading before.”

“I liked when we were in school to exchange different genres and types of books for free – it was like entering a goldmine.”

## Engaging reluctant readers

**“It helped me because I used to dislike reading but when World Book Day happened I LOVED IT.”**

As part of the survey, participants recorded their reading enjoyment levels, which allowed us to explore comments from those who reported lower levels of reading enjoyment. Several children in this group indicated that World Book Day had helped them to re-engage with books, often as their experiences had emphasised fun:

“World Book Day was an extremely fun day where everyone got to choose a new book to try out and from then I started to like reading much more.”

“I think World Book Day doesn't help you read better or more, it's to remind you how fun it is to read. Not to force you but to encourage you.”

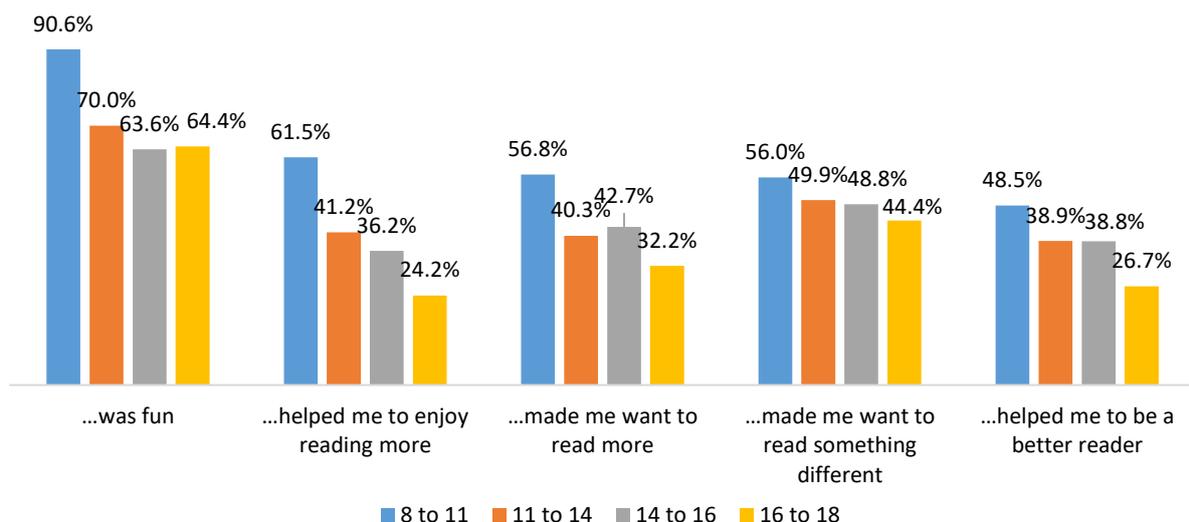
“It helped me because I used to dislike reading but when World Book Day happened I LOVED IT.”

## A brief focus on World Book Day and age

Survey questions also allowed us to compare responses between children of primary school age (8 to 11-year-olds, the focus of this study) and secondary school age (11 to 18-year-olds). Children in the youngest age group were more likely to remember taking part in World Book Day activities, with 84.0% of 8 to 11-year-olds saying they had compared with 53.5% of 11 to 14-year-olds and 38.3% of 14 to 16-year-olds. Perhaps reflecting the increased likelihood of having taken part in World Book Day events, more children aged 8 to 11 also agreed with all the attitudinal statements presented to them as part of the survey (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: World Book Day, age and attitudinal statements**

World Book Day...



Indeed, there is a 20 percentage point (pp) gap between children aged 8 to 11 and other age groups who felt World Book Day was fun and that it helped them enjoy reading more. The gap was narrower concerning agreement that World Book Day making them want to read

more, read something different or that it had helped them be a better reader. While it is heartening to see that children and young people of different ages are almost equally as likely to agree that World Book Day encouraged them to try reading something different, it is unfortunate that the 'fun' aspects of the event, and its influence on reading enjoyment and motivation, decline significantly as children move from primary to secondary school.

**“I started reading new books as a result of World Book Day.”**

Open-text responses shed some light on the reasons behind these statistics. For example, younger children were more likely to share enthusiastic memories of the activities they'd enjoyed on the day. Older students were more likely to express a sense of nostalgia for the fun they'd had when in primary school. Indeed, many older survey respondents chose to share their memories of taking part in World Book Day events as younger children. It was clear that these events had played a memorable and meaningful part in many young people's reading experiences growing up and had often had a positive impact on their reading engagement:

“In primary school we would all dress up ...and take turns reading each other's books. Everyone went home wanting a new book. We should do more at secondary school.”

“We don't do anything in secondary ...but I wish we would ...I really want to change this because honestly I live for World Book Day.”

“My favourite World Book Day was when I was in Year 6 and was chosen to go to Manchester Airport and meet authors and I got one to sign my book.”

“I got to meet my favourite childhood author and it means a lot. I started reading new books as a result of World Book Day.”

### **Summary of findings from first lockdown survey**

Findings from the Annual Literacy Survey 2020 and the first phase of the qualitative research indicate that World Book Day holds an influential place in many children's reading lives. The tokens they received and books they chose helping them to feel a valued part of the world of books and reading. Focus groups also showed that these books were shared widely in the children's homes and schools, indicating that the event's impact lasted well beyond the day itself.

The second phase of the research provided a deeper insight into the breadth of impact of this celebratory reading event on many children. From the anticipation of waiting "all year round" to dress up (and indeed, to see other's costumes) to feeling encouraged and confident to "try reading things [they] had never wanted to or tried reading before", World Book Day gives children the chance to discover and develop as readers, and the social aspects of the day also play a significant role in its success. It is also clear from older children's comments that memories of World Book Day are long lasting, with some young people able to remember changes in their reading behaviour because of past World Book Day events.

The essential role that reading engagement plays in supporting children's reading achievement is well documented (see, e.g. [Barber & Klauda, 2020](#)). However, our annual surveys of children and young people document a downward trend in reading enjoyment since 2014 ([Clark, 2019](#)). Campaigns and events that can be seen to have a positive impact on participants' feelings about reading are therefore of even greater importance in current times. Children's comments suggest that the multiple strands of World Book Day (such as the token, books, fun activities and time and space to explore reading socially with peers) have a cumulative impact on children's reading motivation and practice and can both establish and grow a nascent interest in reading, even in disengaged readers. In the words of one such child, "World Book Day was an extremely fun day where everyone got to choose a new book to try out and from then I started to like reading much more."

### **Phase 3: World Book Day and children's reading in early 2021**

When the research began, we could not have anticipated the momentous events of the planned time span. However, as our wider research indicated<sup>13</sup>, many children found additional time to read and a revived interest in reading for enjoyment during the first period of school closures. The final phase of the research echoed the second phase, including five questions (quantitative and qualitative) about World Book Day in a national survey of children and young people. Taking place more than six months after the initial survey, the survey received 42,502 responses between January and March 2021, of which 34,451 children and young people aged 8 to 18 answered questions about World Book Day. Of these, 2,389 were from primary schools. Due to the timing of this survey, most children referred to their experiences of World Book Day in the previous year. However, some responded after World Book Day 2021, when the event coincided with a lockdown period.

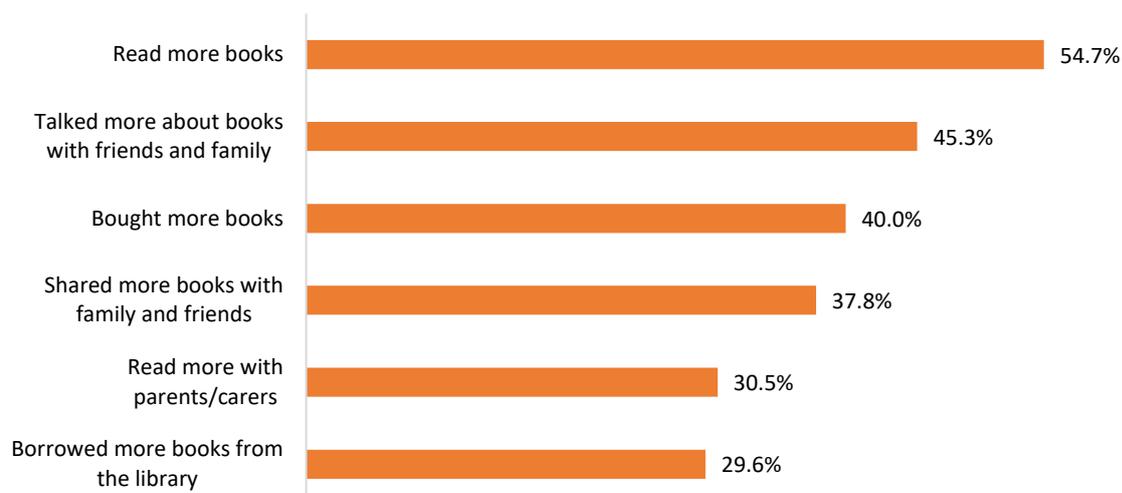
Overall, almost all (96.9%) children and young people had heard of World Book Day, and nearly 2 in 3 (64.8%) had taken part in a World Book Day event or activity. This rose to 81.8% for those in primary schools.

Those who had participated in World Book Day activities were also asked whether taking part had changed their reading. As shown in Figure 6, over 1 in 2 of those in primary school said that they had read more books as a result of taking part in World Book Day activities. Additionally, World Book Day seems to have created a more social reading environment for these children as nearly 1 in 2 had also talked more about books with family and friends, and over 1 in 3 had shared more books with their family and friends. Overall, 3 in 10 also said that they had read more with their parents/carers. Finally, World Book Day also appeared to have stimulated more interest in reading, with 2 in 5 saying that they had bought more books and 3 in 10 saying they had borrowed books from their library.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-reading-in-2020-before-and-during-the-covid-19-lockdown/>

**Figure 6: Primary children’s perceptions of World Book Day’s impact on their own reading habits in 2021**



We asked children and young people if the book they chose with the World Book Day token this year was the first book they had owned. 1 in 7 (13.2%) said that it was, with this rising to nearly 1 in 5 (18.8%) for those who receive free school meals.

As in phase 2 of the research, children and young people who told us that they remembered taking part in World Book Day were invited to tell us more about what they did and what they liked best. As this survey was conducted between early January and late March 2021, most respondents commented on World Book Day from the previous year. However, some children referred to World Book Day in early March 2021, which fell during a period when schools remained closed to most children<sup>14</sup>.

Broadly speaking, the words appearing most frequently in children’s reflections about World Book Day in our 2021 survey were similar to those most used in phase 2 of the research, in 2020 (see **Figure 7**; see also Figure 4).

<sup>14</sup> In 2021, schools re-opened for all pupils in [England](#) on March 8, in [Scotland](#) and [Wales](#) in April



**“I read a book I have never read, and I really liked it and it was very fun to read and very interesting.”**

When asked about what they did on World Book Day and what they enjoyed about it, aspects relating to fun activities are often uppermost in children's minds. However, it is encouraging to note the extent to which books play a central role in children's enjoyment of the day. Reinforcing findings from the previous phase of the research, many comments from the 2021 survey indicate that World Book Day is a key date in the calendar when children know they will have a much-anticipated chance to choose a book from an already-favourite author or will be able and encouraged to explore a variety of books:

**“I always like waiting for the list of books coming out for World Book Day, as it gives me something to look forward to when some of my favourite authors are releasing a new book.”**

**“What I liked the best was when we got to choose the books, I got what I had in mind to get.”**

**“I liked looking at various different books. I also liked to hear about different books from around the globe.”**

Trying something new could result in the discovery of a new favourite author or series, leading to further reading:

**“I got one of my favourite books from the World Book Day token.”**

**“I liked picking new books, I found one I'm really into.”**

**“I read a book I have never read, and I really liked it and it was very fun to read and very interesting.”**

**“I got *The Wizards of Once* about a year ago, and I loved it so much that I got the next book.”**

Reflecting findings from our research into diversity and children and young people's reading in 2020<sup>16</sup>, some children were also keen to find books that matched their interests and personal experience:

**“I looked for some books about similar things to me.”**

**“I liked that ...if you were lucky you would be able to find a book about someone who was in the same situation as you.”**

**“I liked picking out my book with the book token.”**

As in both the focus group discussions and subsequent surveys, comments in 2021 indicated that children highly valued the tokens they received on World Book Day. Comments suggested that children appreciate that their token allows them to choose the book they want

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<sup>16</sup> <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/diversity-and-children-and-young-peoples-reading-in-2020/>

to read and to keep it. At the same time, for some, the associated opportunity to visit a bookshop is another meaningful aspect of the initiative:

**“I loved the World Book Day tokens.”**

**“I [like] when you get a free book and do not have to give it back.”**

**“I liked picking out my book with the book token.”**

**“I liked the fact that we could go into more bookstores than usual, and be able to use book tokens.”**

**“My mum takes me to Lingham’s to use my book token.”**

**“I liked best that I found out about new writers and new books.”**

Alongside exposure to new titles, authors and series, data from large-scale surveys and focus groups clearly show that World Book Day supports and extends children's reading beyond the day itself by providing children with time and space to talk about books and reading. As noted in the focus groups, children in this age group value the opinions of their peers, and World Book Day events importantly give children a chance to hear and share book recommendations with their friends and classmates. Indeed, giving and getting new ideas for books to read was a favourite aspect of the day mentioned by almost as many children as dressing up:

**“...I dressed up as Lenka from *Two Sides* by Polly Ho-Yen. Since this is not a very popular book, I told everyone all about it and recommend it to everyone.”**

**“We spoke about our favourite writer and our favourite book. I liked best that I found out about new writers and new books.”**

**“I like how you can be whoever you want, and you get to be in that character’s shoes.”**

The third phase of the research also provided further new insights into children's perspectives on activities such as dressing up. It was interesting to note that, alongside other children's costumes providing reading inspiration (also mentioned in phase 2), several comments suggest that dressing up offers children an opportunity to reflect on their reading, and in particular, the book characters that had inspired them:

**“I dressed up and it was fun to see which characters I know or don’t and then read about them.”**

**“I dress up as a character who has inspired me or has made me see something for the better.”**

**“Becoming a character that I admire (Hermione Granger)”**

A further strong theme coming through in the 2021 survey was the role of dressing up in supporting imagination and self-expression, with comments showing how dressing as a book character could enrich children’s engagement with the world of books and stories:

“I like the fact that you can dress up as characters the way you imagine them.”

“Personally, I love the idea of dressing up as your favourite book characters as you can express yourself by doing so.”

“I dressed [as] Billionaire Boy, it was fun choosing my character. I loved that book that’s why I chose it.”

“I liked that on World Book Day ...I get to find out what people enjoy reading. I dressed up as Mrs. Trunchbull ...it was fun to be in their personality for a day.”

“I like how you can be whoever you want, and you get to be in that character’s shoes, e.g., if you were a superhero then that would mean you would be superior.”

### “I loved dressing up into different *Marvel* characters for a TikTok”

Another interesting feature of children’s comments on favourite parts of World Book Day in the 2021 survey were the number relating to activities referencing aspects of popular and global culture. Comments mentioned well-known character brands, concepts such as ‘cosplay’, TV series (such as *The Great British Bake Off* and *The Masked Singer*) and video sharing apps, and often also included multi and transmedia elements:

“I loved dressing up into different *Marvel* characters for a TikTok.”

“On World Book Day, I cosplayed as Roronoa Zoro from *One Piece*. What I liked best was comparing cosplays with my friends.”

“I couldn’t dress up this year but I would have got into cosplay of Shoto Todoroki from *UA*.”

“I’m thinking of dressing up as a manga/ anime character but I’m not yet sure. I would love to have my favourite manga, it would be amazing!”

“My favourite part of the day was the Emoji Quiz<sup>17</sup>.”

“*Great Bookish Bake Off* at school.”

“At school we have an annual book quiz when we dress up as our favourite book character, and this year, ‘Masked Reader’, where the children need to guess which teacher is under the mask reading.”

“I dressed as the Blueberry from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* – I made a Flipgrid<sup>18</sup> on what I was.”

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<sup>17</sup> Children had to guess book titles based on emojis

<sup>18</sup> A video discussion platform (see <https://info.flipgrid.com/>).

“I made *Top Trumps* cards using book characters.”

Such comments illustrate how, while books are at its centre, World Book Day activities evolve and are re-invented to incorporate popular culture and, in this way, remain relevant within the expansive 'ecosystem' of leisure activities available to children and young people today. By connecting and relating books to other media and favourite ways of spending leisure time, activities associated with popular culture may help ensure that reading is thought of as an integral part of children's leisure time, rather than a mainly school-related activity.

### **World Book Day under lockdown**

As mentioned earlier, the timing of the third phase of the research meant that some children reflected on World Book Day 2021, which took place during a period of lockdown and school closures. A handful of comments indicated that, unfortunately, some children had not been able to take part in World Book Day activities at all, for example:

“I didn't do much this year because of COVID as well I didn't want to.”

“We weren't at school for it so we didn't do anything - I forgot it was about this year.”

“I actually did not do anything for World Book Day because ...my mum did not know ...what to do and where to find where you buy the books, and I was planning on getting *There's a Wolf In Your Book*.”

However, these comments were the exception. Many other children shared how their schools had managed to devise creative responses to help children mark World Book Day despite school closures, including everything from dressing teddies and potatoes as favourite book characters to building cosy 'reading dens' at home. Families also enjoyed sharing reading time as part of home-schooling, and, where children responding to the survey had been attending school, they were often enthusiastic about efforts made to hold whole-school and cross-curricular activities:

“I enjoyed it but I didn't dress up as much as last year. I made a very good potato.”

“The best thing that I did is dress up and show everybody my costume and on home-schooling I read books with my brother.”

“Our teachers organised some very fun activities for us like Macbeth meets Maths.”

“There was a Harry Potter meal in the cafeteria.”

“On World Book Day, I like how you don't really have to do maths or English and if we do have to, it's fun and it's got something to do with story characters.”

**“We built a reading den and we also watched a live assembly and me and my sisters wrote a book together.”**

Reflecting common approaches to remote teaching during school closures, another key feature of World Book Day described by children in our 2021 survey was the blend of digital and non-digital activities that children enjoyed. This often included using online platforms to share stories, quizzes and author videos:

“I read a book online and in real life.”

“We saw five authors or illustrators who showed us their tips and tutorials. I loved it when we saw Michael Rosen's video - it was funny!”

“[I liked] the MC Grammar song”

“We built a reading den and we also watched a live assembly and me and my sisters wrote a book together.”

“I dressed up in lockdown and sent a photo ...to my teachers on Seesaw<sup>19</sup>.”

“We read picture books on Teams and talked about which books we liked as a child.”

“We were on a Zoom meeting and wrote our own books which was really fun - we even got a video of Katherine Rundell.”

## Summary and discussion

Over the last three years, our series of focus groups and surveys have allowed an increasingly rich and varied picture of the place and value of World Book Day in the reading lives of children in the UK to emerge. By exploring different themes and aspects of book ownership and reading engagement at each time point using quantitative and qualitative approaches, we have developed a comprehensive sense of how World Book Day aligns with children's broader reading experiences and its impact on reading attitudes and behaviour.

Our latest survey indicates that around 3 in 5 (62.4%)[20] UK children aged 8 to 11 enjoy reading, and it was clear that reading plays an important role in the lives of most of the children in our focus groups. These children told us that they enjoy reading as it helps them to relax, to imagine other lives and to think about what they might like to do in the future. Children's perspectives on how World Book Day might complement these aspects of reading suggest it primarily supports reading engagement by evoking a strong sense of books being for everyone. The children we spoke with attended schools in disadvantaged areas. While most had access to books they could borrow, some lacked access to a public library, several had never visited a bookshop, and most were concerned about the cost of books for their parents. As one child said, when they get their World Book Day book, "I just want to treasure it, because I never get things that are new."

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<sup>19</sup> A classroom app

However, perhaps of equal importance is the sense that many of the other experiences around reading help new readers feel part of the world of books, and that books are for everyone. These include choosing and buying a book for yourself, owning that book and therefore being able to decide to reread it or share it with friends, enjoying social events celebrating the fun of reading and taking part in discussions with peers about your favourite books and book characters. The value of these experiences should not be underestimated. The volume of comments on this theme shows that many children associate World Book Day with dedicated time to think, reflect upon and talk about reading with each other. The ideas and inspiration gained from these discussions last well beyond the event itself. Often happening at a pivotal point in developing children's reading identities, these experiences may be seen as essential rites of passage in becoming an autonomous and independent reader. Children's comments show how World Book Day supports them directly – in the words of one child, "It made me feel happy because everyone was doing it!"

Indeed, the social and cultural aspects of World Book Day provide children with positive, regular and familiar experiences around books and reading, and for many, a happy sense of anticipation and excitement ahead of the event itself. This was particularly important in relation to the events of 2020 and 2021 when schools were closed to most pupils and libraries, and bookshops were also closed for extended periods. Our wider research indicated that many children rediscovered a love of reading during this time. For these children, World Book Day provided essential extra reading material – as one child said, "I mostly enjoyed picking a book I wanted to read because this year I have read more than I ever have."

Other themes of the final phase of the research in early 2021 also reflected trends from the past year. For example, the growing use of 'blended' (digital and non-digital) learning during the lockdown was also seen in many World Book Day activities, such as sharing stories or watching author videos online. Interestingly, in the most recent survey many comments about World Book Day activities linked to popular culture. This may suggest that recurrent explorations of the role of World Book Day in children's reading lives may be an effective way of identifying evolving trends that keep books and reading a relevant part of children's leisure time. Taken together, findings from this research indicate that World Book Day has an essential role to play in helping children to feel part of the world of reading, and to feel that reading is part of their world.

## 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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