Educational Research for Policy and Practice
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-026-09419-z

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Literacy support in England: comparing policy and practice for children from marginalised communities

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Received: 2 August 2025 / Accepted: 6 March 2026
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Abstract
In this paper, we explore how literacy support for children from marginalised communities is expressed at policy level, and how this translates to the classroom. Focusing specifically on children who have been labelled as either "EAL" (English as an Additional Language) or "SEND" (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities), we explore the impact of these labels as part of children's positioning and identities within schools. In critically juxtapositioning policy and the extant research literature, supported by our own body of work, we identify commonalities and discrepancies in the ways in which children's literacy support needs might be expressed and enacted within the realm of inclusive pedagogy that benefits all. As researchers, we adopt co-produced methods in our research, and in drawing together conceptual and methodological threads, we suggest that the power of the label itself will need to be considered alongside literacy support, to disrupt inequalities and produce asset-based approaches to literacy support across contexts in England and beyond.

Keywords Multilingualism · Literacy · EAL · SEND · England · Identity

1 Introduction and background: "literacy" in England

In the United Kingdom, education policy is decided at nation state level, meaning that England, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland each have their own ways to govern education, including literacy support. England's education system, like that of most nations globally, is governed by a desire to support children in gaining a certain set of key skills and knowledge as part of their childhood, with "literacy" being part of this desire. With the term "literacy" being used liberally (and often uncritically), we begin our paper with a brief exploration of literacy and approaches to literacy in the England context. Street (1995) describes the *autonomous model of literacy* as a definition that focuses on developing the necessary skills for

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Published online: 25 March 2026

reading and writing. This model is tempting, as it paves the way for performative thinking, bringing with it measurable outcomes, testability, international comparability, and related concepts such as the "word gap", which triggers its own necessary problematisation (see e.g. Cushing, 2023). In juxtaposition to the autonomous model of literacy, the *ideological model of literacy* (Street, 1995) conceptualises literacy as socially constructed, embodied, and relational, encouraging critical engagement with discourses around power and dominance. As Kiramba (2017) argues, the very concept of "literacy" can only be made relevant by ignoring the ubiquitous literacies pupils bring to the classroom. In an effort to draw attention to alternative forms of literacy, several researchers have sought to trouble and critique the terminology, with much of the work coming from the fields of languages education/multilingualism, and critical disability studies, respectively. Bailey (2023), for example, uses the term "neurodivergent literacies" to refer to autistic adults' "ruling passions" as part of literacy studies. The field of new literacies further expands and troubles conceptualisations of the singular "literacy" by engaging critically with traditional and emergent technologies, multimodality, and situated meaning making (Burnett et al., 2014). In this paper, then, we approach the concept of literacy from an inclusive and multimodal paradigm, even though this does not necessarily align with the relevant policy context, as we will see. We draw on and analyse policy relevant to the education of a) multilingual children, and b) children with special educational needs and disabilities, to contribute to this special issue an overview of the English context. Our paper specifically addresses two research questions: 1) How are multilingual children, and children with special educational needs, positioned in the English policy context, and 2) How do children themselves position literacy support needs against this policy background. This paper, then, focuses on examples from our own work and the wider literature, proposing theory-grounded, practice-focused ideas that facilitate literacy support for pupils from marginalised backgrounds—specifically, disabled pupils, and pupils who are multilingual. By drawing on our own work and extant literature, we deliberately trouble the positioning of these children as having "problems" or "issues", and instead suggest that the very act of labelling needs to be considered alongside that of literacy support, to avoid negative impact on children.

It goes beyond the boundaries of this paper to offer a full history of methodologies employed in the teaching of reading in England, and authors have extensively commented on literacy and the teaching of reading and writing in schools (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022), and at home (Nutbrown et al., 2016). The phonics screening check has been in place since 2012, and remains compulsory for all children aged 5–6 years old, while statutory SATs (Standard Assessment Tests) take place at the end of Year 2 (~age 7) and the end of Year 6 (~age 11). These tests, and especially the phonics screening check, have been critiqued extensively (Carter, 2020; Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). Teachers' views that the assessment is driving the curriculum (Carter, 2020) are common, and schools' standard language ideologies are being challenged (Cushing, 2021). A government-funded report three years into the test found that the phonics screening check had no discernable impact on reading and writing (Walker et al., 2015), and international research has problematised the issues that present themselves when monolingual tests are used to assess multilingual children (Altman et al., 2022).

Following the above brief overview over the education policy system in England, we turn to a deeper exploration of two groups of "labelled" children within this system, namely children labelled as having special educational needs (SEND), and children labelled as having English as an additional language (EAL). While we are aware that multilingual and

disabled children are but two of the many facets that may impact on a child's marginalisation in the context of education and literacy support, we predominantly draw on these two aspects due to our respective expertise.Taking each of these labels in turn, we provide a more detailed overview of relevant policy and practice, specifically in relation to literacy support, before, in the conclusion, drawing on emerging theories around literacy support that come from inclusive pedagogy backgrounds.

2 What's in a name? exploring terminology, policy and practice around educating marginalised children

To facilitate a broader critique, and as a juxtaposition to the practice section later in the paper, it is worth considering how multilingual and disabled children—often labelled EAL and SEND respectively—are framed in the policy discourse. Before exploring disability labelling in more depth, we are keen to recognise that whilst our central focus here is disabled children, not all children labelled as having Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) are disabled, and vice versa—despite the literature often categorising SEND students as "disabled" and non-SEND students as "nondisabled" (e.g. Azpitarte & Holt, 2024; Hamilton & Matthews, 2025). Nevertheless, disability models and associated literature provide a useful lens through which to view SEND labelling in relation to literacy support in schools. For example, coming from a philosophical stance similar to the *ideological model of literacy*, the *social model of disability* rejects homogenous and simple definitions, instead viewing disability as "a socially produced injustice which it is possible to challenge and eliminate through radical social change" (Lawson & Beckett, 2020, p. 349). It explicitly challenges the precursory medical model of disability which, in relation to childhood education, implies that disability is something to be cured or solved (see Haegele and Hodge, 2016). The social model of disability itself is not beyond critique—for example it has been argued that it "does not engage with [the] embodied experience" of disability (Owens, 2014, p. 389)—but it has been successful to some extent in emphasising how society can become more inclusive of and accessible to disabled people, rather than problematically focusing on how disabled people could change and adapt to fit within normative structures of education.

This brings us to the 'Special Educational Needs' label itself, a term which has become "common currency in the UK education system" since the publication of the The Warnock Report—otherwise known as The Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People (DES, 1978)—by the UK's Department of Education and Science (now known as the Department for Education) in the late 1970s (Runswick-Cole and Hodge, 2009, p. 198). Black (2019) tells us that the definition of whether a person has (or does not have) Special Educational Needs is legally enshrined, pointing to Part 3, Sect. 20 of the Children and Families Act (2014): "A child or young person has special educational needs if he or she has a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her". The use of the "Special Educational Needs" (SEN[1]) label in UK schools presents us with "dilemmas of difference" (Norwich, 2009). Similarly, Runswick-Cole and N. Hodge have argued that "the language of 'special

[1] We have purposely referred to 'SEN' rather than 'SEND' here as this literature predates the formal integration of Disabilities within SEND support, which was introduced by The Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations (2014).

educational needs' within current policy and legislation continues to locate the 'problem' within the child" (2009, p. 198). There are parallels here to the positioning of multilingual and linguistically diverse children, which, as Cummins (2003) argues, are often viewed as "problems to be solved" (p. 65), and the most recent literature still shows that an asset model around multilingualism is lacking (Cunningham & Little, 2023; Leung et al., 2021).

The ongoing struggle related to framing multilingual children in the educational discourse is somewhat surprising, bearing in mind that, fifty years ago, the Bullock report "A Language for Life" offered an exciting glimpse into a potential policy future for multilingualism in England. The report explains that.

> *No child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he [sic] crosses the school threshold, nor to live and act as though school and home represent two totally separate and different cultures which have to be kept firmly apart.*
>
> (DES, Bullock Report, 1975, p. 286).

Ten years later, the Swann report (DES, 1985) points out that "a large British bilingual population is an asset and a resource, which ought to be welcomed and exploited" (p. 180). The report critiques the contemporary governmental consultative paper Foreign Languages in the School Curriculum (APU, 1985), calling for a "radical reappraisal of language policies" (ibid) to include pupils' mother tongues as recognised languages in language learning provision, and facilitating pupils in studying them.

Focusing on support for multilingual and disabled children in England's policy context, Hodkinson and Burch's (2019) analytical reading of the 2014 Children and Families Act and the associated 2015 SEND Code of Practice, identifies an overreliance on three key words—"support" (used 775 times in the SEND CoP), "employment/work/training" (431 times) and "independence" (122 times). They conclude that the report reproduces a "master narrative of disability" which "transforms a population into future workers and is nothing more than a measure of capital" (Hodkinson & Burch, 2019, pp. 161–169). Ten years on from its inception, implementation of the SEND CoP's guidance—which also notably extended SEND provision "from birth to 25 years of age"—continues to be viewed as "unattainable for many educational professionals as the adequate level of special educational support is not currently in place to enable educational professionals to apply the guidance to their practice" (Last & Su, 2025, pp. 2–13). Focusing specifically on how pupils labelled as having Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) receive literacy support in schools, the fact that SEND pupils are being more commonly taught by Teaching Assistants compared to their non-SEND peers (see CFE Research, 2024, p. 2) has raised concern. It has recently been claimed that "the time spent away from the teacher who is trained to design and deliver quality learning" may potentially "limit an individual's access to a quality education" (Porrino et al., 2024, pp. 1–2).

For multilingual children, the combined body of research leads us to conclude that, when the English national curriculum speaks about "literacy development", it does so with, linguistically speaking, seven silent letters preceding the term "literacy". In much of the policy sources cited throughout this paper, these seven silent letters, spelling "ENGLISH" are nevertheless pervasive in the way they permeate research, policy, and practice. Against a backdrop of immense pressures on teachers to meet targets across all age groups, it is not

surprising that a certain "inert benevolence" (Cunningham & Little, 2023) has developed. This inert benevolence might be visible via a generic positioning of multilingualism as positive, or even a "superpower", but a curriculum discourse that enforces (English) language and (English) literacy development—again, like the "k" in "knowledge" or the "p" in "pterodactyl", the "English" is silent, but present.

In summary, and as an end-point to our excursion into policy, it is worth pointing out that it is very much in living memory that children who speak a language other than English at home were "lumped in" with the wider "special educational needs" label, with the SEN Code of Practice of 2001 being the first one to clearly state:

> *Children must not be regarded as having a learning difficulty solely because the language or form of language of their home is different from the language in which they will be taught.*
>
> (DfES, 2001, 1:3)

Although there is now a clear distinction, where "SEND" no longer forms an uncritical umbrella term for "EAL" children, history shows us that current terminology is problematic and steeped in historical (mis)understanding, leading us to briefly explore ongoing discussions for new terminologies.

2.1 Care-with-language in policy and practice

The language used to describe multilingual and/or disabled children in educational discourse is not value free, and a variety of labels have been historically applied, as well as comprehensively critiqued elsewhere (Cunningham, 2019). Without wanting to repeat this critique, it is worth pointing out that many definitions imply a segregation or hierarchy among the various languages spoken by the child, which typically "others", marginalises or minoritises the language that is not dominant in the wider society. Care-with-language (Little, 2025) is therefore vital when it comes to finding ways to facilitating discourse about certain groups of individuals. The EAL label, although now broadening in scope, draws on a history of deficit discourse, linguistically foregrounding English as the major focal language. Whilst this is understandable from an educational and school perspective, it effectively silences accomplishments in home, heritage or community languages, pointing towards where the perceived "problem" lies. In the last few years, the term "emergent multilingual" has risen in popularity across the globe, offering a label that is free from English-dominant discourse (see e.g. Linares, 2025; Shelton et al., 2025).

One prominent call for a name change to replace the term "Special Educational Needs" emerged in the late 2000s:

> *Building on the work of early years educators in the Reggio Emilia schools in northern Italy, we advocate for the abandonment of the phrase 'special educational needs' and for the adoption of the phrase 'educational rights'. We suggest that the impact of such a linguistic turn would be significant for the lives of all children, and, in particular, for those currently described as having 'special educational needs'.*

(Runswick-Cole and N. Hodge, 2009, p. 198)

The rationale behind this name change stemmed from the belief that the focus of educators and policymakers should not be on "an individual child's perceived deficits", but rather, "what can be done to facilitate children's learning" (Runswick-Cole and Hodge, 2009, p. 201)—echoing a key tenet of Critical Disability Studies literature (see Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). The parallel development of querying, questioning, and troubling terminology highlights a dual contemporary focus that fits with Glissant's (1990) postcolonial and poststructural arguments—on the one hand, a move away from an anglo-centric deficit model towards a plural linguistic identity, on the other, a justice-informed approach that repositions children's "needs" as fundamental "rights". In the following, we will explore more concretely how literacy support plays out in the classroom.

3 Literacy support for disabled and multilingual children in the classroom

Moving from policy to practice, for multilingual children, the concept of translanguaging (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020; García & Kleifgen, 2020) has helped with ushering in a change in pedagogical philosophy as well as practice, where children's multiple languages are viewed and supported as part of their full linguistic repertoire in the classroom (Otheguy et al., 2015). Translanguaging as a concept is rooted in social justice approaches to linguistic diversity, rejecting, monoglossic, "standard", and "additive" ideologies of languaging and multilingualism in favour of an equitable plurality (García & Otheguy, 2020), arguing that children ought to be supported in learning through all their languages, or rather more accurately, question the concept of individual languages in the first place (Otheguy, 2015). In England, a variety of research projects have focused on translanguaging and literacy. Costley and Leung (2020) propose a more collaborative practice between EAL and MFL (modern foreign languages) teachers, in order to fill gaps in teachers' understanding and support a multilingual mindset among staff, so that they may support pupils accordingly. Translanguaging practices have also been explored within the context of deaf college students in England by Iturriaga and Young (2022), who conclude that they facilitate "deaf students to question teachers, produce common understanding or debate points of views with others, reflecting the benefits of linguistic flexibility […] and partially fulfilling the dialogic requirements for developing cognitive flexibility and complex reasoning" (p. 107). In fact, representing members of the d/Deaf community is a prime example for the complexity related to labels, and related support. Ryan's work with d/Deaf adults around the sociocultural implications of inaccessible film captions (i.e. Bramley et al., 2025) has illustrated the importance of marginalised people not being assigned a label that does not relate to their personal identity. Whilst deafness is considered a disability under the 2010 Equality Act, many d/Deaf people do not consider themselves disabled. Indeed, Ryan's research worked with adults who identified as "Deaf" with a capital "D"—"because they all identified as culturally and prelingually Deaf" (Bramley et al., 2025). Notably, the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) treads this line with care in their guidance page on the Equality Act:

> *If you are deaf or have hearing loss or tinnitus that fits this definition, you will have rights under the Act, even if you don't think of yourself as being disabled.*
>
> (RNID, 2021, para. 8)

While translanguaging is a long way away from being adopted at national level, some encouraging successes point towards an increasing interest in embracing multilingual pedagogies. Recently, Sabine's (Little, 2024) work on multilingual rivers of reading, a methodology that supports pupils in considering and talking about reading in all their languages, has been adopted by the nation's largest annual literacy event, "World Book Day", with the relevant resource being shared with all schools and libraries in the country. The approach embodies artifactual literacy practices, which facilitate making multiliteracies visible, and create a chronological piece of work that invites children to consider what reading is "important" to them, forming a springboard for further discussion and learning. Crucially, the inclusion of this resource within the World Book Day campaign further highlights how literacy support can take into account multilingual children as part of holistic inclusive teaching practice.

Whilst our article has focused primarily on the context of England, it is important to note that Special Educational Needs labelling has been presented as problematic in a variety of international primary education settings, including Vietnam (Thuy Luong et al., 2023), Germany (Menze et al., 2023), Australia (Porta & Todd, 2023), and New Zealand (Newbury & Eagle, 2025). As Kashikar et al. (2024) found in their experimental study with special and mainstream education teachers, labelling associated with SEND can have a negative impact on teachers' expectations of student outcomes for SEND-labelled pupils. Focusing specifically on the use of the 'Learning Disability' label, this research further found that the expected student outcomes from special education teachers was lower than that of mainstream teachers—a finding the researchers attribute to the notion that "students with an LD [Learning Disability] are low achievers by definition" (Kashikar et al., 2024, p. 707). Additionally, children from particular minoritised ethnic backgrounds, such as pupils Black Caribbean heritage, are over-identified as SEND (Demetriou, 2022)—whereas others, such as pupils of Asian heritage, are under-identified (Hutchinson et al., 2025). Whilst multiple explanations have been offered for the over- or under-identification of SEND amongst pupils from particular ethnic backgrounds, there is a general consensus that teacher bias—or rather, the way that teachers position particular pupils—is a significant factor (see Strand & Lindorff, 2018, pp. 19–20). When it comes to literacy support in particular, it is not surprising that the extant literature primarily focuses on pupils whose disability may be in direct juxtaposition to curricular expectations, e.g. disabilities related to language processing, and/or speech and language development (Snowling et al., 2016). Focusing on the label of dyslexia, Knight and Crick (2021) highlight systemic inequalities, with white middle-class parents being most likely to leverage economic and social capital to access both a diagnosis and subsequent support (Reay, 2005). Although we do not focus on socioeconomic status specifically in our paper, this shows that access to literacy support can be hampered by multiple marginalisation, due to complex hegemonic discourses that make any one child's developmental journey necessarily opaque (Glissant, 1990). Research literature from English classroom contexts highlights that assigning a label itself—whether that label is SEND or EAL—may have a variety of consequences, not all of them positive. Instead, inclusive teaching practice that explicitly focuses on foregrounding and taking into account margin-

alised children's skills and strengths, speaks to a meaningful, asset-based approach that need not be detrimental to the literacy development of all children. Following our excursion into the literature surrounding policy and practice, in our conclusion, we turn to the children, as the only people who inhabit the dual spheres of home and school, to explore how they position themselves as literacy learners.

4 Conclusion: pupils positioning themselves

We choose to close our paper by turning to the views of children directly, highlighting where in research and policy discourse they have shared how they position themselves within the context of literacy specifically, and education more broadly.

In her foreword to the 2022 report, 'Beyond the labels: A SEND system which works for every child, every time', Children's Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, reflects on how school pupils labelled as SEND typically view themselves:

> The Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND) system in England exists to help children achieve their goals, and it works most effectively when it works in partnership with children and their families in a shared vision. But this is too rarely the experience. Children want support to help them do well, but they often experience a system which is more interested in asking "what is wrong with you?" than "how can we help?". Children told me that they find labels marginalising; they are often accompanied by a sense that each label leads to a drop in ambition. We need to move away from diagnostics, labels, and processes and towards a system of practical help focused on achieving outcomes.
>
> Children as young as 11 have told me they are worried that SEND meant that achieving the things they wanted would be much harder. Children were worried about being judged or being treated unfairly. (Children's Commissioner, 2022, pp. 3-4)

This report claims, based on the Children's Commissioner's engagement with SEND pupils, that "children want practical help, not labels" (2022, p. 9). However, the main body of this 34-page report uses the SEND label no fewer than 117 times (Children's Commissioner, 2022). Clearly, labels are here to stay.

In Sabine's work with multilingual children, their lived duality—with curriculum pressures in the societal language on the one hand, and home language and culture on the other—becomes obvious. In a series of focus groups, we discussed pupils' reading across their various languages, although pupils initially seemed to focus only on their reading in English. Once prompted to consider their home language, one eight-year-old girl replied: "Yeah, I read all the Harry Potter books in Bengali—but why do you want to know about that? Nobody wants to know about that!" In follow-up discussions with the children, it transpired that not only had they positioned themselves and their language and literacy skills in alignment with curriculum expectations, they also positioned Sabine—an adult they encountered on school grounds—as someone who, based on their prior experiences, would not be interested in their heritage language and literacy experiences. In 2021, the National Literacy Trust's National Literacy Survey (Teravainen-Goff et al., 2021) received

data from 10,000 multilingual children, the largest investigation into multilingual reading habits among children in the country to date. The research revealed that multilingual children were more likely to enjoy reading than those who did not class themselves as multilingual, but also highlighted that 40.4% of them wished school acknowledged their home languages more. One in six children (15.9%) had been made fun of or bullied because of their language. These data show links between language, literacies, and identity, highlighting that literacy support needs to be viewed as a holistic endeavour, taking into account children's identities, rather than primarily focusing on educational outcomes. In bringing together policy and research literature, our paper argues that the time has come for support measures—including literacy support—to be defined and accessed via asset-based models focusing on the abilities and strengths inherent in disabled and multilingual children, respectively. Before we can even begin to meaningfully develop literacy support measures that take into account marginalised children's experiences, we need to work on creating an education context where no child believes that "nobody wants to know about" an integral part of their identity.

Acknowledgements The authors wish to thank Professor Dan Goodley for the valuable feedback on a draft, and to Professor Jennifer Rowsell for help with early conceptualiastion.

Author contributions Little: Conceptualisation, focus on multilingualism, editing. Bramley: Conceptualisation, focus on disabilities/SEND, editing.

Funding The authors received no funding for the work associated with this paper.

Data availability There is no data set associated with this paper.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

Consent for publication The authors consent to publication.

Ethics approval and consent to participate Ethics approval was not required for this paper.

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