

Children and young people's engagement with podcasts before and during lockdown

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Podcast consumption has increased steadily in recent years.¹ Ofcom reported in 2019 that 1 in 8 adults (aged 15+) listened to podcasts, up from just 1 in 13 in 2014.² (In 2020, these numbers have plateaued, though some recent early reports are suggesting a rise during lockdown.)³ ⁴. To date, most research into podcasts has focused on adults and the US market. While Edison Research's *Infinite Dial* report (conducted in the US with 1500 participants) has a lower age threshold of 12, this bracket extends to 34; this is not broken down further to separate younger from older listeners within this group. Nevertheless, the 2020 report found this age group has the highest percentage of podcast listeners, which increased from 42% in 2019 to 49% in 2020. For the next age bracket, 35 to 54, the percentages were 26% in 2019 and 40% in 2020.⁵

While these statistics provide a useful context for podcast consumption over time, there is still little research or data on younger people's podcast engagement. This report sets out our initial findings and a review of the existing literature, but will be the starting point for further research, including a survey of young people aged 11 to 18, which is currently under way.

There have been mixed reports of changing listening habits during lockdown, but research suggests that the change in circumstances has had a positive impact. For example, Podtrac

¹ Oxford English Dictionary defines a podcast as "[a] digital audio file made available on the Internet for downloading to a computer or mobile device, typically available as a series, new instalments of which can be received by subscribers automatically." <https://www.lexico.com/definition/podcast>

² https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0019/160714/media-nations-2019-uk-report.pdf

³ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/200503/media-nations-2020-uk-report.pdf

⁴ Reuters Digital News Report, 2019: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf

⁵ Nicole Beniamini, *The Infinite Dial*, 2020, 78.

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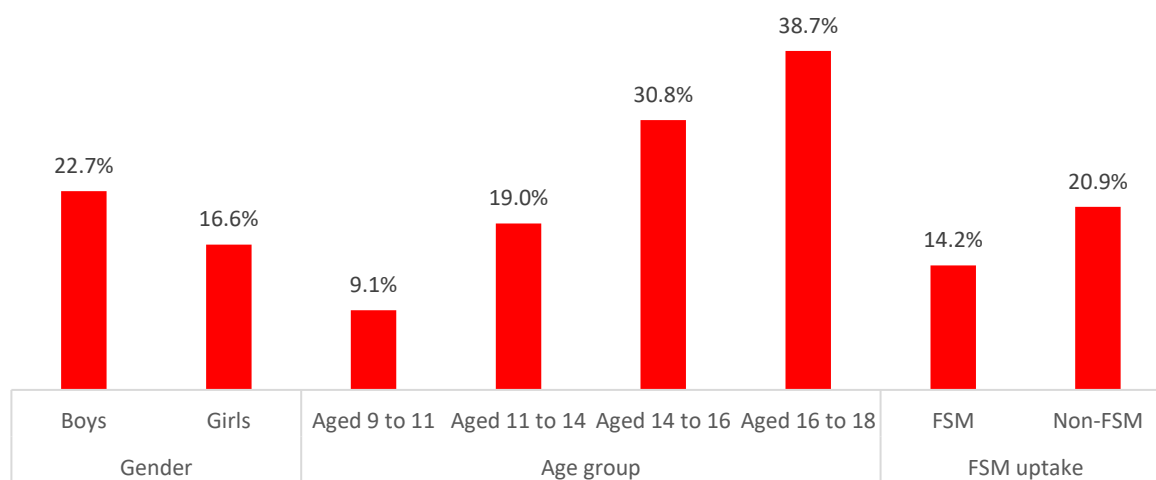
reported that listening in the US dropped about 10% in the first month of lockdown,⁶ while in the UK, Acast reported a 24% increase in listenership over the same period.⁷ There is some suggestion that, in fact, listeners have simply changed the way they listen and what they listen to, which may impact on the statistics.⁸ According to our research, during lockdown nearly 1 in 4 (23.7%) children and young people said that they listened to audiobooks and/or podcasts more than before lockdown.⁹

Children and young people’s engagement with podcasts

This report contains findings from two recent surveys: our Annual Literacy Survey, which this year surveyed 58,346 children and young people aged 9 to 18, conducted in January 2020, and a subsequent survey of 4,141 pupils aged 8 to 18, conducted in May to June 2020, during the school closures and UK-wide lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In our Annual Literacy Survey completed just before lockdown, 1 in 5 (19.6%) children and young people aged 9 to 18 said they listened to podcasts. However, more boys than girls listened to podcasts (see Figure 1). Engagement with podcasts also increases with age, with more young people aged 14+ listening to podcasts compared with their younger peers. Indeed, only 1 in 10 children aged 9 to 11 said that they listened to podcasts compared with nearly 2 in 5 young people aged 16 to 18. Fewer of those who receive free schools meals (FSMs), our proxy of socioeconomic status, say that they listen to podcasts compared with their peers who do not receive FSMs.

Figure 1: Engagement with podcasts by gender, age group and free school meal uptake



⁶ <https://www.wwd.com/business-news/media/coronavirus-media-trends-podcast-listening-declines-1203547264/>

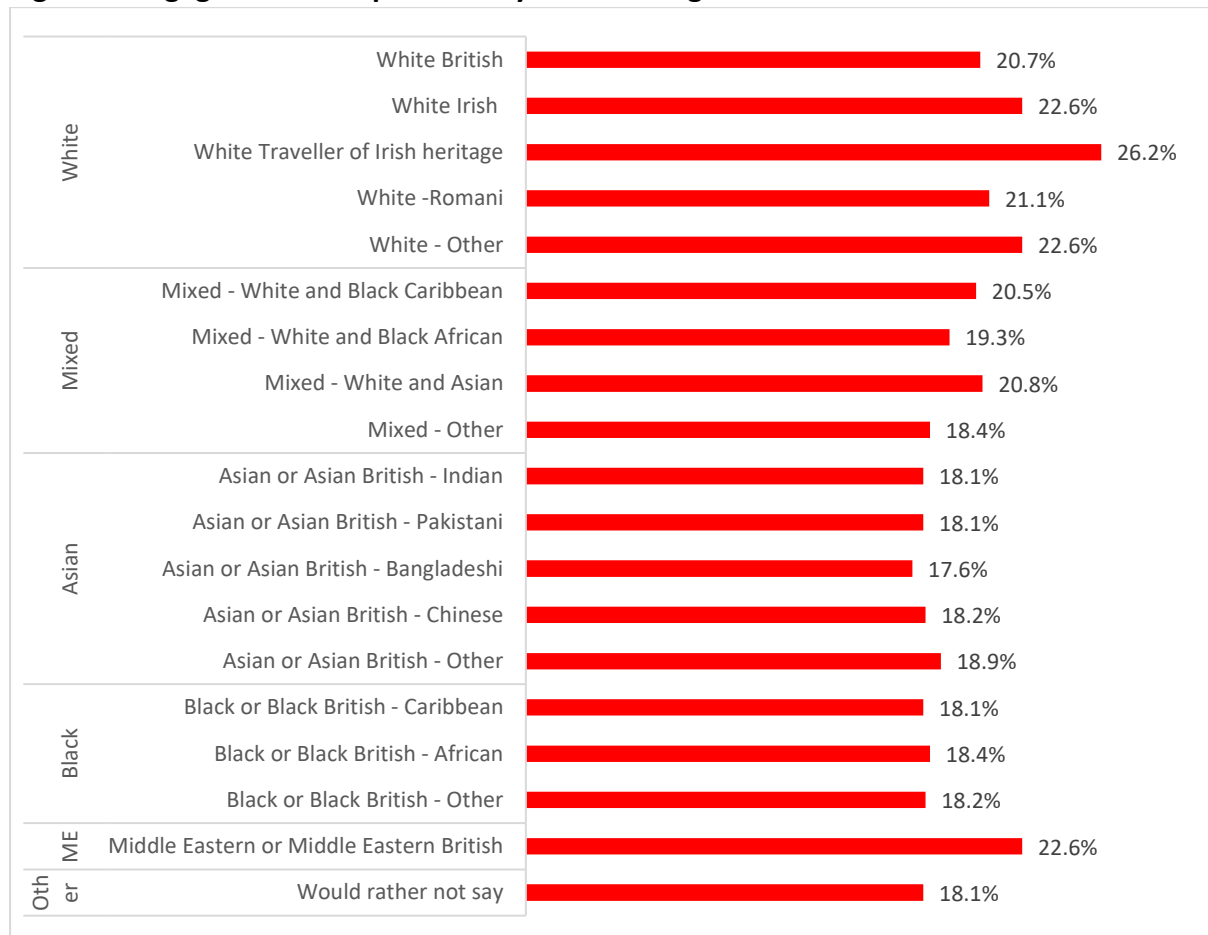
⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/may/22/we-dont-want-to-give-up-now-could-coronavirus-weaken-the-podcast-industry>

⁸ <https://techcrunch.com/2020/04/13/will-podcast-ad-revenue-bounce-back-after-covid-19/>

⁹ Best, E., Clark, C. and Picton, I. (2020). *Children, young people and audiobooks before and during lockdown*. London: National Literacy Trust.

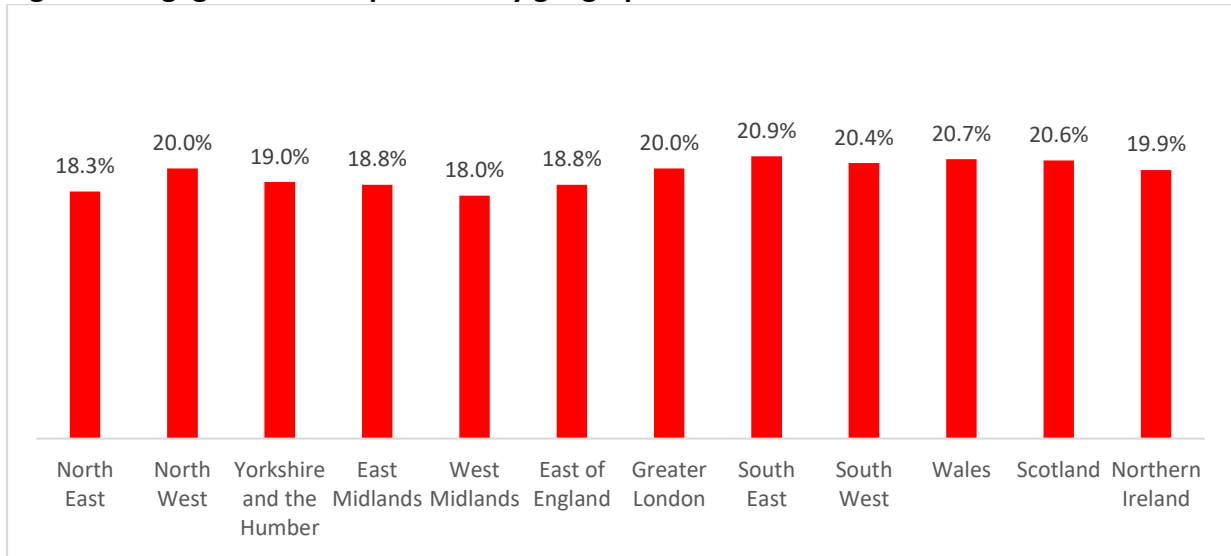
Figure 2 shows that there were some minor variations in the percentage of children and young people who engage with podcasts by ethnic background.

Figure 2: Engagement with podcasts by ethnic background



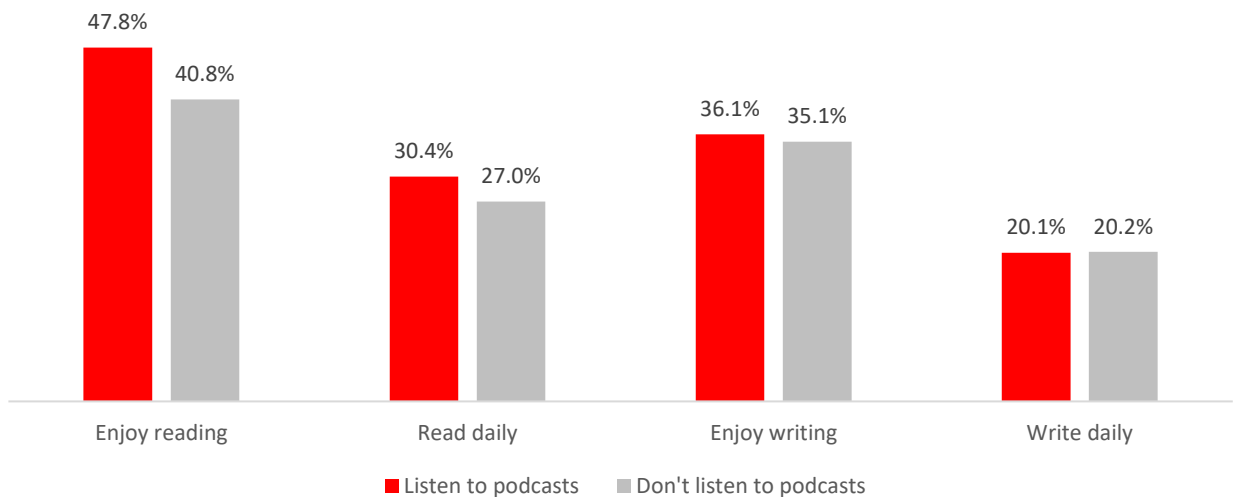
While there were some differences by gender, age, FSM uptake and ethnic background, a similar percentage of children and young people listen to podcasts regardless of where they are in the UK (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Engagement with podcasts by geographical location



There is some tentative evidence that listening to podcasts is associated with improved reading outcomes. As shown in Figure 4, more young people who listen to podcasts say that they enjoy reading and read daily compared with their peers who don't listen to podcasts. Interestingly, the same is not true for writing outcomes.

Figure 4: Listening to podcasts and reading and writing outcomes



In our most recent survey we found that since lockdown, 23.7% of children and young people said they had listened to audiobooks and podcasts more than before lockdown. Comments suggested that some young people had increased their listening frequency and duration over this period, while others had started listening to podcasts for the first time:

Much like with reading and writing for pleasure, and indeed listening to audiobooks, many children and young people said they listen to podcasts more because they have more time:

“Before I never really listened to podcasts but now that I had time I found out that I actually enjoy them.”

“I've been able to find and listen to good podcasts, which I wouldn't have time to before.”

“[B]ecause of all the spare time e.g. weekends aren't full of homework[...] I listen to a podcast or read a huge chunk in my book.”

In addition to time to listen, some comments suggest that there is also more time to seek out podcasts, or that it has presented an opportunity, as some children and young people comment on having found something they like:

“I have only recently found a couple of podcasts I enjoy.”

“I have more time in my day to do things like that so I have been getting into reading and have recently found a podcast that I love!”

“I'm enjoying listening more because I found a really good podcast to listen to.”

Ways of listening

Listening to podcasts, like other audio formats, is often characterised as an activity that can take place alongside other activities such as housework or travelling.¹¹ This is echoed in the comments from our lockdown survey, with many children and young people saying they enjoy playing podcasts while they carry out schoolwork:

“I started listening to podcasts while doing my work.”

“I have more peace than in class when listening to a podcast or an audiobook.”

“[M]usic and podcasts help me to focus on work.”

Indeed, much like adults, children and young people are listening to podcasts while they do other activities at home and outside, in addition to work:

“I [...] have downloaded BBC Sounds to listen to lots of podcasts of [theirs] while doing arts and crafts.”

“I listen to podcasts when I go outside.”

“I have got into the habit of listening to podcasts while walking my dog or running.”

¹¹ See, for example, *What Is Listening to Podcasts All Day Doing to My Brain?* <https://www.thecut.com/2017/10/what-is-listening-to-podcasts-all-day-doing-to-my-brain.htm>.

Wellbeing

While there are many podcasts on wellbeing, mindfulness and relaxation, the act of listening to a podcast itself is often shown to be relaxing. A recent study of 2000 participants carried out by Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM) in partnership with Spotify found that over a third listened to podcasts to improve their mental wellbeing.¹² Again, as with audiobooks, this was echoed in the comments in our lockdown survey:

“I [now have] free time and listening to podcasts makes me feel more relaxed in panicky situations.”

“I love listening to podcasts as they make me feel calm and relaxed.”

In addition, the sense of companionship that can be found from hearing others speak, as noted with audiobooks, also suggests that podcasts may represent a form of social connection to help combat isolation:

“I started to listen to more podcasts to boost my energy or to just genuinely know what others are getting up to.”

There may also be a link here between wellbeing and access to information. Anxiety can often stem from a feeling of disconnection and while some may use podcasts (and indeed, reading and writing) as a form of distraction, for others they represent an opportunity to stay abreast of information:

“[A] lot of podcasts are addressing the pandemic and it’s nice to hear people discussing the issue.”

“To keep an update on the global pandemic or to just casually listen on podcasts discussing teenage interests (exam stress, conformity, etc).”

“[T]he podcasts I listened [to] as much as before because they will be talking about what will happen with lockdown due to the coronavirus.”

Diversity

Figures 2 and 3 suggest that there is little differentiation by ethnic background or geographical location, suggesting that children and young people have a similar interest in podcasts. This in itself is encouraging, but also shows that there may be an appetite and potential for children and young people to find in podcasts both experiences and voices that are familiar and/or comparable experiences and voices, and also to promote awareness of different backgrounds. Some of the comments reflect this:

“I have more time and I find it interesting listening to podcasts because I get to hear other people[’s] opinions on things.”

¹² <https://www.voice-online.co.uk/entertainment/music/2020/05/18/spotify-in-partnership-with-the-campaign-against-living-miserably-calm/>

“I miss hearing people’s voices so I like audiobooks and podcasts so I can hear different voices.”

There is also a strong drive for podcasts to feature a wider diversity of voices. As reported in our audiobook report, initiatives such as the #ownvoices campaign are pushing for original authors, or actors with similar backgrounds to the authors, to read audio versions of books to ensure authenticity of voices, alongside the project’s main goal of getting a diverse range of characters represented in stories.¹³ Similar projects are happening with podcasts: American production company Stitcher, for example, has recently launched *More Sauce*, a podcasting network dedicated to championing and promoting Black voices and creating an inclusive listening experience.¹⁴ In the UK and internationally meanwhile, Spotify are in their third year of *Sound Up*, an intensive podcasting workshop for underrepresented groups, which this year focuses on women and non-binary people of colour.¹⁵

Learning opportunities

Several comments referred to specific subjects and contents of podcasts, and indeed specific podcasts that they listen to. This suggests a level of curiosity and interest, particularly in non-fiction subjects, that could be used to support reading around a subject:

“I enjoyed listening to podcasts and reading around matters that I’m passionate about, considering that before, I had other academic priorities.”

“I enjoy listening more as there are a variety of topics of podcasts I enjoy listening to.”

“I am now listening to cricket [podcasts] and they are very interesting.”

Some even recognise the benefits to their learning and are listening to podcasts to supplement and complement their school work:

“I listen to a podcast thing every day and I learn a lot from it.”

“I listen to history and Spanish podcasts to do with what I’m currently learning at school in these lessons, as I’m barely learning anything from the work being set to me from home and I’m trying to fall behind as little as possible.”

“I like to listen to something when working at home so I think that a podcast is more productive and I can actually learn something rather than listening to music on repeat.”

¹³ Best, E. (2020). *Audiobooks and Literacy*. London: National Literacy Trust. For more information see <https://www.audiofilemagazine.com/blog/audiobooks-and-literacy-own-voices/>

¹⁴ <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/stitcher-launches-more-sauce-a-network-dedicated-to-championing-black-voices-301126741.html>

¹⁵ <https://newsroom.spotify.com/2020-06-01/spotify-supports-underrepresented-podcasters-with-sound-up-now-in-the-us-uk-and-ireland-germany-australia-sweden-and-brazil/>

Personalities

Several of the comments referenced a particular person they follow who had started a podcast, which is encouraging in terms of role models:

“Because a new podcast came out by a singer I like (Jae of DAY6) and it’s a very good podcast about random facts you may not have known about before.”

“[I] never used to listen to podcasts but my favourite YouTuber started one and then I started listening to it and it changed me.”

“I didn’t listen to podcasts before but I have discovered that my favourite YouTubers have a podcast so I listen to them now.”

Interestingly, however, many also say that YouTube is where they access podcasts and discuss ‘watching’ them, suggesting an interest in the emergent hybrid form of video podcasts or ‘vodcasts’.¹⁶

“[L]ots of you tubers [sic] I watch now do podcasts, and when I have lots of free time they are entertaining to watch.”

“I love watching podcasts.”

“I have been listening to podcasts on YouTube.”

Opportunities for schools

The appetite and enthusiasm for podcasts among our respondents suggests that there could be many opportunities to use them in the classroom, and to make them available in distance learning contexts. There are many cognitive benefits in using podcasts: a 2019 study found that at a neurological level our brains respond in almost identical ways to hearing a word or verbal stimulus as we do to reading it.¹⁷ While podcasts should not replace other learning techniques there are many opportunities here to expand into new areas.

Teaching listening is a key practice at every stage of school but is often overlooked and difficult to quantify. James Mannion and Neil Mercer recently commented that “listening has historically received the least attention by teachers and researchers. Perhaps the main reason for this is that listening is invisible – it leaves no paper trail and cannot be detected or recorded in the way that speaking can.”¹⁸ However, while it is indeed intangible in many ways, comments from our survey suggest that children and young people are aware of the listening process:

“[S]ome podcast tells you stories and [are] a nice time to sit and listen.”

¹⁶ <https://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-video-podcast.htm>

¹⁷ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/08/190819175719.htm>

¹⁸ <https://impact.chartered.college/article/teaching-listening-gateway-understanding/>

“I enjoy listening to podcasts because they’re good for free time when you don’t want to read a book but listen to something and also can be productive.”

Podcasts could, then, help facilitate a more explicit teaching of listening, particularly since the dialogue of a podcast tends to be more structured, combining both conversational and more scripted language. Gary Buck, in his exploration of teaching and assessing listening, explores this:

“The real-time nature of spoken language not only affects the listener, but also affects the speaker, who must speak in real time. This means that speakers must construct the text at a rapid rate, and attempt to organise and control the flow of information with little preparation time. Consequently most spoken texts are just a rough first draft. This is usually referred to as an **unplanned discourse** (Ochs, 1979) – it is spontaneous and produced without taking much time for planning and organisation. **Planned discourse** may be thought of as polished, worked text. Often there is considerable difference between planned and unplanned discourse. [Original emphasis]”¹⁹

As engagement with podcasts grows among young people, they may present an opportunity to harness a technological format that presents a combination of both planned and unplanned discourse, using engaging and relevant themes, to model and teach listening. Mannion and Mercer go on to suggest that “[i]t is likely that the proliferation of digital technology in recent years has had an impact on the extent to which, and ways in which, young people engage in speaking and listening, although we are unaware of any recent research specifically on such matters. However, research does suggest that digital technology can play a powerful role in facilitating dialogue and collaboration [...]”²⁰ Again, research specifically into the use of podcasts is in its infancy, but this provides a useful starting point for further study.

Primary

US-based organisation, Kids Listen, released the first report specifically on children and podcasts in 2017.²¹ This survey asked 436 parents about listening with their children from birth to 12 and offered some useful findings that could be replicated in a classroom setting. For example, 74% of respondents reported that their children initiate discussions based on the podcast after listening:

¹⁹ Gary Buck, *Assessing Listening*, Cambridge Language Assessment Series (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 9.

²⁰ <https://impact.chartered.college/article/teaching-listening-gateway-understanding/> Mercer explores this further in his article Neil Mercer, Sara Hennessy, and Paul Warwick, ‘Dialogue, Thinking Together and Digital Technology in the Classroom: Some Educational Implications of a Continuing Line of Inquiry’, *International Journal of Educational Research*, 97 (2019), 187–99

²¹ http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/10c540_8056b16c7caa47b091ca25a5cc426176.pdf

“Kids are also likely to quote or re-enact part of the episode, tell others what they’ve learned, ask to listen again, get more information, or request to do an activity inspired by the podcast.”

The breadth of subjects covered in podcasts, even children’s podcasts, means that most topics will be covered and so using a podcast as a starting point for a discussion, or a piece of written work or drama, could be very effective if it capitalises on this excitement.

In terms of parental engagement, it was also striking that 98% of parents said that they chose which podcast to listen to, but only 60% made the decision to listen, suggesting that young children are choosing actively to listen to podcasts even if they are not in a position to choose content. Also, 70% of participants said that they seek out podcasts as an alternative to screen time. So in addition to using them in the classrooms, there is merit to schools recommending to parents that they share podcasts with their children. Podcasts are also hugely accessible: as well as being free they can be accessed from a number of free apps as well as streaming platforms, websites and smart speakers, and many have subscription models that mean the most recent content is downloaded automatically.

Secondary

At secondary level it is important for teachers across every subject to embed literacy teaching in their practice, which can be daunting for those who do not feel confident in doing so. Podcasts present a range of speakers who are experts in their subject, so can be very effective in modelling how to speak like a scientist, economist or historian. Further to this, as well as developing listening skills, podcasts can be a great opportunity for debate around a subject. Ashley Marquez gives lots of useful suggestions on how to create podcast-based activities on her *Teach-Create-Motivate* blog: <https://www.teachcreatemotivate.com/using-podcasts-in-the-classroom/>

It is also quite possible, and practical, to create podcasts in your own setting. Lucas Maxwell, author and school librarian at Glenthorne School comments in his blog:

“In 2016 we won £500 from Reading Hack and used that money to buy podcasting equipment. However, you do not need £500 to start a podcast. You can use free software like Audacity and buy a £10 mic and a £20 pair of headphones and be on your way.”²²

There are many benefits to this but in particular at secondary level, creating podcasts can help students interrogate their own thinking processes and understand the move from informal speech to more formalised presentation. Ciro Scardina, a teacher librarian in the US, explains below how she scoped out a podcast process with her students. Though her project was with slightly younger children (fourth graders aged 9 to 10) this process could work well to meet the demands of a secondary curriculum:

“Fourth graders were introduced to podcasting alongside a writing unit on Small Moments. One at a time, prior to writing their narratives, they spoke

²² <http://glenthorneirc.blogspot.com/2019/10/internet-librarian-international.html>

them into a microphone. They used their oral accounts as a framework to craft their recollections in written form, and once written, students recorded a retelling as a podcast, with attention to changes in pitch and tone, as well as clarity of their message.”²³

Conclusion

Our research supports the claim that podcasts are increasingly popular among younger listeners, and the comments shown here suggest that in lockdown children and young people have found more time to engage with them. Wellbeing and an interest in different topics seem to be the main drivers beyond having the time, alongside the positioning of key role models as podcast creators. The ability of a podcast to excite interest around a topic, particularly where a role model is enlisted, could be utilised by teachers both in distance and classroom-based learning. At the same time, the availability of podcasts as a free and accessible storytelling medium should be promoted as an opportunity for independent access to stories, information and voices.

In autumn 2020 we plan to launch a more in-depth survey of children and young people to explore their interaction with podcasts. This will build on the comments and conclusions here and gather data that we can use to further evidence the potential of podcasts to help build literacy outcomes. This research will help us build our work in the audio space, which also includes audiobooks and other formats via partnerships with Audible, Fun Kids and many other partners. For more information visit literacytrust.org.uk/podcasts.

²³ *Ciro Scardina, Aural Language: Podcasting as a Tool of Expression, Teacher Librarian, 46.1 (Oct 18), 35.*

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