Readathon: How children and young people are engaged and the benefits to reading

Findings from our Annual Literacy Survey

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Readathon is a sponsored reading scheme where children and young people in schools pledge to read various quantities and types of reading material over a certain time, and are sponsored by friends and family for achieving their targets. The money raised is then given to charity, notably to fund mobile mini-libraries in children's hospitals all over the UK.

This report shows that compared with pupils who had not taken part in Readathon (80.6%, N = 26,020), either in this year or previous school years, pupils who have participated in Readathon (19.4%, N = 6,267):

- Enjoy reading more (66.0% vs. 54.3%)
- Are more likely to read something in their free time daily (38.4% vs. 29.0%)
- Have on average higher perceptions of their reading ability (7.59 vs. 7.38 on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 = not a very good reader at all to 10 = a very good reader)
- Read a wider variety of materials, such as poems, non-fiction, fiction, lyrics, text messages and websites, in their free time at least once a month (7.59 vs. 7.38, possible range between 0 and 10)
- Have more positive attitudes towards reading, for example they are more likely to agree that reading is cool (52.6% vs. 37.4%); more likely to agree that they carry on reading even when they find it difficult (73.7% vs 64.5%); and more likely to agree that there are lots of things they want to read (66.1% vs 50.5%)
- Are more likely to use the school library (74.2% vs. 58.7%)
- Report higher life satisfaction (7.61 vs. 7.26, on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 = your worst possible life and 10 = your best possible life)

These findings remain true regardless of pupils' gender, age group and whether or not they receive free school meals.

Overall, 3 in 5 (58.5%) of all pupils who participated in the survey believe that children and young people would read more if being sponsored to read raised money to help children in hospital. This rises to 71.8% for those who have taken part in Readathon, either in this academic year or previous ones.

Findings from the survey have provided us with some insight into the wider reading patterns of pupils who have taken part in Readathon-sponsored reads in school. They suggest that these pupils enjoy reading more, read daily more often, read a greater variety of materials and think more positively about reading than their peers who haven't participated in Readathon.

While these are clearly encouraging findings, they only offer us a crude insight into the potential benefits of taking part in Readathon. An evaluation that uses pre and post-tests, as well as a control group, is needed to establish with greater certainty whether or not taking part in Readathon has an impact on pupils' wider reading outcomes. Nonetheless, the current findings offer a promising glimpse of what Readathon can achieve.

Introduction

Readathon is a sponsored reading scheme where children and young people in schools pledge to read various quantities and types of reading material over a certain time, and are sponsored by friends and family for achieving their targets. The money raised is then given to charity, notably to fund mobile mini-libraries in children's hospitals all over the UK.

With a flexible delivery approach, Readathon aims to:
- Increase pupils' reading enjoyment and motivation
- Increase pupils' reading frequency and/or the breadth of materials pupils read
- Improve pupils' confidence in their reading ability and perception of themselves as readers
- Improve pupils' reading skills and attainment

A wealth of data about the programme is routinely collected by Read for Good, who run Readathon, such as number of books read and money raised. However, the charity has little information on the wider reading outcomes, such as reading enjoyment, reading behaviours and reading attitudes that Readathon might bring about. While a detailed evaluation of Readathon is being planned, we were commissioned by Read for Good to include a few questions about it in our annual literacy survey, which we conducted in November 2017 to January 2018. The annual literacy survey was completed by 49,047 children and young people aged eight to 18. Amongst other literacy aspects it explores whether young people enjoy reading, how often they read outside class, what type of materials they read outside class and what they think about reading. In 2017 we also included a few questions on school libraries and mental wellbeing.

While this may be a fairly blunt tool that does not allow for an in-depth exploration of Readathon outcomes and impacts or different delivery models, it may provide initial insight into the differences between children who take part in Readathon and those who do not. To allow us to explore the differences, if any, between children and young people who had taken part in Readathon and those who had not in terms of their reading enjoyment and reading attitudes, a question was included in the survey which simply asked children whether they had ever taken part in a Readathon-sponsored read at school. Two further Readathon-specific questions were inserted: one asked those who had taken part whether they now read more as a result of participating, and the other asked all children taking part in the survey whether they believe that being sponsored to read to raise money for books for children in hospital would make their peers read more. This report looks at the responses to all of these questions.

Taking part in Readathon

Of the total sample of 49,047 pupils who took part in the National Literacy Trust's annual literacy survey, 1 pupil in 5 (19.4%, N = 6,267) said that they had taken part in a Readathon-sponsored read at school, either in this academic year (20.6%) or in previous years.

More girls than boys said that they had taken part in Readathon (56.3% vs. 43.7%). The majority of pupils in this sample who said that they had taken part in Readathon were aged 11 to 14 (63.6%), with 26.9% of pupils aged 8 to 11 saying they had taken part and 9.5% of

pupils aged 14 to 16. 14.6% of pupils who receive free school meals said that they had taken part in Readathon.

Reading to raise money for children in hospital

One of the fundamental premises underpinnings of Readathon is that children take part in sponsored reads in school to raise money to give books to children in hospital. Indeed, there is overwhelming buy-in into this concept of Readathon from all pupils aged 8 to 16 who participated in our survey, with **3 in 5 (58.5%)** saying that they believe that children and young people would read more if being sponsored to read raised money to help children in hospital. Only 1 pupil in 10 (10.1%) didn't think that children and young people would read more, while 3 in 10 (31.4%) were unsure whether or not they would.

It is worth noting that the percentage of children who believe that pupils would read more if by doing so they raised money to help children in hospital increased to **71.8%** for those who have taken part in Readathon either in this academic year or previous years.

As can be seen in Figure 1, buy-in into the fundamental premise of Readathon was **largely universal** across the sample as there were no differences by gender or free school meal (FSM) uptake. Younger children aged 8 to 11 and 11 to 14 were slightly more likely to agree that their peers would read more if reading raised money for children in hospital than were pupils aged 14 to 16.

Figure 1: Percentage agreement that children would read more if they raised money for children in hospital by pupil characteristics
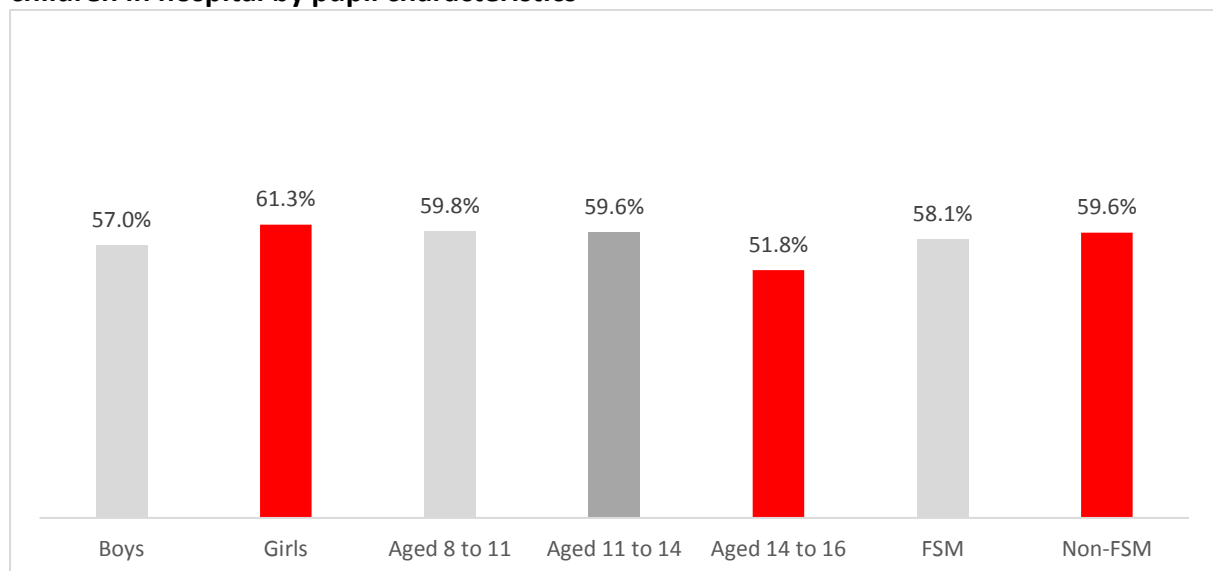
Has taking part in Readathon increased the rate at which pupils read?

As can be seen in Figure 2, **2 pupils in 5** said that as a result of taking part in Readathon they now read more often. Half said that they read about the same amount as before, while 1 in 8 said that as a result of taking part they now read less often.

Figure 2: Changes in reading frequency as a result of taking part in Readathon
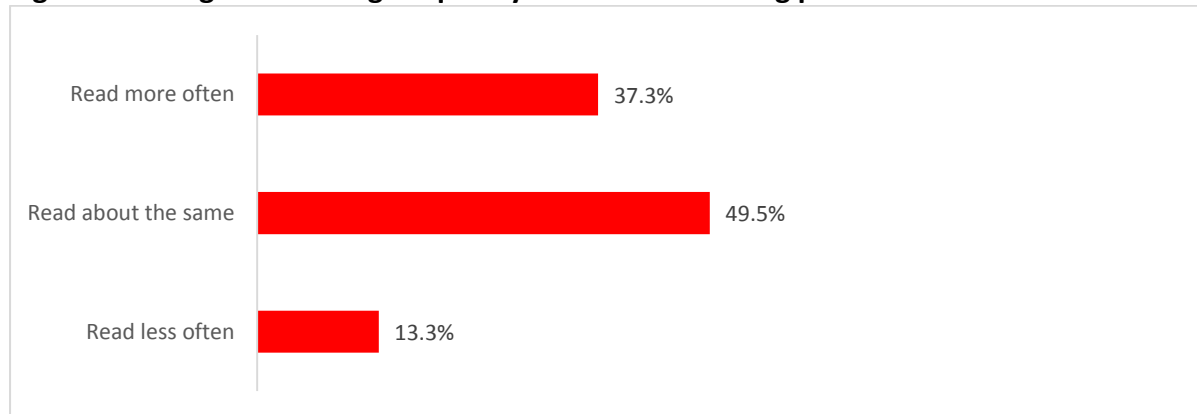
There is some indication that Readathon **benefits certain groups of pupils**, i.e. those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those in primary school. As shown in Figure 3, there was no difference in the number of boys and girls who say that they now read more often as a result of taking part in Readathon. However, pupils aged 8 to 11 were nearly twice as likely as those aged 11 to 14 to say that they now read more often as a result of taking part in Readathon, and they were nearly three times as likely to say they now read more often as those aged 14 to 16. Similarly, more FSM pupils say that they read more now as a result of taking part in Readathon compared with their non-FSM peers.

Figure 3: Percentage of pupils reading more often as a result of taking part in Readathon by pupil characteristics
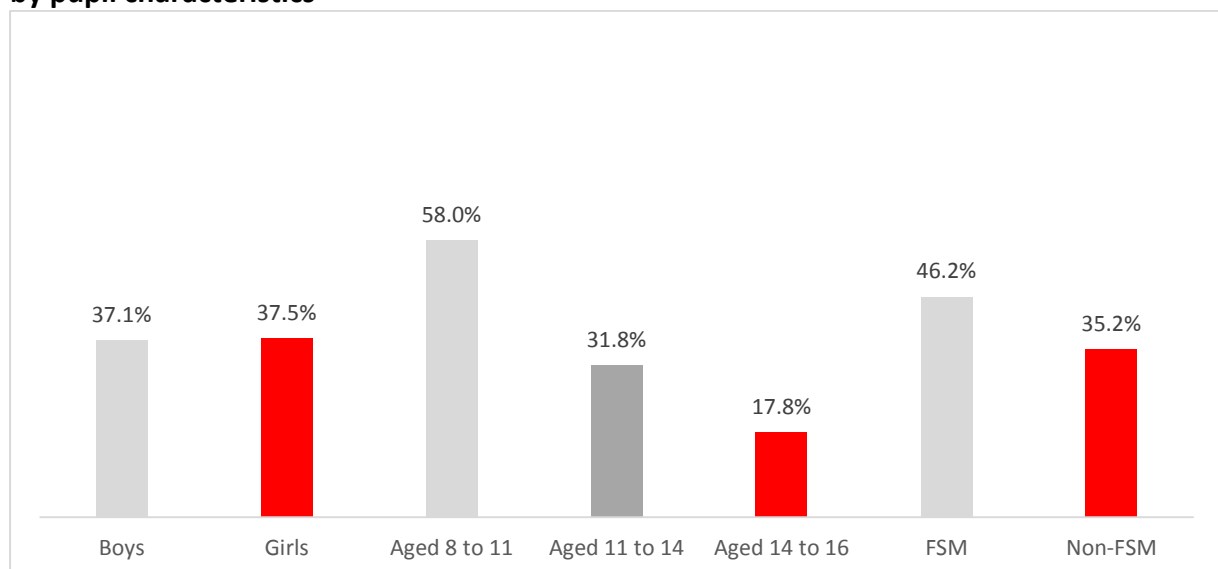
Other reading-related benefits of taking part in Readathon

The following sections explore how pupils who have participated in Readathon (19.4%, N = 6,267) potentially differ from those who haven't (80.6%, N = 26,020) in terms of wider reading outcomes[1]. Please note that those pupils who weren't sure whether or not they had taken part (N = 12,165) were excluded from the following analyses.

Greater reading enjoyment: Our data indicate that more children who have taken part in Readathon say that they enjoy reading compared with their peers who haven't taken part (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Levels of reading enjoyment by whether or not pupils had taken part in Readathon-sponsored reads in school

As can be seen in Figure 5, more pupils who participated in Readathon enjoyed reading compared with those who didn't take part, regardless of gender, age group and free school meal status.
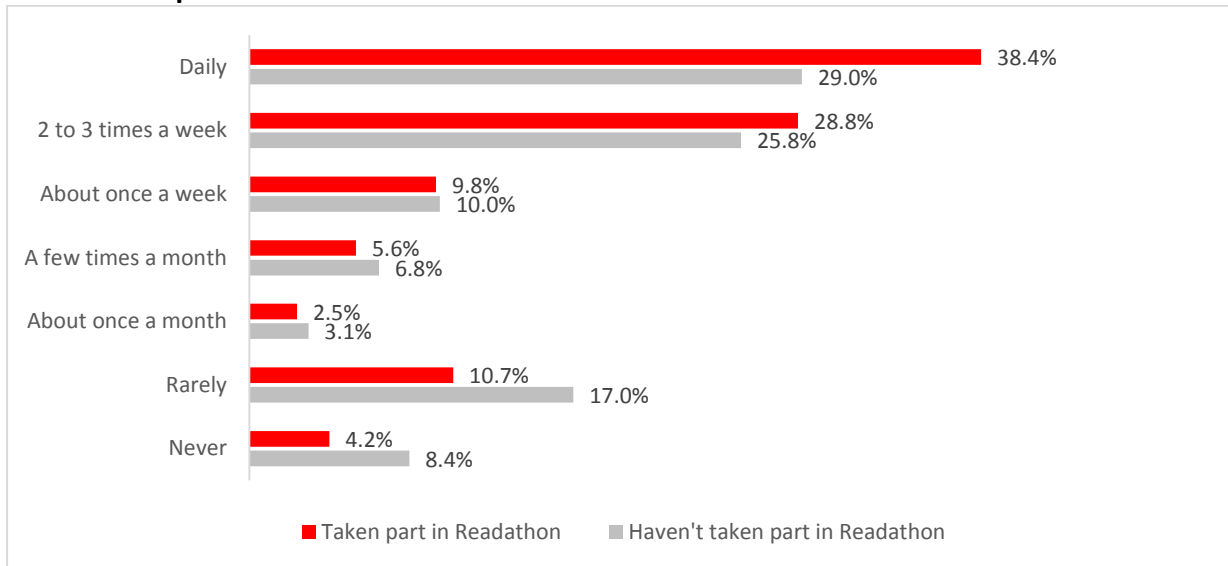
Figure 5: Levels of reading enjoyment by whether or not pupils had taken part in Readathon-sponsored reads in school by pupil characteristics

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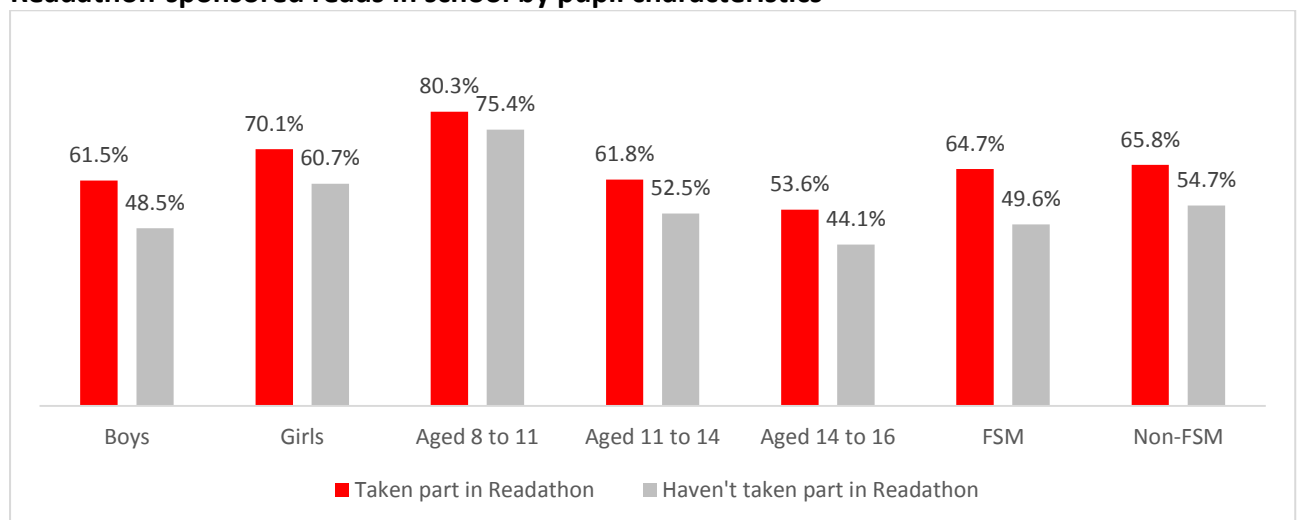
[1] The two groups were well matched in terms of gender (Readathon boys: 43.7%, non-Readathon boys: 47.1%; Readathon girls: 56.3%, non-Readathon girls: 52.9%) and FSM uptake (Readathon FSM: 14.6%, non-Readathon FSM: 11.6%). However, the Readathon sample contained more pupils aged 8 to 11 (26.9% vs. 14.2%) and fewer pupils aged 14 to 16 (9.5% vs. 17.3%) but similar numbers of pupils aged 11 to 14 (63.6% vs. 68.5%). The proportion of pupils who don't participate in Readathon was adjusted to mirror the proportion of pupils who do for comparative purposes (matching pupils in terms of the other background variables).

Increased daily reading: As can be seen in Figure 6, more pupils who have taken part in Readathon say that they read daily outside class compared with their peers who haven't taken part. Conversely, more pupils who say that they haven't taken part in Readathon say that they rarely or never read compared with their peers who have taken part (25.4% vs. 14.9%)

Figure 6: Levels of reading frequency by whether or not pupils had taken part in Readathon-sponsored reads in school
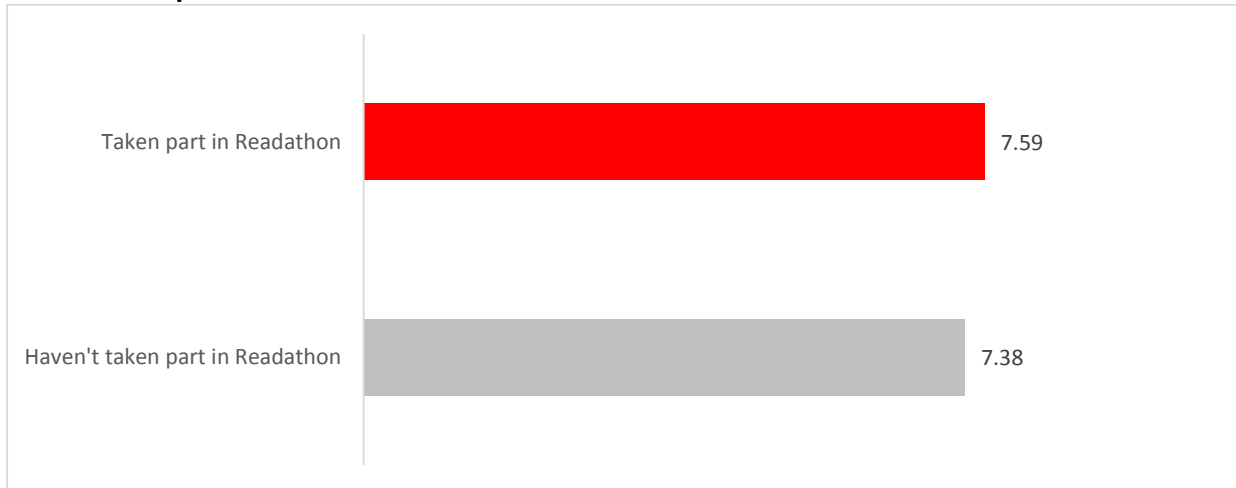

Regardless of their gender, age group and free school meal uptake, more pupils who take part in Readathon said that they read daily in their free time compared with pupils who haven't participated (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Levels of daily reading by whether or not pupils had taken part in Readathon-sponsored reads in school by pupil characteristics
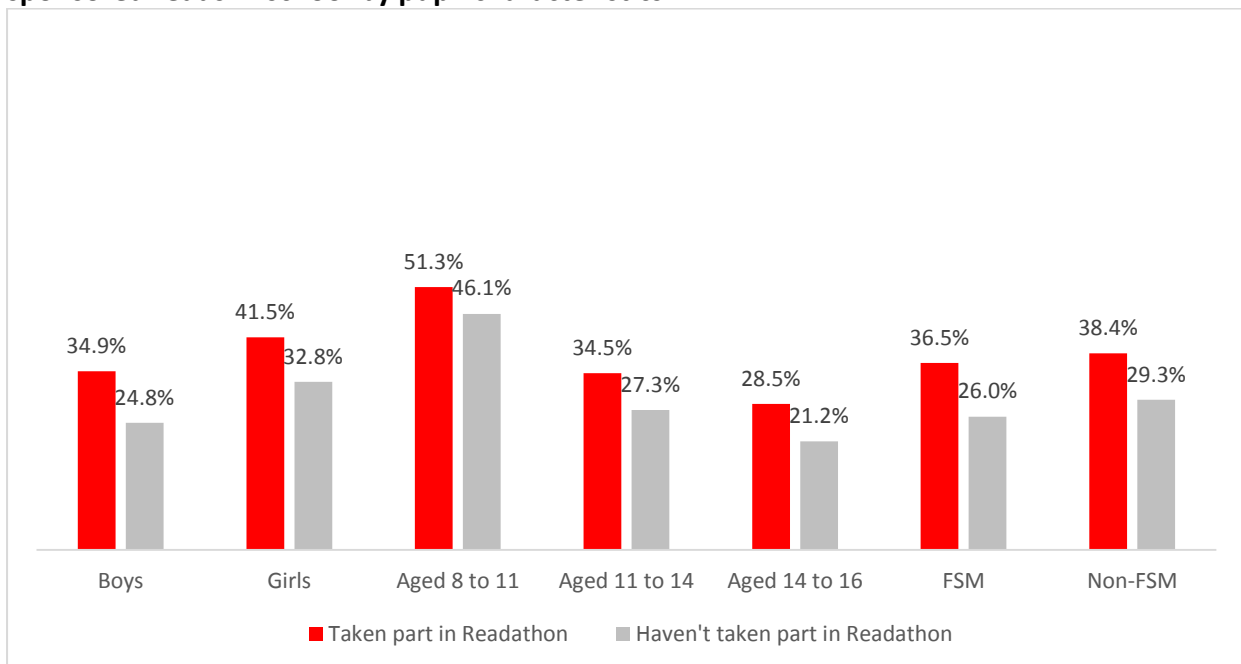
Higher perceptions of reading ability: Pupils who take part in Readathon, on average, rate their reading skill as higher than their peers who haven't taken part (on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 = not a very good reader at all to 10 = a very good reader; see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Average perceptions of reading ability by whether or not pupils had taken part in Readathon-sponsored reads in school

As can be seen in Figure 9, pupils who had taken part in Readathon had slightly higher self-rated scores of their reading ability than their peers who hadn't participated in Readathon regardless of their gender, age group and free school meal status.

Figure 9: Average perceptions of reading ability by whether or not pupils had taken part in Readathon-sponsored reads in school by pupil characteristics
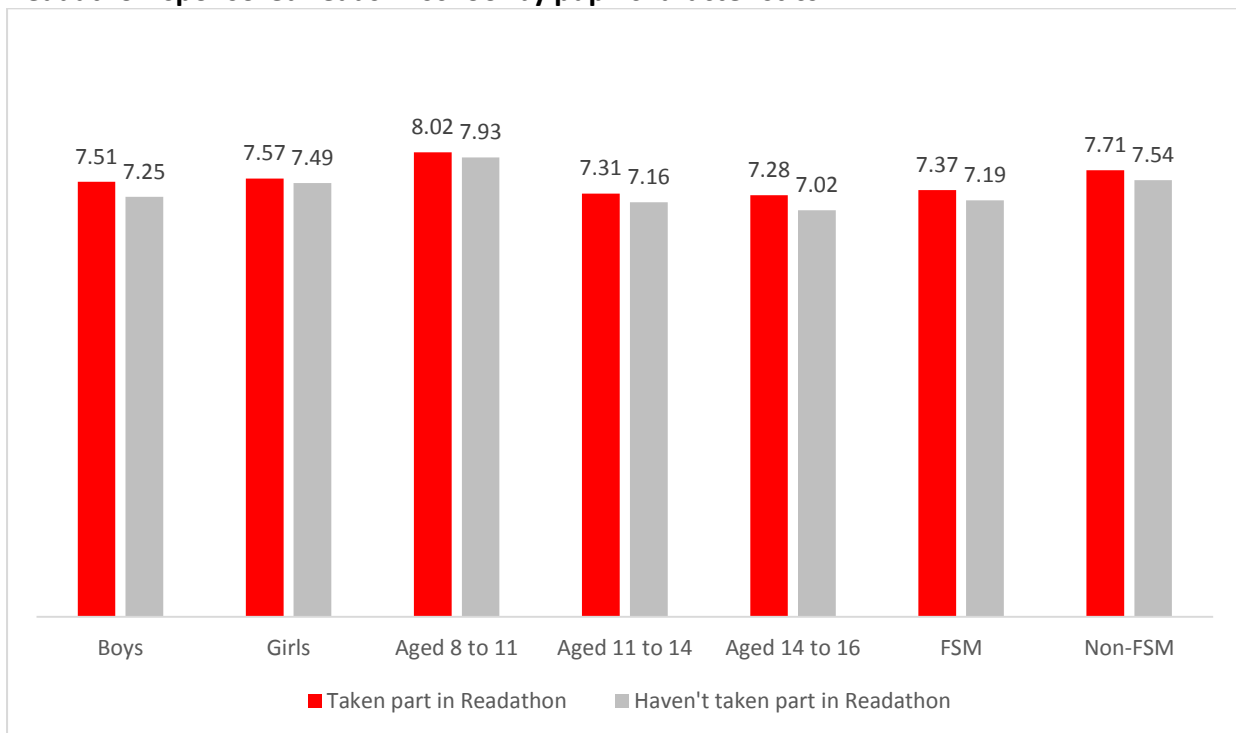
Read more widely: On average, pupils who have taken part in Readathon, on average, read a greater range of materials, such as lyrics, poems, fiction, non-fiction, text messages and websites, in their spare time at least once a month compared with their peers who haven't taken part (min = 0, maximum = 10; see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Average number of materials read outside class at least once a month by whether or not pupils had taken part in Readathon-sponsored reads in school

The finding that pupils who have taken part in Readathon read more widely, on average, than their peers who haven't taken part remains true when one looks at pupil characteristics such as gender, age group and free school meal status (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Average number of materials read outside class at least once a month by whether or not pupils had taken part in Readathon-sponsored reads in school by pupil characteristics
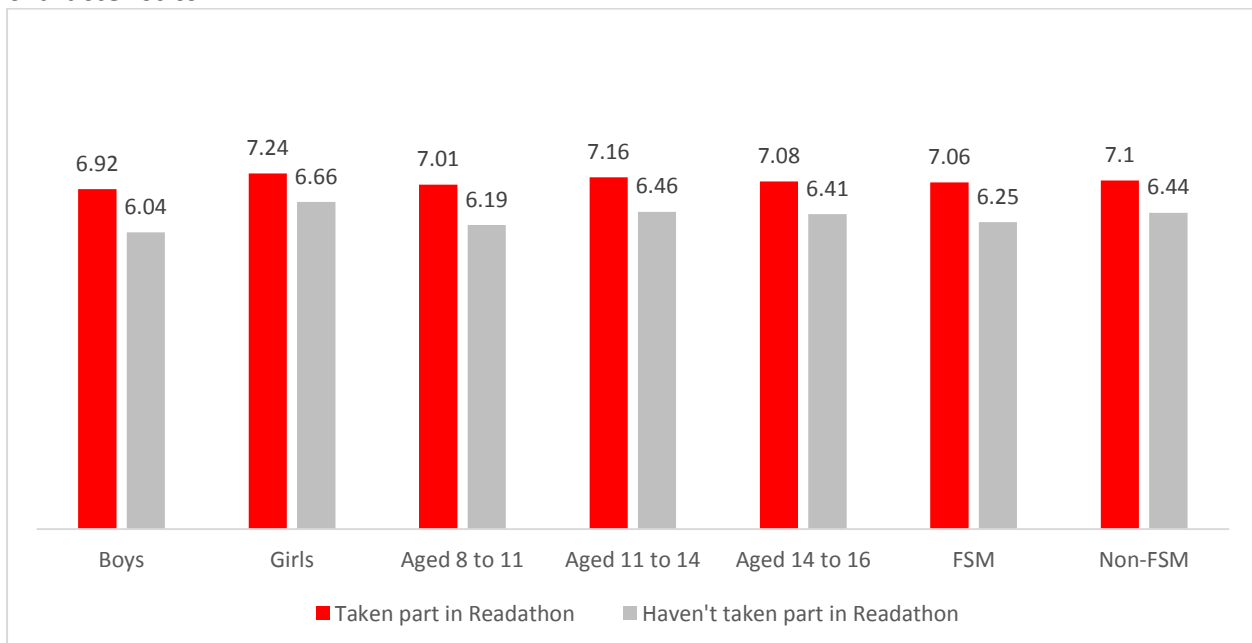
More positive attitudes towards reading: Our annual literacy survey also contains a variety of statements that explore how pupils feel about reading. As can be seen in Figure 12, pupils who have taken part in a Readathon-sponsored read at school are more likely than their peers who haven't taken part to agree that reading is cool and that there are lots of things that they would like to read. They are also more likely to see a link between their reading skill and their chances of future employment and to persevere with their reading even when they find it difficult. However, they are also more likely to say that they read for approval as they are more likely to agree that they read because they want their teacher to think they are a good reader.

Figure 12: Percentage agreement with reading attitude statements by whether or not pupils had taken part in Readathon

Table 1 (overleaf) outlines the more positive attitudes towards reading held by pupils who had taken part in Readathon reading regardless of their background characteristics.

Table 1: Percentage agreement with reading attitude statements by whether or not pupils had taken part in Readathon by pupil characteristic

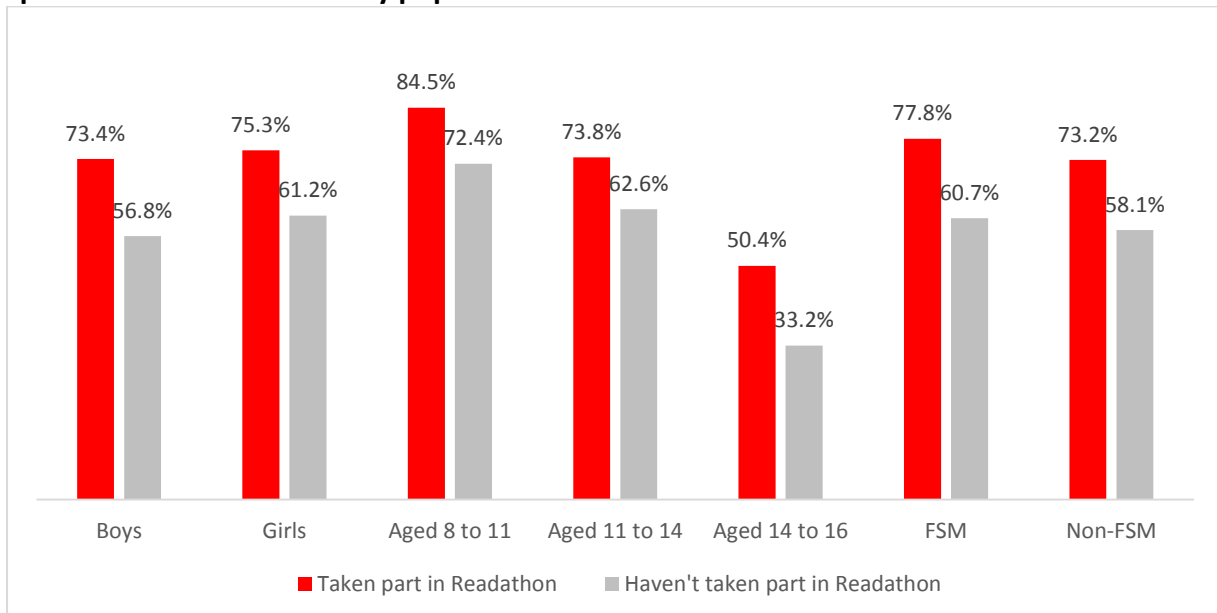|		Boys	Girls	Aged 8 to 11	Aged 11 to 14	Aged 14 to 16	FSM	Non-FSM
I cannot find things to read that interest me	Taken part	32.2%	28.5%	25.9%	31.8%	36.8%	38.5%	29.3%
	Not taken part	36.5%	32.1%	23.6%	36.0%	39.5%	39.6%	34.0%
I only read when I have to	Taken part	30.7%	20.2%	25.7%	24.5%	28.5%	33.5%	23.6%
	Not taken part	35.6%	26.1%	22.7%	31.0%	38.5%	36.0%	30.5%
Reading is cool	Taken part	50.9%	54.8%	75.7%	45.5%	35.7%	57.9%	50.8%
	Not taken part	33.1%	41.9%	68.9%	34.1%	25.3%	39.7%	36.7%
If I'm a good reader then I will get a better job when I grow up	Taken part	65.1%	61.1%	73.2%	60.0%	49.4%	67.2%	61.4%
	Not taken part	54.8%	53.0%	65.9%	53.6%	45.1%	56.5%	53.4%
Reading is difficult	Taken part	15.1%	11.9%	15.2%	13.1%	13.1%	21.1%	12.1%
	Not taken part	11.9%	10.2%	14.0%	11.1%	10.2%	16.2%	10.2%
I carry on reading even when I find it difficult	Taken part	72.5%	75.5%	81.6%	72.6%	62.4%	73.6%	73.9%
	Not taken part	64.2%	66.0%	76.2%	64.2%	56.8%	63.8%	64.7%
I am certain I can improve my reading if I really want to	Taken part	83.0%	87.3%	86.4%	84.8%	83.1%	84.6%	85.5%
	Not taken part	79.1%	83.4%	82.9%	80.8%	78.5%	79.4%	81.2%
I want the teacher to think that I'm a good reader	Taken part	69.5%	69.3%	82.1%	65.6%	55.0%	72.9%	68.1%
	Not taken part	56.1%	57.5%	77.7%	55.8%	43.3%	56.7%	56.2%
I believe reading will help me learn more	Taken part	87.7%	91.8%	94.7%	88.2%	85.7%	88.9%	89.8%
	Not taken part	79.3%	84.3%	90.8%	80.3%	76.6%	80.7%	81.6%
There are lots of things I want to read	Taken part	62.8%	69.1%	82.4%	61.1%	53.4%	69.4%	64.9%
	Not taken part	45.5%	56.0%	73.5%	47.7%	42.3%	51.1%	50.4%

More likely to use the school library: We also asked pupils if they use their school library (if they have one). As can be seen in Figure 13, more pupils who have taken part in Readathon said that they use their school library compared with their peers who haven't taken part.

Figure 13: School library use by whether or not pupils had taken part in Readathon-sponsored reads in school
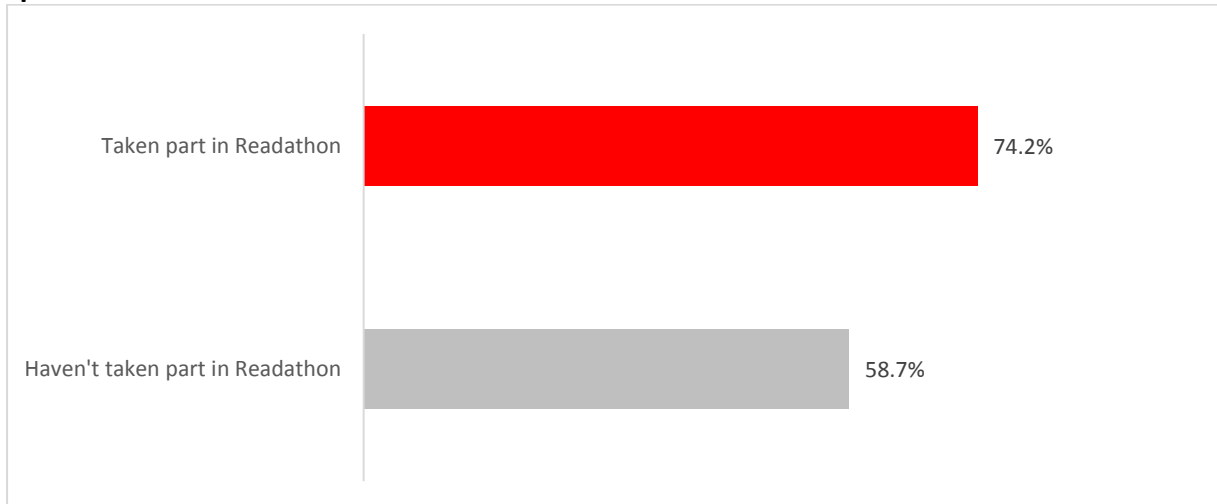

Regardless of their gender, age group and free school meal status pupils who have taken part in Readathon are more likely to use the school library than their peers who haven't taken part (see Figure 14).

Figure 14: School library use by whether or not pupils had taken part in Readathon-sponsored reads in school by pupil characteristics

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Greater life satisfaction: In 2017 we also asked pupils to indicate how satisfied they are with their life. In particular, pupils were asked to rate this on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 = your worst possible life and 10 = your best possible life. Figure 15 shows that, on average, pupils who had taken part in Readathon reported higher life satisfaction than those who hadn't.

Figure 15: Average life satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10 by whether or not pupils had taken part in Readathon-sponsored reads in school
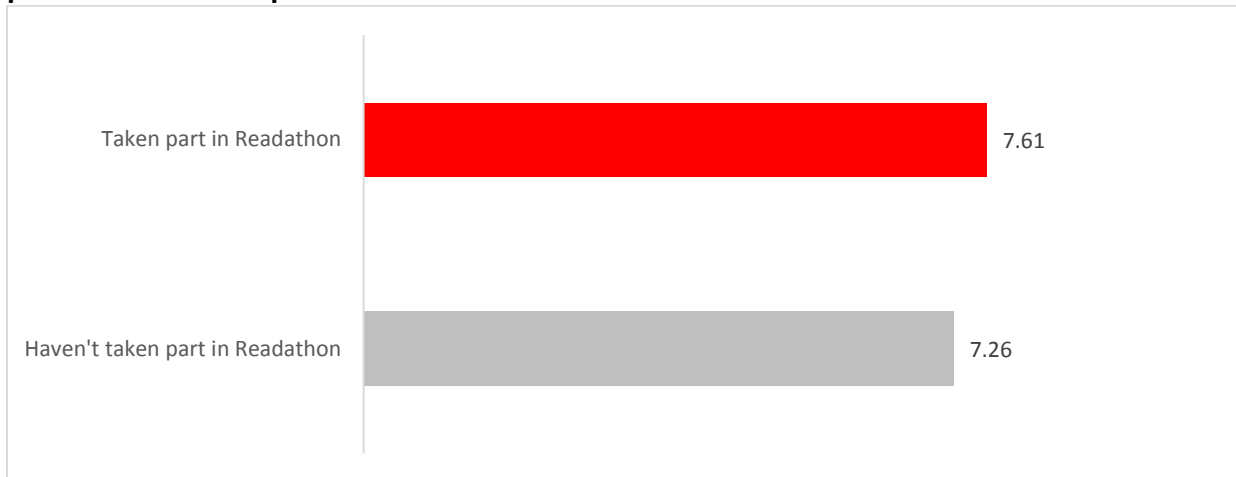
The finding remains true when one looks at pupils' gender, age group and free school meal status (see Figure 16).

Figure 16: Average life satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10 by whether or not pupils had taken part in Readathon-sponsored reads in school by pupil characteristics
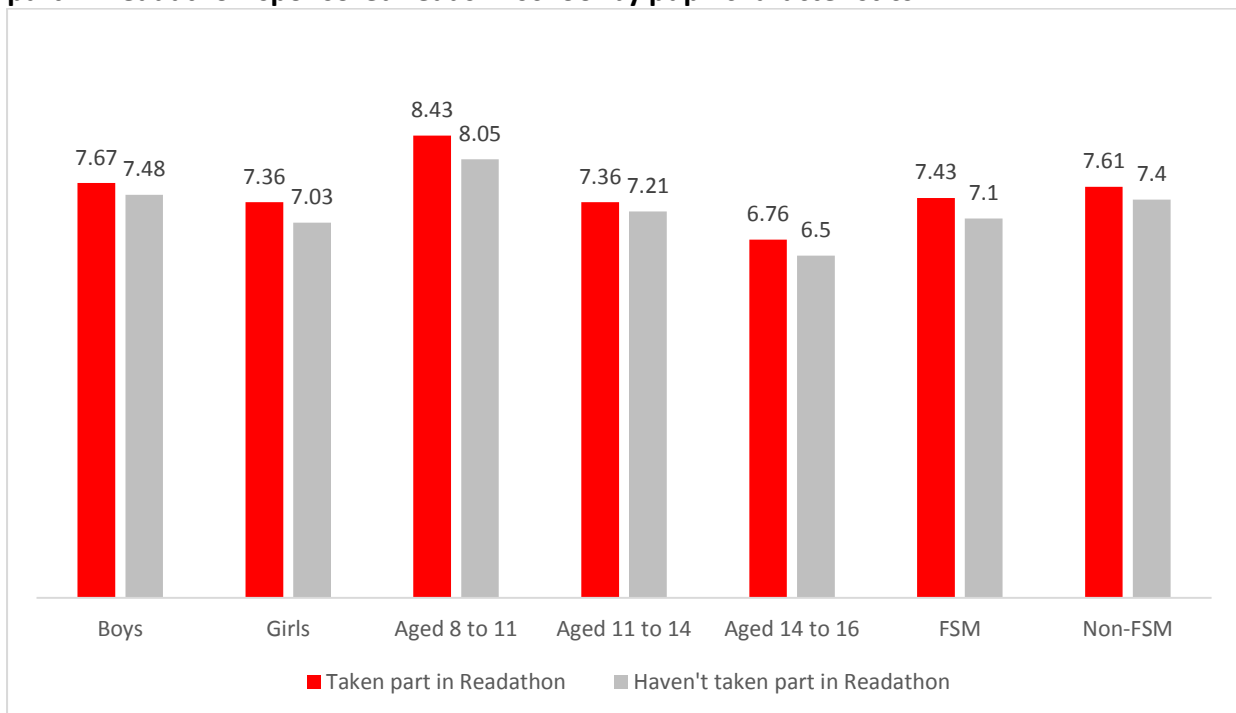
Summing up

To sum up, findings from the survey have given us a glimpse into the wider reading patterns of pupils who have taken part in Readathon-sponsored reads in school. They suggest that these pupils enjoy reading more, read daily more often, read a greater variety of materials and think more positively about reading than their peers who haven't participated in Readathon. This is irrespective of their gender, age group and whether or not they receive free school meals.

While these are encouraging findings, they only offer us crude insight into the potential benefits of taking part in Readathon. An evaluation that uses pre and post-tests, as well as a control group, is needed to establish with greater certainty that taking part in Readathon has an impact on pupils' wider reading outcomes. Nonetheless, the current findings offer a promising glimpse of what Readathon can achieve.

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