



How Does Age Relate to Pupils' Perceptions of Themselves as Readers?

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Research has shown that age profoundly affects attitudes towards reading and reading behaviour. For example, a recent study by Scholastic (2008) showed that while 30% of 5 to 8-year-olds were classified as high frequency readers (i.e. read a book every day), only 17% read as frequently by ages 15-17. Comparing 9 and 11-year-old pupils, Sainsbury and Schagen (2004) also found that older children enjoy reading less and that they hold more negative attitudes towards reading than younger ones.

Much has been made of the reluctant or disengaged reader at secondary schools and it was therefore of interest to us to explore the connection between age and seeing oneself as a reader. Are there significant differences between primary and secondary school pupils as readers? And if so, what are these differences and what could be done to address them? This report forms a companion piece to the full report of the study, *Young people's self-perceptions as readers: An investigation including family, peer and school influences* (Clark, Osborne and Akerman, 2008).

To investigate the impact of age on the reading self-concept two broad categories were identified – primary and secondary. The primary category refers to pupils up to upper-key stage 2, while the secondary category includes key stage 3 pupils. It should be noted that while this crude categorisation may hide some important differences within primary or secondary pupils, it allows for general age differences to be obtained.

Methodology

Reading Connects is an initiative delivered by the National Literacy Trust (NLT) on behalf of the Department of Children Schools and Families. It supports schools in building whole-school reading communities. Twenty nine Reading Connects schools (over 1600 pupils) took part in the online questionnaire. In addition to being emailed the link to the online questionnaire, teachers were also sent guidance on how to administer the questionnaire. The analyses in this paper are predominantly based on basic descriptive statistics (such as frequency distributions and percentages). The data in this study were analysed using SPSS 13.0. For more information on the methodology and analyses please see the full report: *Young people's self-perceptions as readers: An investigation including family, peer and school influences* (Clark, Osborne and Akerman, 2008).

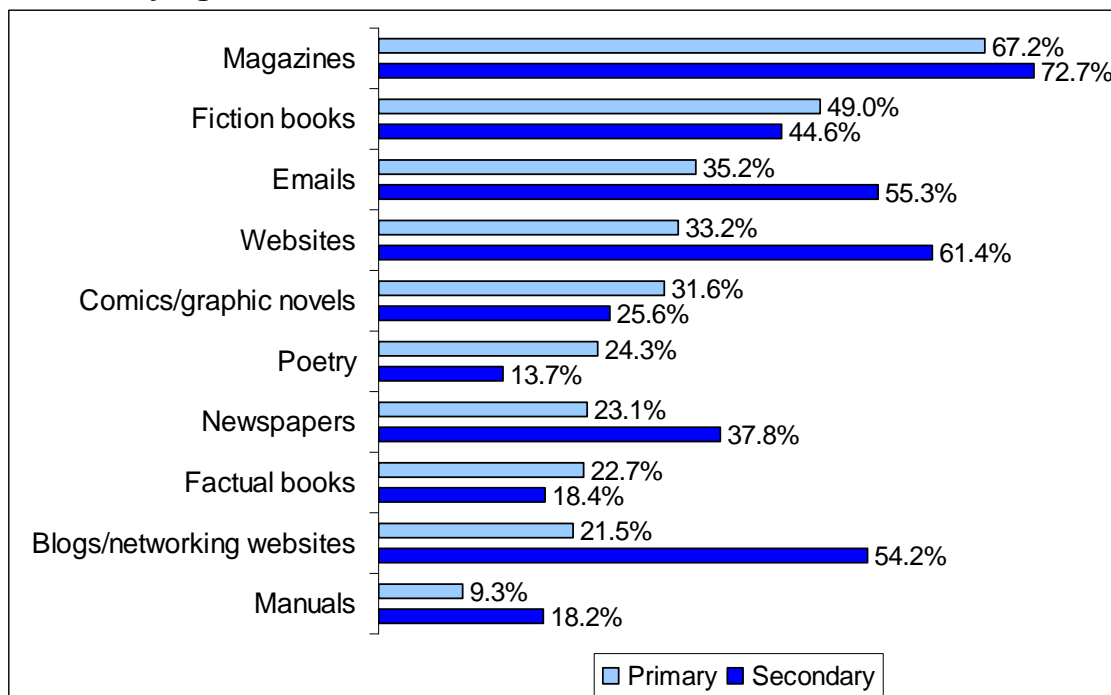
Any result for which statistical significance is reported was significant at the conventional probability level of 0.05. This means that the result would be likely to occur by chance only a few times in every 100 cases. However, as noted by Hall and Cole (1999), some judgement is needed about the educational significance of these findings.

Preliminary findings

Previous research has shown that reading enjoyment declines with age (Clark and Foster, 2005; Hall and Cole, 1999). Consistent with this research, a significantly greater percentage of primary than secondary pupils indicated that they enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot (73% and 55%, respectively). This is in line with a previous Reading Connects survey (Clark and Foster, 2005), where a greater percentage of primary than secondary pupils reported themselves to be more proficient readers.

However, while the previous Reading Connects survey (Clark and Foster, 2005) has shown that primary school children read a greater variety of materials, results from the present study indicate that secondary pupils endorse a wider range of texts than primary school pupils (see **Figure 1**). A significantly greater number of secondary than primary pupils said that they read emails, websites, newspapers, blogs/networking websites and manuals. By contrast, a significantly greater number of primary than secondary pupils indicated that they read poetry outside of class. It is likely that the difference in reading choices is the result of greater access of secondary pupils to computers. In fact, previous NLT research (Clark and Foster, 2005) has shown that secondary pupils had greater access to a computer at home than primary pupils.

Figure 1: Which of the following do you read outside of school more than once a month? By age



The interplay between reader self-perceptions, age and other factors

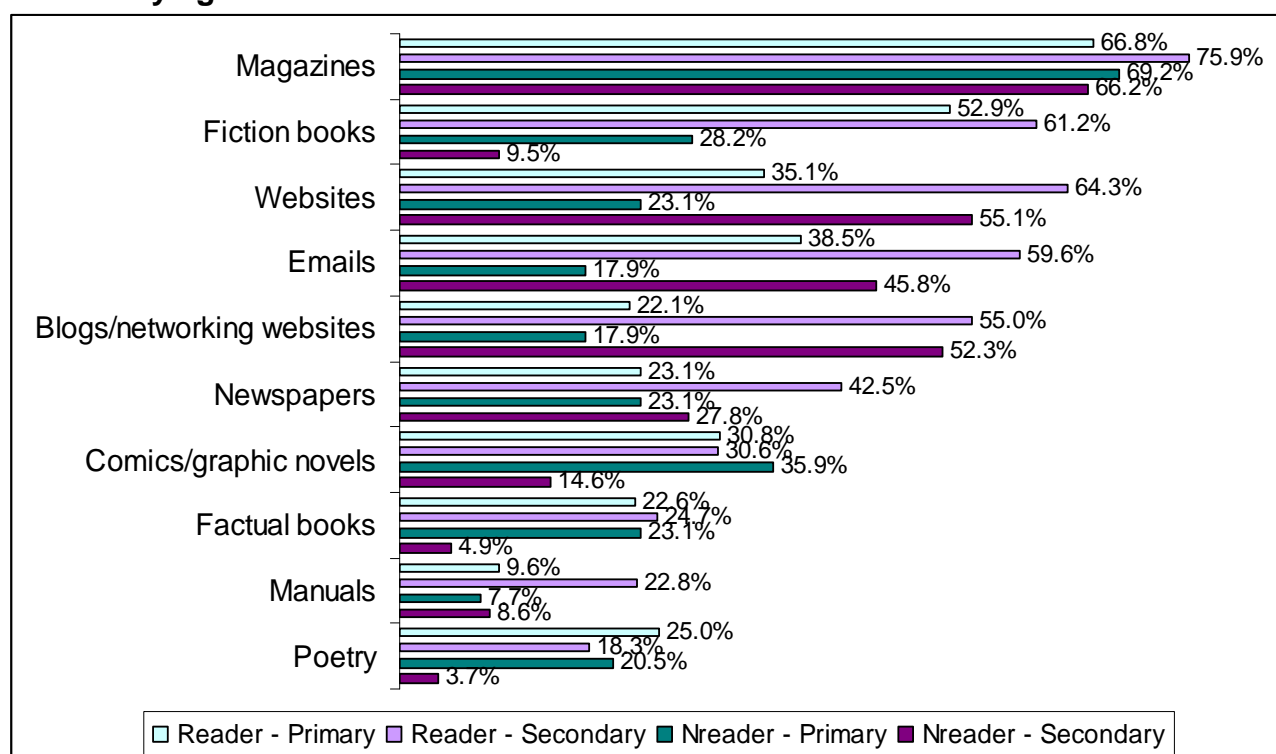
When asked whether they are a reader, a greater percentage of primary than secondary pupils saw themselves as a “reader” (84.2% and 68.4%, respectively). This self-definition has an interesting impact on their attitudes and reading behaviour. Additionally, pupils’ attitudes, habits and views, both positive and negative, from primary school are further cemented in secondary school

When asked how often they read outside of school, the profiles of reading frequency were relatively similar for primary and secondary non-readers. However, there were significant differences between primary and secondary readers, with a notably greater percentage of primary than secondary readers stating that they read outside of school every day or almost every day (57.2% and 46.0%, respectively).

Types of material read outside of school

The interplay between age and reader self-concept is also reflected in pupils’ reading choices outside of school (see **Figure 2**). Secondary readers generally indicated that they read a greater range of materials than primary readers, while secondary non-readers were reading different materials from primary non-readers.

Figure 2: Which of the following do you read outside of school more than once a month? By age and reader self-definition



More specifically, a significantly greater percentage of secondary than primary readers read magazines, fiction books, websites, emails, blogs/networking websites, newspapers and manuals, while a significantly greater percentage of primary than secondary readers stated reading poetry outside of school. Conversely, a significantly

greater percentage of primary than secondary non-readers stated reading fiction books, comics/graphic novels, factual books and poetry outside of school, while a significantly greater percentage of secondary than primary non-readers stated that they read more alternative reading materials, such as websites, emails and blogs/networking websites.

The striking aspect of these results is the evidence that young people who do not describe themselves as readers are still reading a variety of materials. Even in the case of many secondary non-readers, the simple, but crucial difference is that those who do not call themselves readers do not read fiction books.

Feelings associated with reading

Age and reader self-concept also affected what feelings pupils associated with reading. When asked how reading makes them feel, there was only one significant difference between readers, with a significantly greater percentage of primary than secondary readers stating that reading makes them happy (51.4% and 36.4%, respectively). However, there were a few statistically significant differences between non-readers. More specifically, a significantly greater percentage of primary than secondary non-readers indicated that reading calms them (43.6% vs. 28.2%) and makes them feel happy (28.3% vs. 8.3%) and clever/intelligent (17.9% vs. 8.6%). However, they also believed that reading makes them nervous (12.8% vs. 4.6%) and stressed (23.1% and 12.0%, respectively).

Reader characteristics

Without following any apparent pattern, there were widely differing views between the groups on the characteristics of a reader (see **Figure 3**). A significantly greater percentage of primary than secondary readers believed that readers are happy and have lots of friends, while a significantly greater percentage of secondary than primary readers viewed readers as clever/intelligent but also as geeks, boring and as people who do not go out much.

Conversely, a significantly greater percentage of primary than secondary non-readers believed that readers are people who will do well and someone who has lots of friends while their secondary non-reader counterparts were significantly more likely to view readers as clever/intelligent but also as people who do not go out much.

Choice of reading materials

When asked what materials a reader enjoys, a significantly greater percentage of both primary and secondary non-readers compared to their reading counterparts believed that a reader reads fiction books (see **Figure 4**). A significantly greater percentage of primary non-readers than readers also believed that a reader enjoys factual books, newspapers and blogs/networking websites.

Figure 3: If you imagine someone who reads, what kind of person are they? By age and reader self-definition

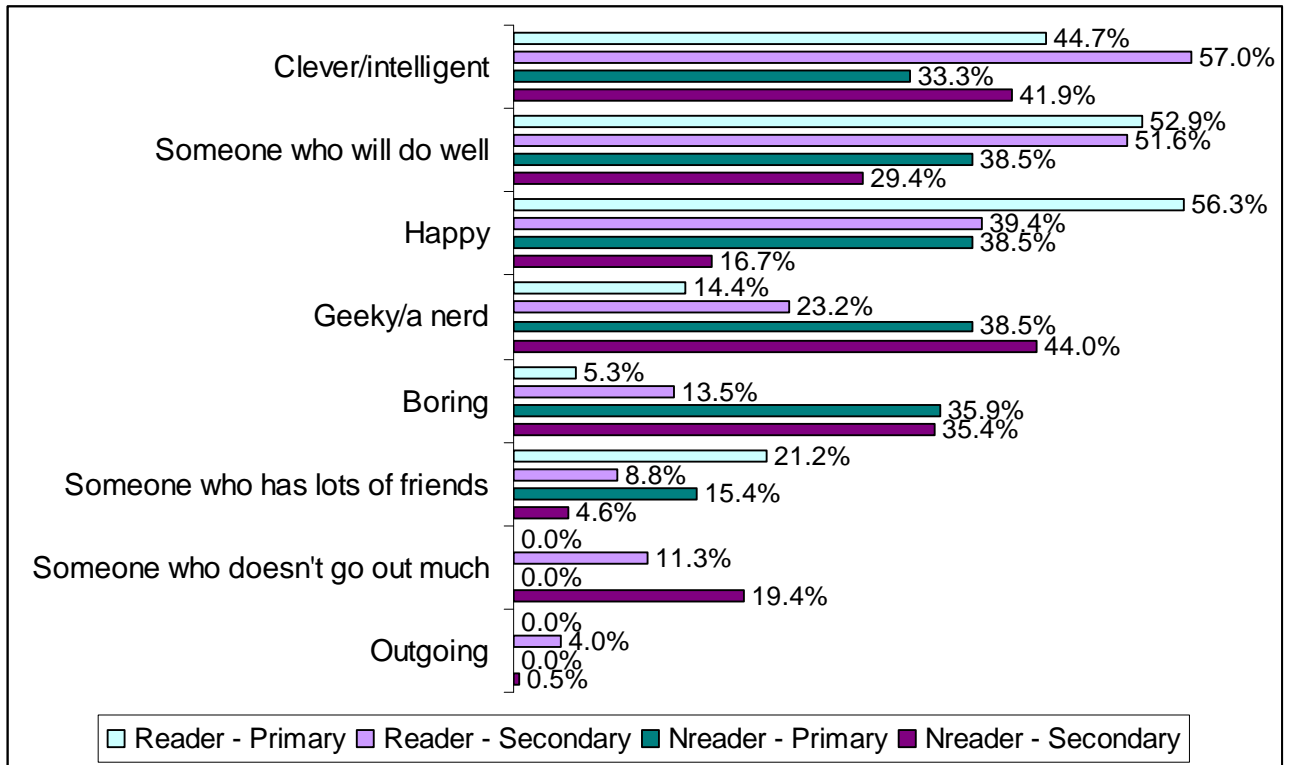
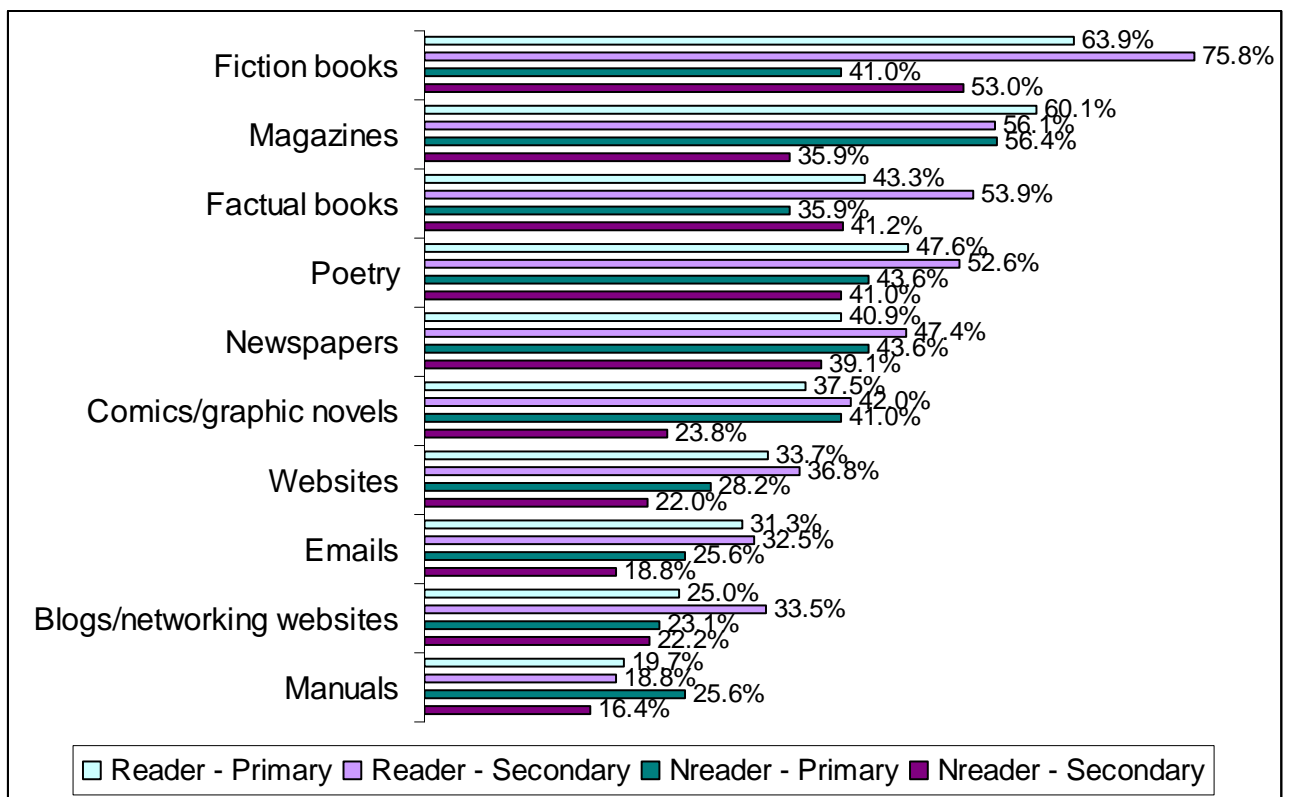


Figure 4: In your opinion, what does a reader enjoy? By age and reader self-definition



Primary and secondary non-readers believed that a reader enjoys different materials. More specifically, primary non-readers were significantly more likely than their

secondary non-reading peers to say that a reader reads magazines, newspapers, comics/graphic novels, websites, emails and manuals. By contrast, secondary non-readers were significantly more likely than their non-reading primary counterparts to say that a reader reads fiction and factual books.

Importance of reading

There were no significant differences between the groups in terms of their view of reading as a gendered activity. However, there were marked differences between the groups in terms of the importance reading plays in their lives at the moment. With the exception of television, which was not affected by the reader/age relationship, a significantly greater percentage of reading primary pupils than their non-reading peers indicated that reading is more important than sport (41.3% vs. 24.9%), hanging out with friends (37.5% vs. 19.4%) and listening to music (38.0% vs. 21.5%).

Similar dynamics also existed between reading and non-reading secondary pupils, with a significantly greater percentage of reading secondary pupils than their non-reading peers saying that reading is more important at the moment than sport (41.0% vs. 11.6%), hanging out with friends (25.6% vs. 12.0%) and listening to music (30.8% vs. 10.6%).

A significantly greater percentage of secondary readers than non-readers also believed that reading is more important than computers/computer games in their lives at the moment (15.4% vs. 8.6%), while a significantly greater percentage of primary non-readers than their reading peers saw reading as more important than computers/computer games at the moment (24.5% vs. 17.8%). This finding may be partly due to the greater access to technology in the teenage years (e.g. Clark and Foster, 2005)

However, these significant differences disappeared when pupils were asked to assess the importance that reading will play in relation to other activities for them to do well in life, which suggests that pupils of all ages equate reading with success in later life.

Levels of family support

There were significant differences between the groups in terms of self-rated family perception of their reading skills (see **Figure 5**). A significantly greater percentage of both reading and non-reading primary pupils indicated that they believe that their mother (or step-mother/carer) thinks that they read well. A significantly greater percentage of non-reading primary than secondary pupils also believed that their father (or step-father/carer) and sibling think that they read well. By contrast, a significantly greater percentage of both reading and non-reading secondary pupils indicated that they do not know what their family members think about their reading skills.

When asked which family member encourages them to read, a significantly greater percentage of primary readers and non-readers than their secondary counterparts indicated that their brother or sister encourages them to read (see **Figure 6**). A significantly greater percentage of primary non-readers rather than their secondary counterparts believed that their mother (or step-mother/carer) encourages them to read.

Conversely, a significantly greater percentage of both secondary readers and non-readers indicated that they do not know which family member encourages them to read.

Figure 5: Who in your family thinks you are a good reader? By age and reader self-definition

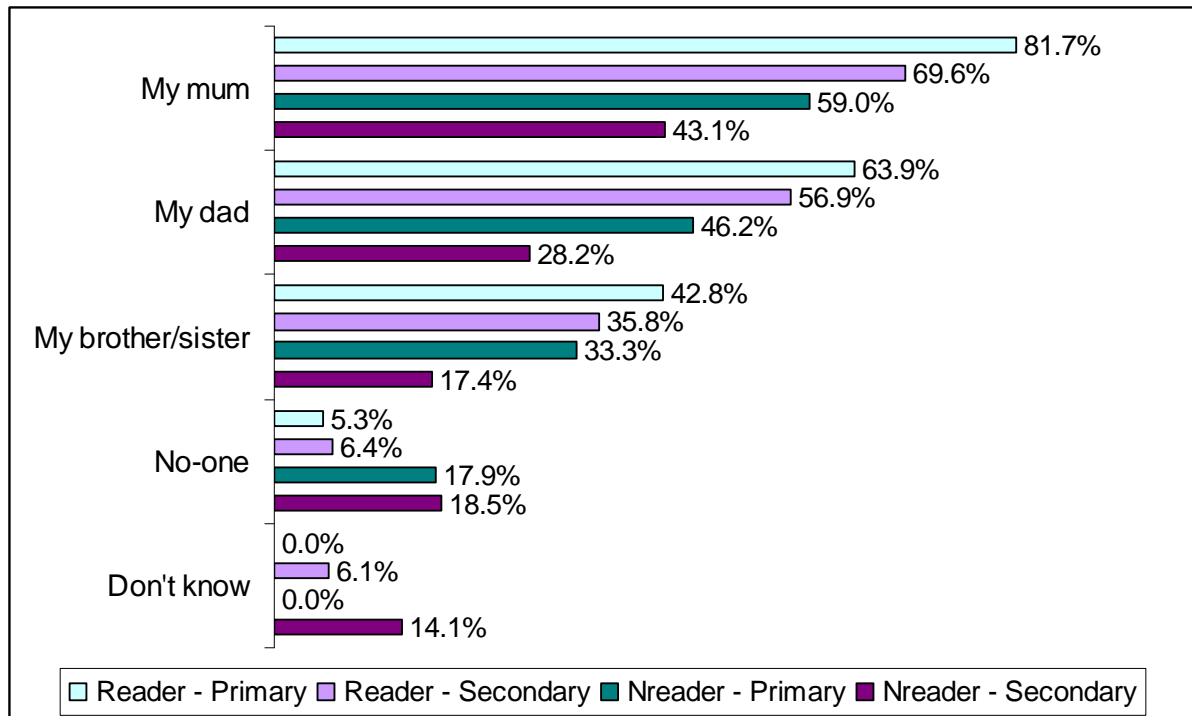
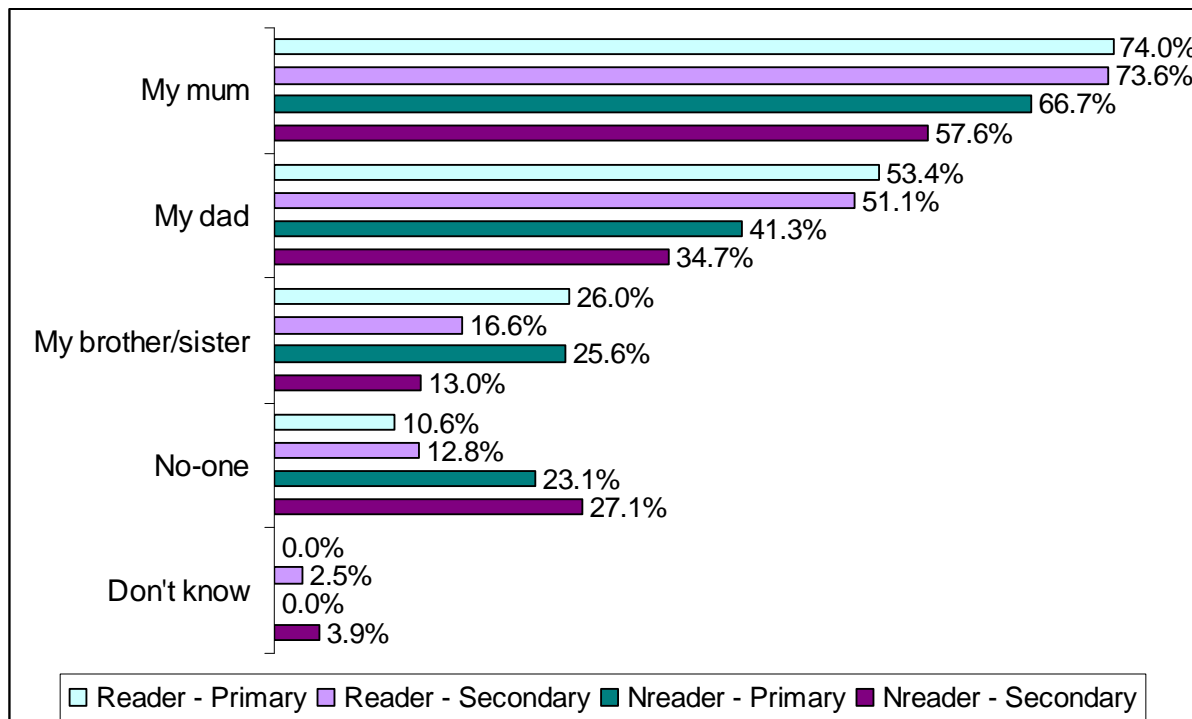


Figure 6: Who in your family encourages you to read? By age and self-definition

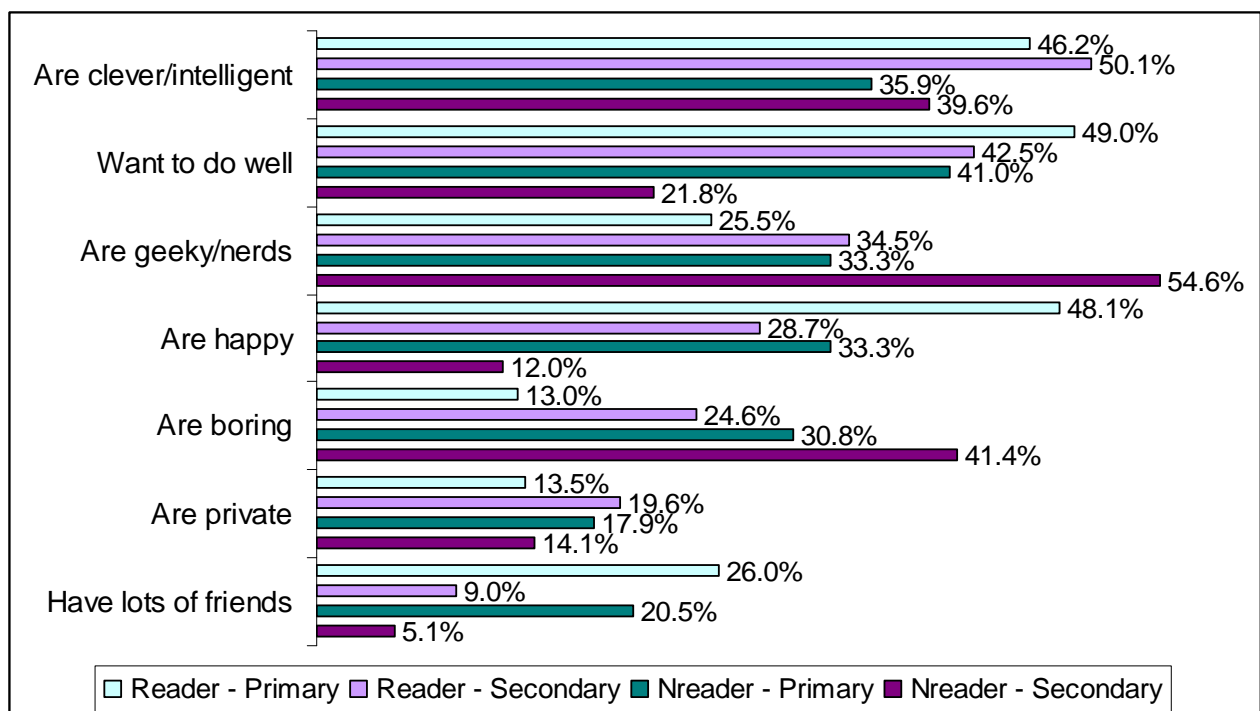


Peer influences

When asked about their friends' perception of readers, some significant differences between the groups emerged. Generally, both non-reading and reading primary pupils believed that their friends viewed readers more favourably than their secondary counterparts (see **Figure 7**). More specifically, a significantly greater percentage of both reading and non-reading primary than secondary pupils believed that their friends see readers as happy and people with a lot of friends. A significantly greater percentage of non-reading primary than secondary pupils also believed that their friends views readers as someone who will do well.

By contrast, a significantly greater percentage of both reading and non-reading secondary pupils felt that their friends perceived readers to be geeky/nerds, while non-reading secondary pupils were also more likely than their primary counterparts to say that their friends believe that readers are boring.

Figure 7: Do your friends think reading is for people who...? By age and reader self-definition



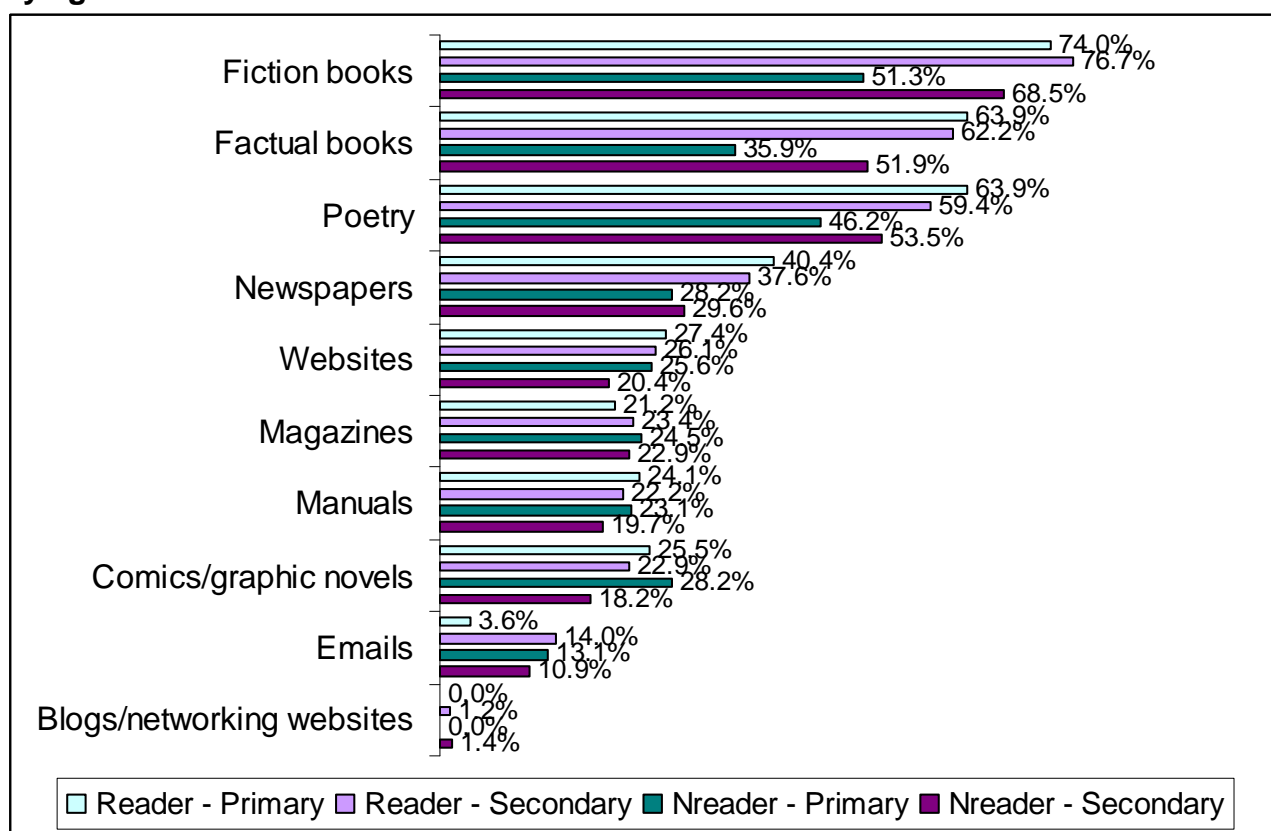
Furthermore, a significantly greater percentage of reading secondary than primary pupils indicated that they did not know what their friends thought about readers (17.1% v. 9.1%), while that pattern was reversed in non-readers – a significantly greater percentage of non-reading primary than secondary pupils stated that they did not know how their friends view readers (30.8% vs. 19.0%).

School influences

Primary readers were significantly more likely than secondary readers to say that adults in their school believe that they read well (76% vs.48%). There were no significant differences between non-readers.

There were very few differences between the groups in the extent to which they believed that certain materials were being promoted by adults in their school (see **Figure 8**). Indeed, with the exception of emails, both primary and secondary readers had similar perceptions of the texts that they feel are encouraged by schools.

Figure 8: Which of the following do adults in your school encourage you to read? By age and reader self-definition



However, a significantly greater percentage of non-reading secondary than primary pupils believed that schools encourage them to read fiction books, factual books and poetry, while a greater percentage of non-reading primary than secondary pupils indicated that schools promote comics/graphic novels. A significantly greater percentage of primary non-readers than secondary ones did not know what materials are being encouraged by schools (41.0% vs. 19.2%).

Discussion

This survey backs up the existing evidence that primary pupils are more likely to describe themselves as readers and are more likely to read outside school than those in secondary school. The findings underline the need to continue to target secondary

pupils specifically to help them redefine their perception of their reading, which may help to make reading something that can be seen as fun, since it has to compete with many other activities that may currently be seen as more enjoyable.

As the findings show that young people of all ages do read some kinds of materials, this should provide encouragement for those working to engage children in reading. The results show that almost all young people are already reading some kinds of texts outside of school, giving scope to build on their interests.

Teachers wishing to promote reading to pupils who do not perceive themselves as readers may wish to bear in mind that there were marked age differences in reading choices outside of school, with secondary pupils being more likely to read materials that require technology, such as websites, emails, and blogs/networking websites, possibly indicating a difference in access to computers in school. By contrast, primary school pupils were more likely to read poetry outside of class.

In addition to McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1995), who found a consistent decline in both recreational and academic reading attitudes as children progressed upwards through grade levels, our research similarly showed that primary pupils enjoyed reading more and read more than secondary pupils.

It is possible that the reader self-concept, and its associated views and attitudes, becomes cemented with age. While our data was not longitudinal but cross-sectional, and we therefore cannot speak about individual changes, there appeared to be significant differences between primary and secondary readers and non-readers. Indeed, differences in the self-concept appear to emerge early. Chapman et al. (2000) examined the relationship between academic self-concept and measures of reading-related performance in children starting school and found that differences in reading self-concepts between competent and less competent readers appeared within the first two months of schooling.

The NLT research reports that a lack of reading enjoyment and negative attitudes to reading are often compounded when pupils are at secondary school. This emphasises the importance of primary and secondary schools working together to pass on information about pupils' attitudes to reading and the types of reading materials that pupils have enjoyed (or not enjoyed) in and out of the classroom. As well as transferring of information, they should be working together in creative ways to bridge the reading gap as pupils leave primary school and enter Year 7. The Summer Reading Challenge is one good way to do this – with primary schools encouraging pupils to take part and then secondary schools doing follow-up work in the new term.

This research also emphasises the importance of primary and secondary schools following a common reading strategy. It would be a useful exercise for primary and secondary schools to develop a common 'reading for pleasure strategy' together, in collaboration with their school improvement teams. This should include ways to promote the right messages about reading to pupils.

Overall, the disparity between readers and non-readers in their perceptions of the importance of reading could be addressed by work to help young people formulate their aspirations and the steps needed to achieve them, including developing their reading skills. Where it is possible to involve parents or other role models in this process, this is likely to have a positive effect (for a review of role models and their impact see Clark, 2008).

The NLT will conduct a survey at the end of 2008 that focuses on the types of role models that children draw on to be inspired to read. This will also include an exploration of the attributes of role models that children and young people believe are important and who would deter them from reading. Such information will help us and others to define our approaches of using role models in reader engagement strategies.

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