READING MATTERS PROGRAMME:

2024/2025 IMPACT EVALUATION REPORT

Attainment Raising Programmes

Network for East Anglian Collaborative Outreach (neaco)

Project description

Reading Matters is a 6-week programme designed for Year 7 and Year 8 students (although it is also appropriate for Year 9 students with significantly lower reading age). Participants were selected by their schools based on their receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) and/or being from underrepresented groups (UGR) in Higher Education (HE). These students were also identified as having a reading level of below their actual age and/or working at a target grade significantly lower than the expected Year 6 SAT scores, who will therefore benefit best from the additional support of the intervention.[1] The programme was delivered across 9 schools in East Anglia, with groups of maximum 3 students per session, involving a total of 153 participants. The programme was designed by Shaping Futures and co-adapted by our Higher Education Champions and Literacy Leads within the schools. It was delivered in partnership with our Higher Education Champions based in schools in the East of England.

The main goal of the programme is to raise students' attainment levels by helping them develop key literacy skills focusing on disciplinary literacy. As an early intervention beginning in Year 7 and/or Year 8, Reading Matters draws on existing reading materials in various key subjects across the curriculum, and learners are provided with a booklet that is adapted for the individual school. This aims to increase students' reading, comprehension and analytical skills without adding to their cognitive load, thereby helping them access the wider secondary school curriculum and laying the foundations required for success at Key Stages 3 and 4.

The programme consists of 6 sessions, each following the guided reading structure but using a different subject text each week, chosen by the individual school. A summary the session outline is provided in Table 1 below:

Session	Delivery type	Session structure	Subject text
1	In-school, HEC delivery	1. Pre-reading task to ascertain understanding of topic and familiarity of words 2. HEC reads text aloud to students	Decided by school, e.g., English literature

[1] Please note that this is not an intervention for Special Educational Needs learners.

		3. Students read text aloud so HEC hears and gauges confidence in reading 4. Skimming and scanning – students learn these techniques by answering questions set by teacher 5. Understanding – students answer more challenging questions to demonstrate understanding of the text 6. Plenary to check for what students have gained from session	
2	In-school, HEC delivery	1. Week 1 recap Steps 2-7. Same structure as in Week 1	Decided by school, e.g., Science
3	In-school, HEC delivery	1. Week 2 recap Steps 2-7. Same structure as in Week 1	Decided by school, e.g., Geography
4	In-school, HEC delivery	1. Week 3 recap Steps 2-7. Same structure as in Week 1	Decided by school, e.g., RE
5	In-school, HEC delivery	1. Week 4 recap Steps 2-7. Same structure as in Week 1	Decided by school, e.g., History
6	In-school, HEC delivery	1. Week 5 recap Steps 2-7. Same structure as in Week 1	Decided by school, e.g., Media Studies

Table 1: Session outline of Reading Matters programme.

Evaluation approach

The programme was underpinned by a Theory of Change. All activity was logged on the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) and made use of the HEAT Attainment Raising Typology to code activity. The evaluation focused on a pre-and-post design, looking at student cognitive and reading skills (and how these affected the learners' confidence) and academic self-efficacy. Additionally, some open-ended qualitative questions were included to capture the learners' main takeaways from the project, allowing them to reflect on their experiences more freely. The evaluation tracked the changes in these specific skills and outcomes before and after the intervention, and collected information on the learners' perceived impact of the project.

Pre- and post-project surveys were sent to 153 Year 7, Year 8 and Year 9 students across nine schools of East Anglia (see Participants section) before and after their participation in the Reading Matters programme. Each school had between 12 and 15 participating students, who were organised into groups of maximum three for the programme. Surveys were available in both electronic and paper formats, with a preference for paper, which helped mitigate issues related to technology access in the classroom and supported a higher response rate.

This amounts to an OfS Standards of Evidence Type 2 approach that generates empirical evidence but cannot provide an insight into the specific causal impact of the project. Survey questions used were based on TASO's Access and Success Questionnaire (ASQ).

To analyse impact, paired Wilcoxon tests were conducted to compare pre- and post-survey results. The sample size of matched responses (see section below) is sufficient to detect moderate or large changes, though smaller effects may not reach statistical significance. Therefore, the findings provide useful insights into the students who participated, while generalisations beyond this group should be made carefully.

Results

Participants

The programme was delivered to 153 students, of which 60 were Year 7 learners, 81 were Year 8 learners and 12 were Year 9 learners. Out of the 153 participants, 130 completed the pre-programme survey (85% response rate) and 117 completed the post-programme survey (76.5% response rate). A total of 107 students completed both the pre- and post-surveys, accounting for a 69.9% overall response rate. Out of these, 49 were Year 7 students, 51 were Year 8 students and 7 were Year 9 students. An overall impact analysis was conducted including all year groups, while individual year group analyses were limited to Year 7 and Year 8 due to small numbers in Year 9.

Findings and discussion

Overall impact

The figures below, constructed from the 107 matched pre- and post- survey data, reflect one of the main key findings (KFs) of the programme:

KEY FINDING 1: Learners reported a significant development in their cognitive and reading skills after participating in the Reading Matters programme.

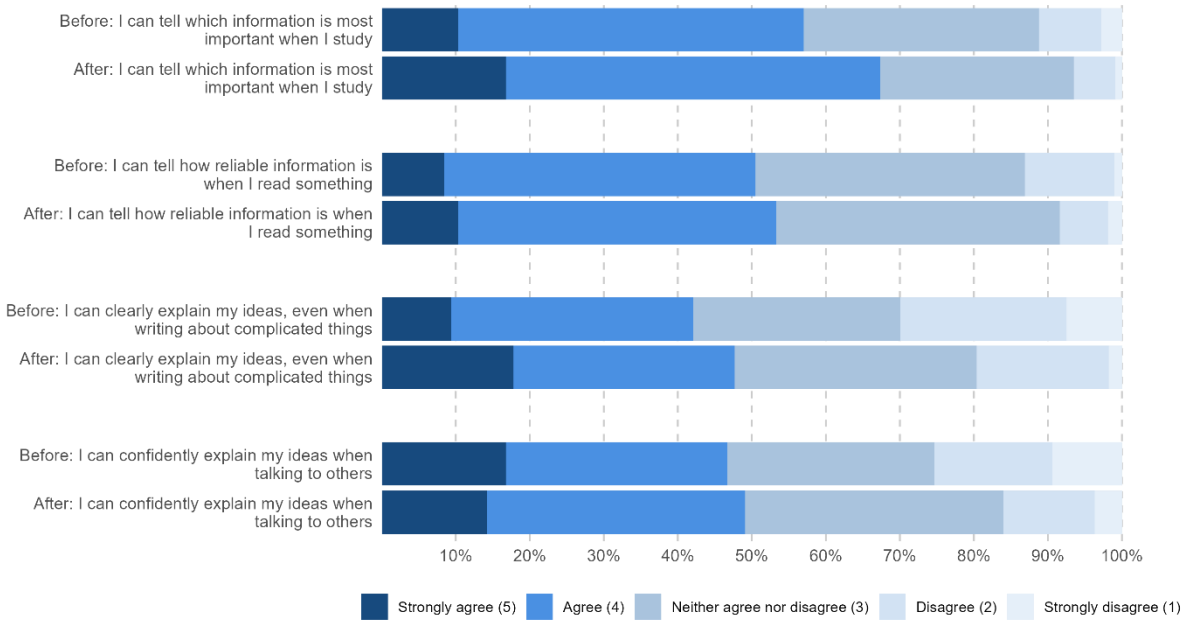

Figure 1: Cognitive skills. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed a significant difference between the pre- and post-survey results of the 'Cognitive skills' block ($p = 0.006$). Regarding question-level analyses, a significant positive difference was found for the first ($p = 0.01$) and third questions ($p = 0.018$), while no significant differences were observed in the second ($p = 0.361$) and fourth ($p = 0.344$) questions in this block.

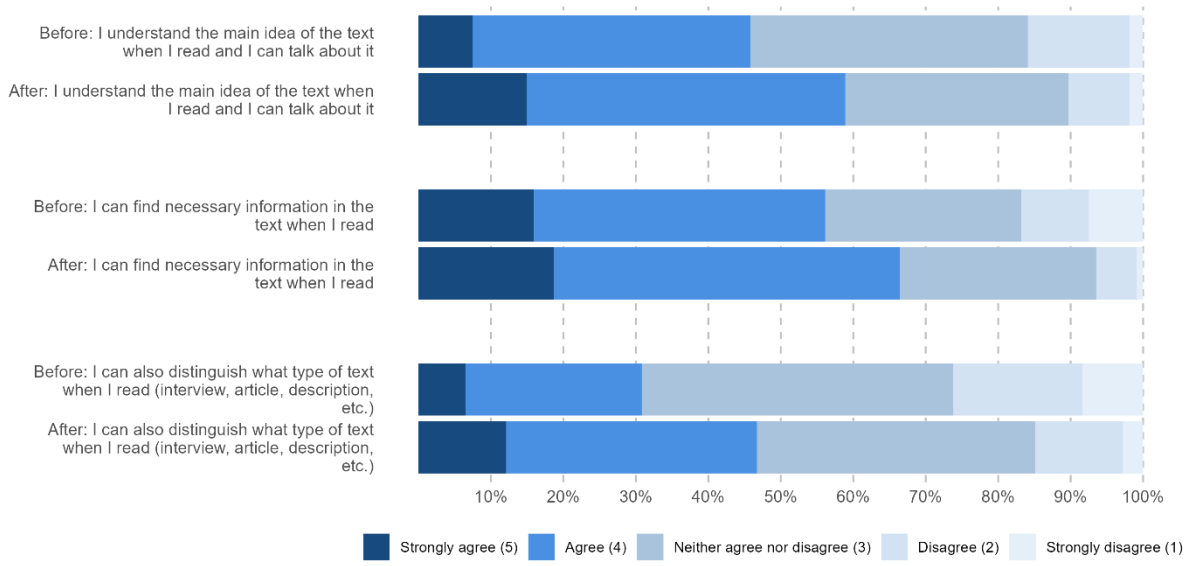

Figure 2: Reading skills. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed a significant difference between the pre- and post-survey results of the 'Reading skills' block ($p < 0.001$). Regarding question-level analyses, a significant positive difference was found across all the questions in the block ($p = 0.005$, $p = 0.008$ and $p < 0.001$, respectively).

Analyses conducted at the block level indicated a significant positive change in the students' self-reported perspectives on their cognitive and reading skills. Fine-grained, question-level analyses further revealed that this effect was observed across all individual questions in the reading block and in two out of the four questions in the cognitive one. These two questions driving the positive effect in the cognitive block are concerned with students' ability to discern important information and to explain their ideas. Both of these abilities are directly targeted in the design of the programme, in which students are explicitly taught and apply skimming and scanning techniques to the texts covered (directly linked to the former question) and are asked to answer questions about their ideas and understanding of the texts (directly linked to the latter question). This, together with the fact that reading skills were explicitly taught as the core focus of the programme, aligns with existing research suggesting that programmes are most effective when their learning objectives are made explicit (Aubin, 2023). In contrast, the other two questions in the cognitive block – relating to information reliability and confidence in talking to others – might not have been directly targeted. While they are related to the cognitive skills fostered through literacy, the programme does not include specific techniques or activities that focus on them. To address these areas in a more direct manner, future iterations of the programme could incorporate activities focusing

on information reliability, particularly in sessions using non-narrative texts, and provide more opportunities for structured talk in the sessions (see Quigley and Coleman, 2018).

KEY FINDING 2: Some positive changes were found in the students' self-reported perspectives on their self-efficacy (post-16) after participating in the Reading Matters programme, although none reached statistical significance.

KEY FINDING 3: Learners reported a significant development in their self-efficacy (HE) after participating in the Reading Matters programme, although this result is skewed by one of the questions in the block.

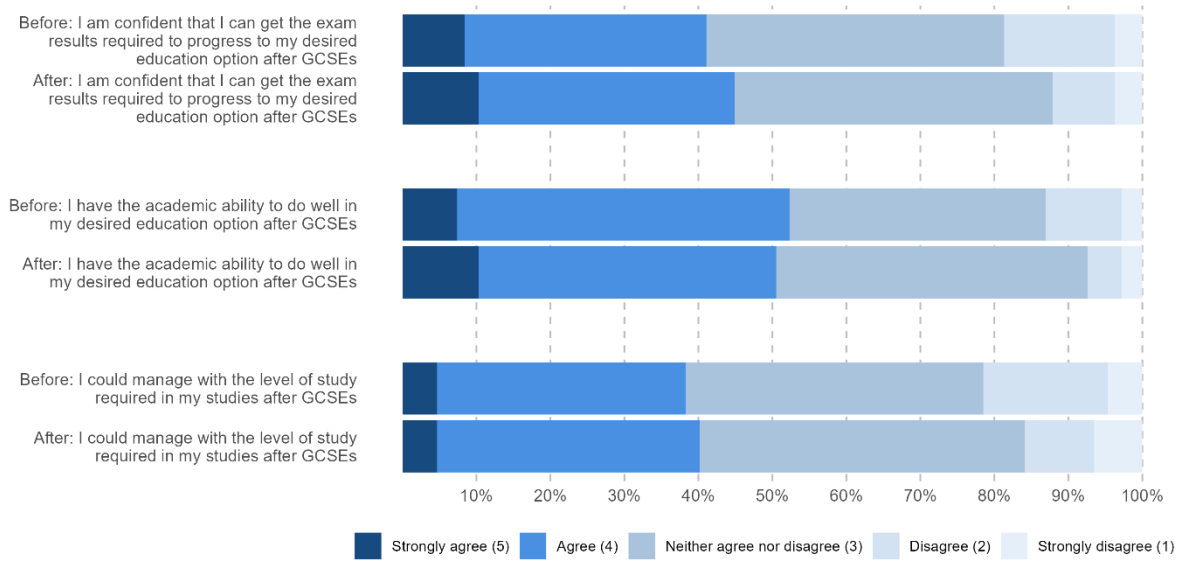

Figure 3: Self-efficacy (post-16). Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed no significant differences between the pre- and post-survey results for any of the self-efficacy (post-16) questions ($p = 0.153$, $p = 0.551$ and $p = 0.557$, respectively). No significance was found when questions were combined and treated as a separate data point for the overall 'Self-efficacy (post-16)' category ($p = 0.135$).

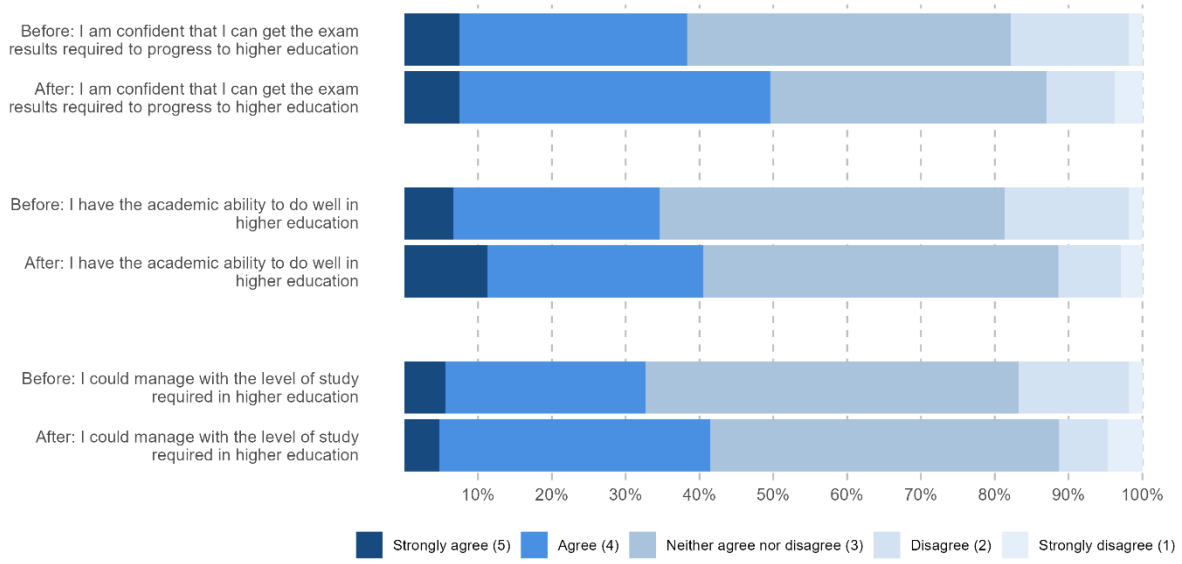

Figure 4: Self-efficacy (HE). Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed a significant difference between the pre- and post-survey results of the 'SE (HE) block ($p = 0.04$). Regarding question-level analyses, a significant positive difference was found for the second question ($p = 0.01$), while no significant differences were observed in the rest of the questions in this block ($p = 0.146$ and $p = 0.329$, respectively).

In the case of self-efficacy (post-16), some positive shifts can be observed; however, none reached the threshold for statistical significance. In contrast, analyses indicated a significant positive change in the students' self-efficacy (HE), an effect primarily driven by the second question in the block (i.e., on their academic ability to do well in HE). In other words, the overall block-level result may be overstating the effect, as it largely reflects significant change in a single question rather than a consistent shift across the block. Moreover, the finding that students' self-efficacy improved for HE but less so for post-16 education is conceptually inconsistent: since HE represents the next step after post-16 study, it would be expected that students' confidence in their ability to success in HE would build on, rather than exceed, their confidence in succeeding at post-16 level. This discrepancy suggests potential issues with the survey design or questions (see Recommendations section) rather than a genuine improvement in students' self-efficacy. Therefore, the results for both self-efficacy blocks should be interpreted with caution.

The quantitative insights observed in the question blocks above are consistent with students' responses when asked directly about the programme's impact, as illustrated in Figure 5 below:

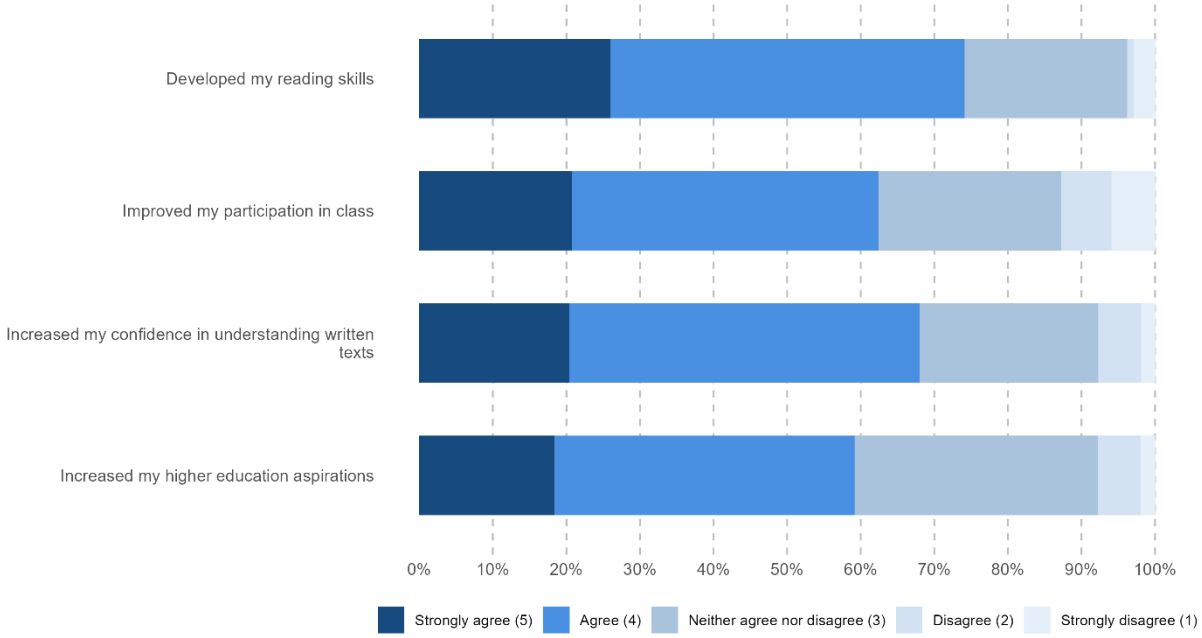

Figure 5: Perceived impact of the Reading Matters programme.

In line with the improvement in reading skills observed in the quantitative results (see Figure 2), 74.1% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that the programme had developed their reading skills more generally, while 69% reported that it had improved their confidence in understanding written texts more specifically. Additionally, 62.4% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the programme had enhanced their participation in class. However, this latter finding warrants further exploration. Given that the programme runs for only six weeks, it is possible that students were still in the process of applying their newly developed skills to classroom participation, and that longer-term effects may not have been captured within the evaluation timeframe. To address this in future iterations, teacher feedback could be incorporated (e.g., through follow-up interviews conducted several weeks after the programme) to gather longer-term and external perspectives on observable changes in classroom participation and students' performance (see Recommendations section). Lastly, 59.2% of learners reported that the programme had increased their higher education (HE) aspirations – the lowest proportion among all perceived impacts. This result is not unexpected, as the programme in its current design does not include any component on HE information, advice, and guidance (IAG), which might explain the modest rise in HE aspirations and the apparent inconsistency observed in the self-efficacy blocks (see Figures 3-4). Future iterations would benefit from embedding an IAG element within the programme outline (see Recommendations section), which would directly address (and potentially raise) students' HE aspirations, if pursued as an intended outcome.

These findings are also further supported by the qualitative data, where learners were asked open-ended questions regarding the main takeaways they gained from the programme:

Biggest takeaway of the programme	Percentage of responses[2]
Improved reading skills	30.3%
Enjoyed the programme activities	16.7%
Improved vocabulary and understanding of new words	10.6%
Improved confidence, out of which: Confidence in reading out loud	9.1% 4.5%
Became better at skimming and scanning	7.6%
Increased class participation	7.6%
Reading more regularly	6.1%
Improved ability to express ideas	3%
Improved my learning	3%
Improved ability to summarise	1.5%
Importance of listening while others read for comprehension	1.5%
Made friendships	1.5%

Table 2. Summary of topics raised in the intervention learners' responses to open-ended questions.

As shown in Table 2, 30.3% of the students noted that the programme had improved their reading skills, while 10.6% highlighted gains in vocabulary and understanding of new words. Moreover, 9.1% of the students reported increased confidence, with half of them specifically mentioning greater ease when reading out loud – an area in which many students typically struggle. Another noteworthy group of responses includes the 7.6% of students who referred to improvements in their skimming and scanning skills – key components in the development of literacy – as well as increased participation in class. As noted earlier, this latter aspect should be further explored in future iterations of the programme. Taken together, these data provide a comprehensive pattern of evidence in support of KF1 as the core finding of the Reading Matters programme.

Lastly, in addition to the qualitative insights above, several students provided brief testimonials reflecting on their participation in the programme. A selection of these, from students across different participating schools and counties, is presented below:

[2] Out of 107 total students, 66 completed the open-ended questions. The percentages presented are out of those students who completed the open-ended questions.

"I think it improves people's reading and confidence and I think every school should have this." – Y7 Student at Benjamin Britten Academy

"[My biggest takeaway from the sessions was] answering more questions, even if I didn't know the answer." – Y7 Student at Open Academy

"I have really enjoyed these lessons and reading has gotten really easy now." – Y8 Student at Queen Katharine Academy

"I liked the lessons. It was fun and interesting, I learnt a lot of information from the booklets. It was very nice." – Y8 Student at Thomas Deacon Academy

"I really enjoyed that kind of activity and the format of the intervention. It was surprisingly good, I would like to do it again if possible." – Y9 Student at Queen Katharine Academy

Differences in impact by programme group

The analyses presented in the previous section examined the overall impact of the intervention using data from all year groups combined. To explore these patterns in more detail, additional analyses were conducted using the same tests separately for each individual year group. It should be noted, however, that, due to the small number of Year 9 responses, individual analyses were only undertaken on Year 7 and Year 8 data.

Year 7 group

While overall analyses indicated a significant positive change in learners' responses for cognitive and reading skills, the Year 7 data showed that, although improvements were observed across both blocks, statistical significance was only reached in the 'reading' block (see Figures 6-7). Similar positive trends were observed in Year 7 students' self-efficacy responses (post-16 and HE). However, unlike the overall analysis, which revealed a significant change in HE self-efficacy driven by a single question, this was not the case for Year 7 students (see Figures 8-9). These results are summarised in the following key findings:

KEY FINDING 4: Year 7 learners reported a significant development in their reading skills after participating in the Reading Matters programme.

KEY FINDING 5: Some positive changes were found in the Year 7 students' self-reported perspectives on their cognitive skills and self-efficacy (post-16 and HE) after participating in the Reading Matters programme, although none reached statistical significance.

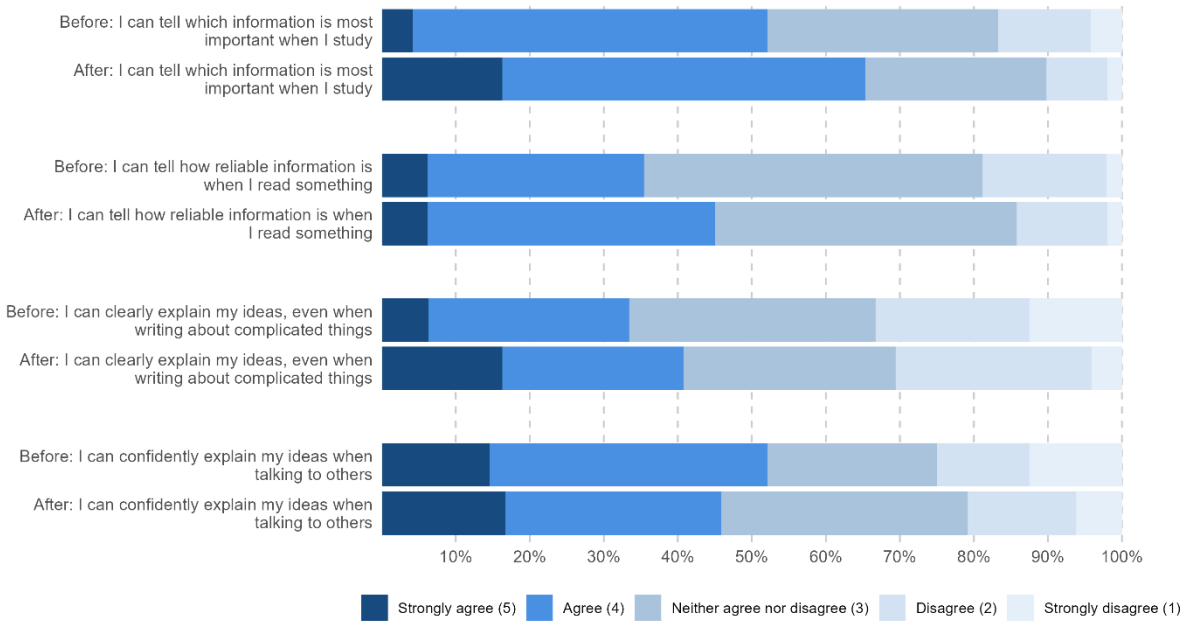

Figure 6: Year 7 pre-and-post- survey results for Cognitive Skills questions. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed no significant differences between the pre- and post-survey results of the 'Cognitive skills' block ($p = 0.100$). Regarding question-level analysis, a significant positive difference was found for the first question ($p = 0.02$), while no significant differences were observed from the other three questions of the block ($p = 0.296$, $p = 0.210$ and $p = 0.910$, respectively).

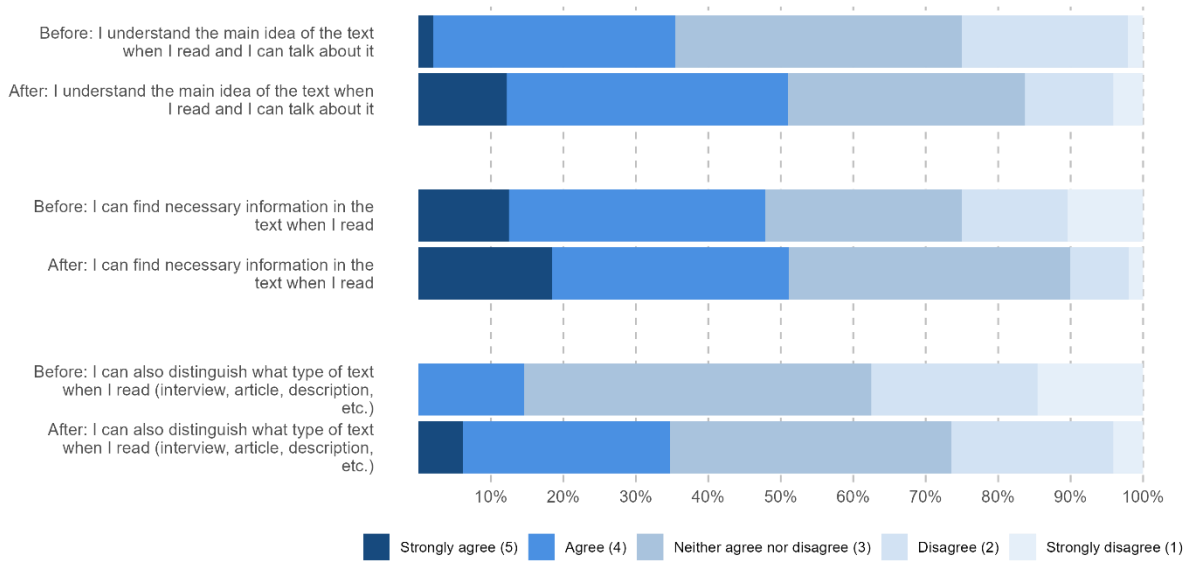

Figure 7: Year 7 pre-and-post- survey results for Reading Skills questions. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed a significant difference between the pre- and post-survey results of the 'Reading skills' block (*p = 0.004*). Regarding question-level analyses, a significant positive difference was found across all the questions in the block questions (*p = 0.03, p = 0.04* and *p = 0.01*, respectively).

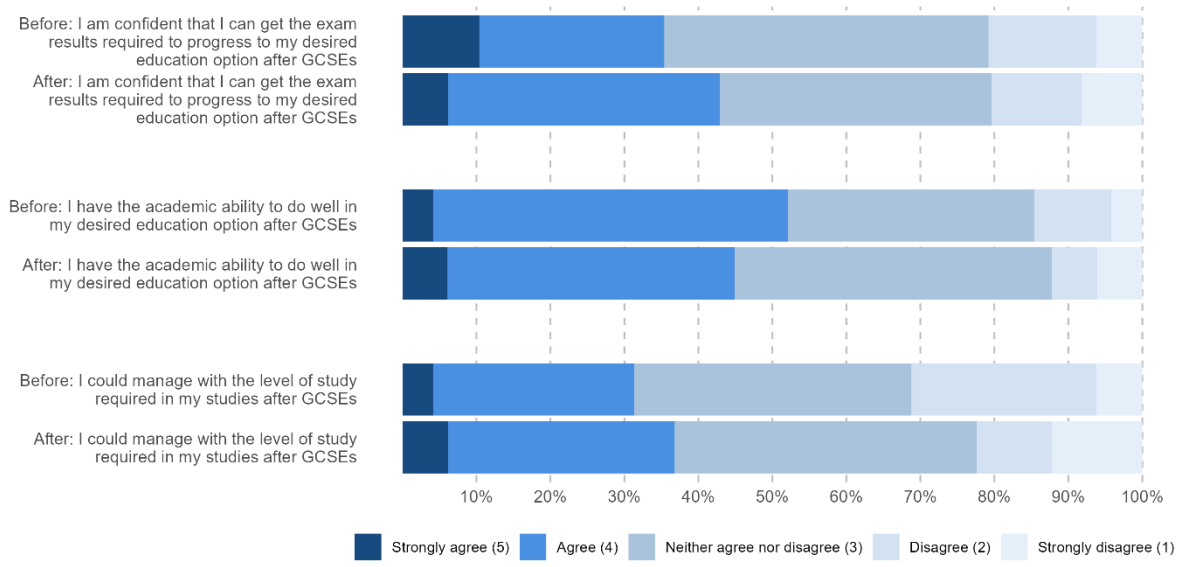

Figure 8: Year 7 pre-and-post- survey results for Self-efficacy (post-16) questions. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed no significant differences between the pre- and post-survey results for any of the self-efficacy (post-16) questions (*p = 0.724, p = 0.810* and *p = 0.294*, respectively). No significance was found when questions were combined and treated as a separate data point for the overall 'Self-efficacy (post-16)' category (*p = 0.412)*.

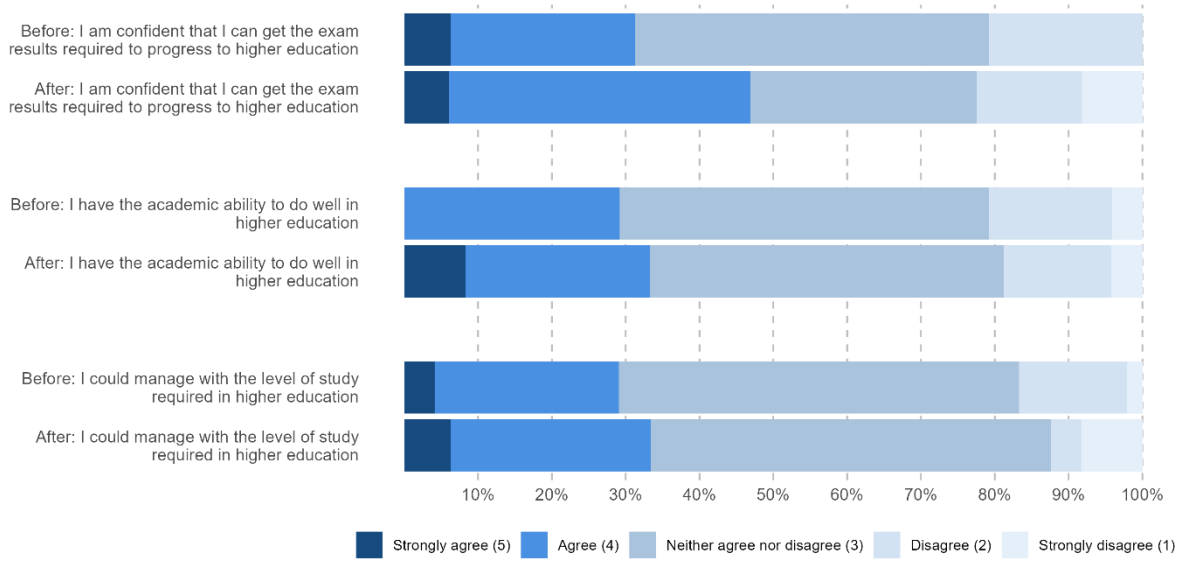

Figure 9: Year 7 pre-and-post- survey results for Self-efficacy (HE) questions. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed no significant differences between the pre- and post-survey results of the 'Self-efficacy (HE)' block ($p = 0.07$). Regarding question-level analysis, a significant positive difference was found for the first question ($p = 0.03$), while no significant differences were observed from the other two questions of the block ($p = 0.08$ and $p = 0.306$, respectively).

In terms of perceived impact, although the Year 7 percentages are broadly aligned with those observed in the overall analysis, the proportion of 'strongly agree' or 'agree' responses was lower across all four statements for Year 7 learners, as depicted in Figure 10 below. Specifically, 66.7% of Year 7 students reported that the programme had developed their reading skills, followed by 63.9% who indicated increased confidence in understanding written texts and 56.5% who reported improved participation in class. The lowest proportion (51%) referred to an increase in higher education aspirations. These values are approximately 6.7 percentage points on average lower than the overall results (74.1%, 62.4%, 69% and 59.2%, respectively; see Figure 5). Taken together, these responses, alongside Key Findings 4 and 5, might suggest that the younger cohort benefited somewhat less from the programme overall, a point that will be revisited and contrasted with subsequent analyses in the following sections.

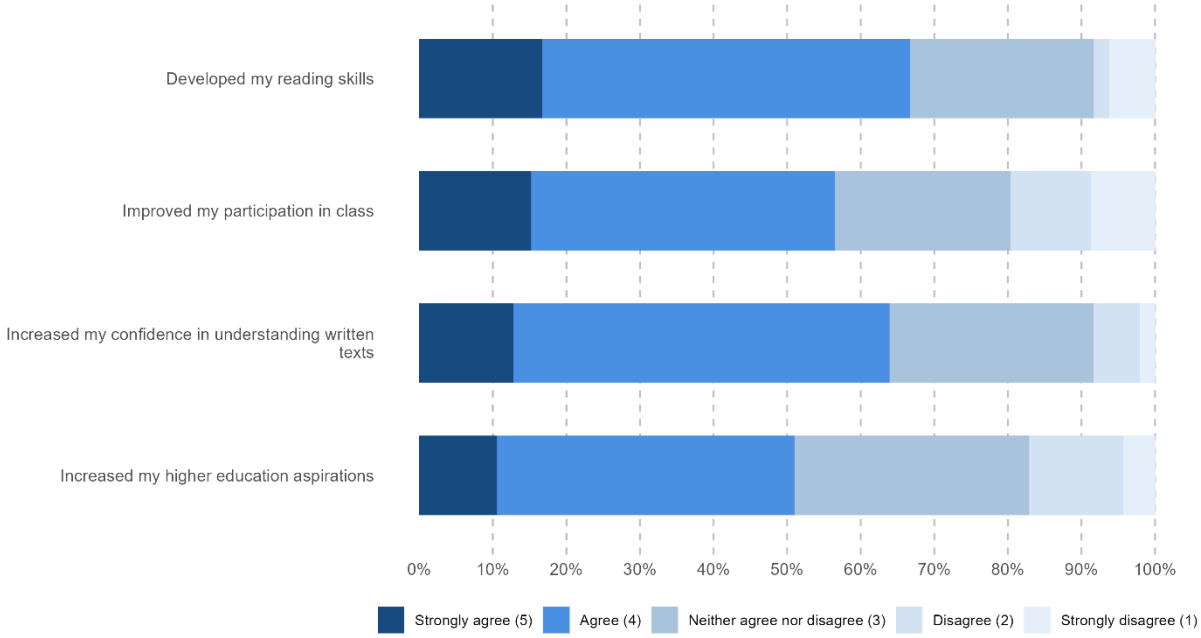

Figure 10: Year 7 perceived impact of the Reading Matters programme.

Year 8 group

In the case of the Year 8 learners, their responses regarding their cognitive and reading skills were consistent with the patterns observed in the overall analysis, that is, showing a significant positive development in both blocks (see Figures 11-12). With respect to self-efficacy, positive trends were also identified in both the post-16 and HE blocks, although, unlike the overall analysis, none reached statistical significance at the individual group level (see Figures 13-14). These results are summarised in the key findings below:

KEY FINDING 6: Year 8 learners reported a significant development in their cognitive and reading skills after participating in the Reading Matters programme.

KEY FINDING 7: Some positive changes were found in the Year 8 students' self-reported perspectives on their self-efficacy (post-16 and HE) after participating in the Reading Matters programme, although none reached statistical significance.

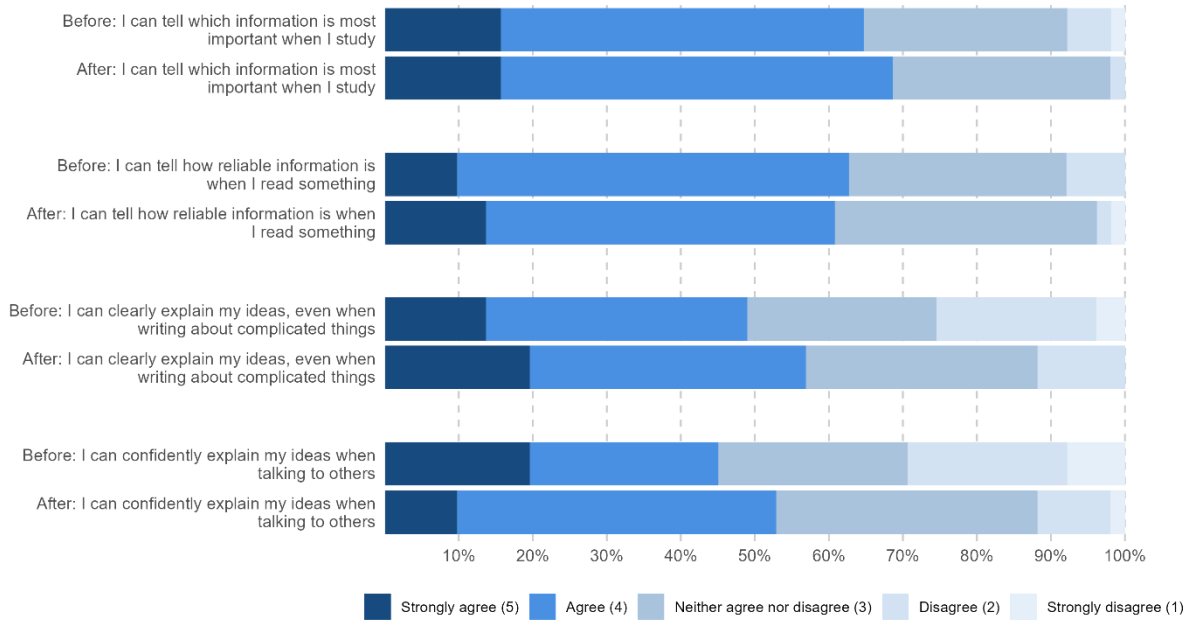

Figure 11: Year 8 pre-and-post- survey results for Cognitive skills questions. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed a significant difference between the pre- and post-survey results of the 'Cognitive skills' block (*p = 0.04*). Regarding question-level analyses, a significant positive difference was found for the third question (p = 0.02), while no significant differences were observed in the rest of the questions in this block (*p = 0.343, p = 0.858* and *p = 0.282*, respectively).

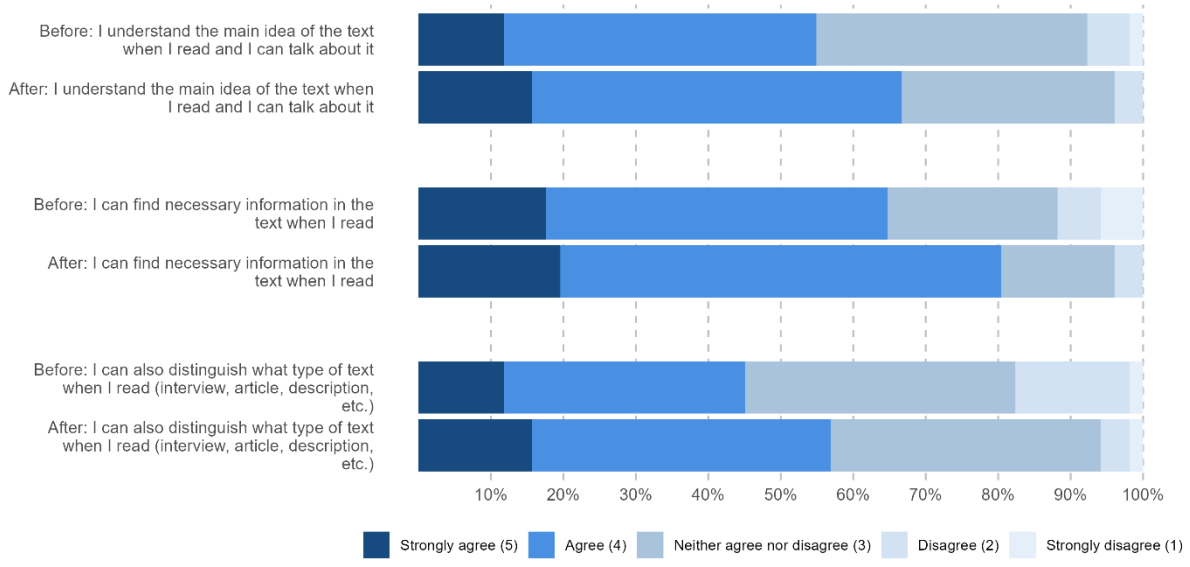

Figure 12: Year 8 pre-and-post- survey results for Reading skills questions. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed a significant difference between the pre- and post-survey results of the 'Reading skills' block (*p = 0.003*). Regarding question-level analyses, a significant positive difference was found across all the questions in the block questions (*p = 0.05, p = 0.05* and *p = 0.03*, respectively).

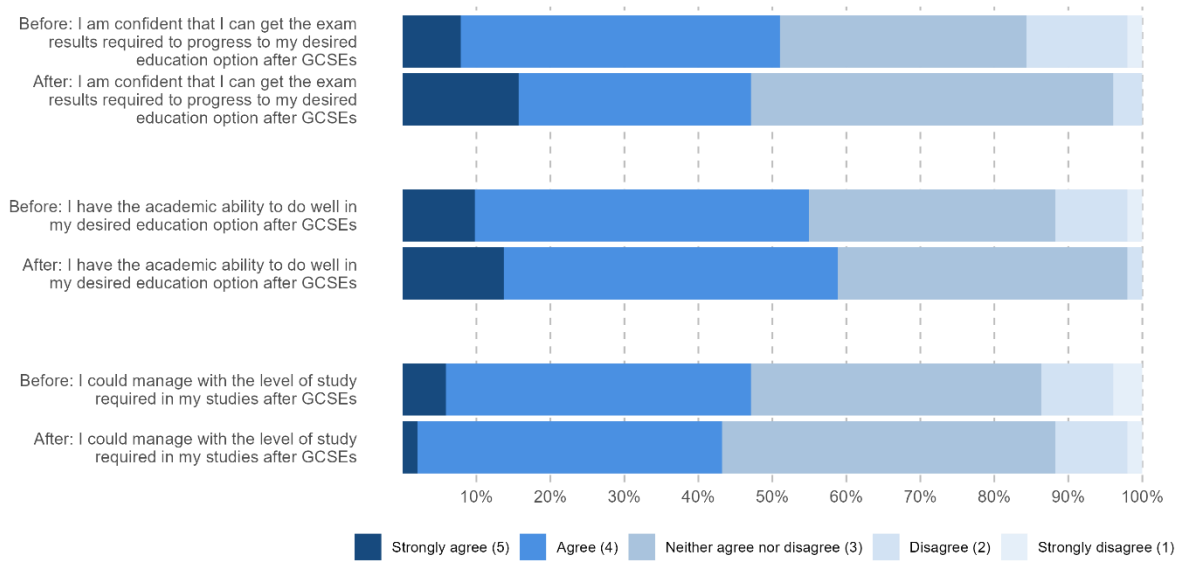

Figure 13: Year 8 pre-and-post- survey results for Self-efficacy (post-16) questions. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed no significant differences between the pre- and post-survey results for any of the self-efficacy (post-16) questions (*p = 0.172, p = 0.118* and *p = 0.639*, respectively). No significance was found when questions were combined and treated as a separate data point for the overall 'Self-efficacy (post-16)' category (*p = 0.253)*.

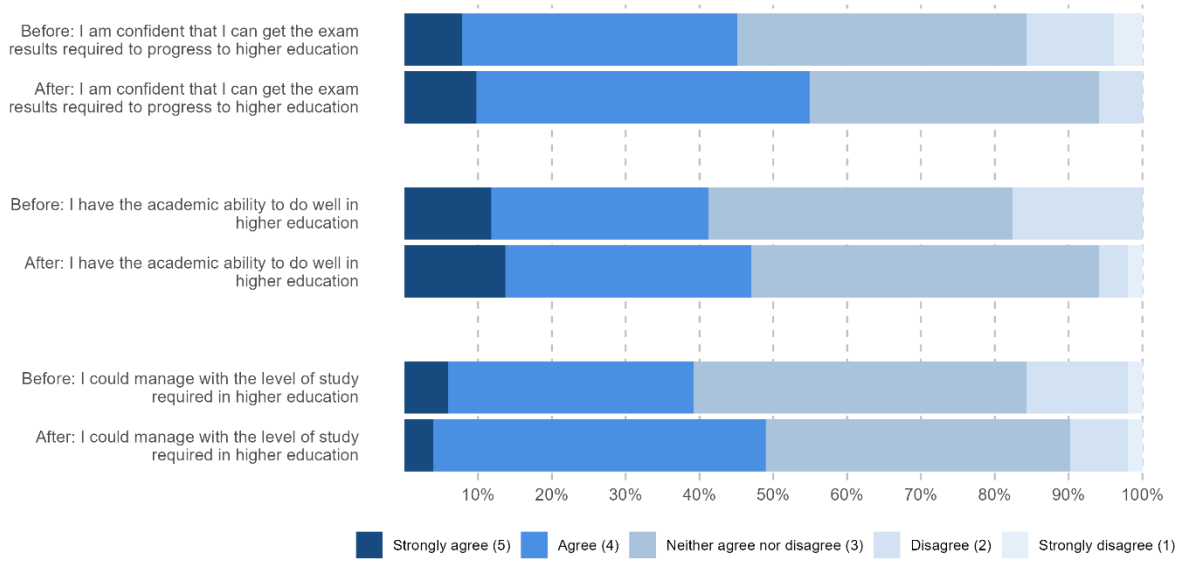

Figure 14: Year 8 pre-and-post- survey results for Self-efficacy (HE) questions. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed no significant differences between the pre- and post-survey results for any of the self-efficacy (HE) questions (*p = 0.674, p = 0.139* and *p = 0.801*, respectively). No significance was found when questions were combined and treated as a separate data point for the overall 'Self-efficacy (post-16)' category (*p = 0.188)*.

In terms of perceived impact, the responses from Year 8 learners broadly align with the patterns observed in the overall analysis. However, in contrast to the Year 7 findings, the proportion of 'strongly agree' or 'agree' responses among Year 8 students was generally higher than the overall averages across most statements. As shown in Figure 15, 78.4% of Year 8 learners reported that the programme had developed their reading skills, 64% highlighted improved participation in class, 68.7% indicated increased confidence in understanding written texts, and 66.7% reported higher aspirations toward higher education. These figures represent, on average, a 3-percentage-point increase relative to the overall sample (see Figure 5). As suggested in advance in the previous section, these results may suggest that older cohorts could benefit greater from the programme, which will be revisited in the next section.

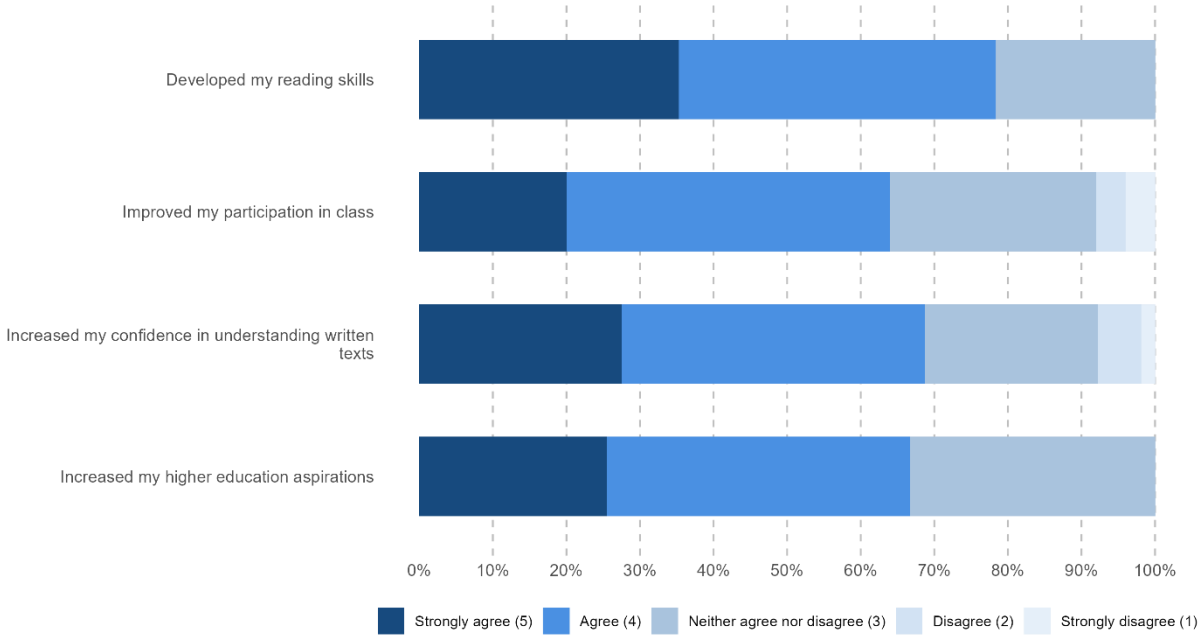

Figure 15: Year 8 perceived impact of the Reading Matters programme.

Group comparison

Having examined Year 7 and Year 8 results individually, this section brings the two groups together to assess the suggested trend that the latter might have benefitted more from the programme. The comparison considers both baseline differences and the magnitude of improvement across the survey blocks.

In several areas, students from different year groups displayed different baseline scores in the pre survey. For the Reading block, learners in Year 7 and Year 8 differed significantly ($p < 0.001$), indicating that Year 8 students started the programme with higher reading attitudes and skills. For the Cognitive block, the difference approached significance ($p = 0.053$), while for SE (post-16) ($p = 0.087$) and SE (HE) ($p = 0.141$), no significant baseline differences were observed – see Figure 16 for visualisation of these results.

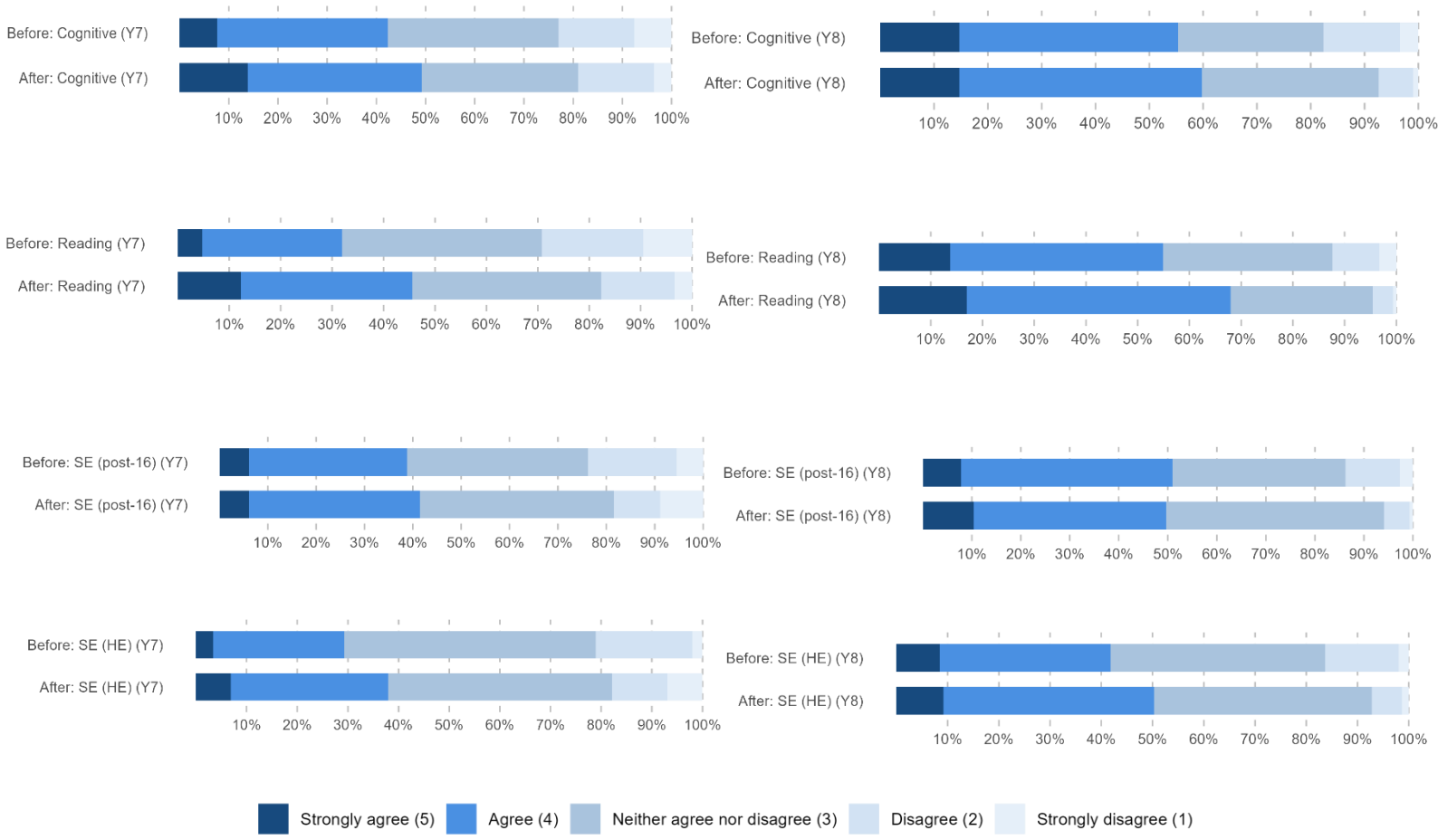

Figure 16. Summary of Year 7 (left) and Year 8 (right) pre- and post- survey responses for the Cognitive Skills, Reading Skills, Self-Efficacy (post-16), and Self-Efficacy (HE) blocks, respectively.

When examining the distance travelled between year groups, that is, how much one group has improved from pre- to post-programme in comparison to the other, no significant differences were observed in any section of the survey. This indicates that the programme had a broadly similar impact on both Year 7 and Year 8 students, with comparable improvements in both Cognitive and Reading skills areas.

Although overall improvement was similar in both years, domain/specific patterns differ slightly. Year 8 learners showed significant gains in a broader range of areas (both Cognitive and Reading), whereas Year 7 learners' significant improvement was concentrated in Reading skills. This suggests that, while the overall improvement was comparable, the programme might have had slightly more impact across more domains for the older learners. A larger dataset for each year group in future iterations could help confirm whether this is a consistent pattern (see Recommendations section).

A summary of this cross-group comparison is captured in the following key finding:

KEY FINDING 8: Overall improvement was comparable across groups, although older learners may benefit slightly more across a broader range of skills.

Recommendations

1. **Refine and strengthen the evaluation, for example, by adapting the language of the survey questions to Year 7-8 students and/or by deploying a before-and-after questionnaire for both an intervention group and a control group that could be matched in terms of personal characteristics.** This would still constitute Type 2 evidence, but stronger than the one used in this report. Moreover, the adapted language will ensure that students are reporting their perceptions more accurately than in the current design. Moreover, student participation could be boosted in order to maximise response rate and ensure stronger data quality.

2. **Incorporate qualitative and/or teacher feedback.** Beyond students' self-reports, future evaluations should gather data from teachers on observable changes in classroom participation and performance. In addition, qualitative data can contribute and add more nuance to the discussion of findings, particularly given the limitations of small-scale quantitative data. Examples of this could be more open-ended questions in the questionnaire or interviews and focus groups, to ensure richer insights into students' experiences and true perceptions are captured.

3. **Introduce an objective outcome measure.** The current evaluation relies entirely on the learners' self-perception which might not be the most suitable design for these year groups. To enhance the reliability of results and provide an additional, more objective layer of evidence, an objective measure, such as a structured pre-and-post reading assessment, could be incorporated.

4. **Consider and incorporate an IAG component**. While findings indicate some positive impact on higher education aspirations, this remained the least perceived benefit. Given the programme's design, a clearer and more structured IAG strand could be embedded - for example, through a dedicated IAG component within delivery or as a continuation element following the programme.

5. **Enhance age analysis and explore the impact of repeating the programme across consecutive years.** The current evaluation did not find statistically significant year differences in the impact of the programme across different years, but a tentative trend pointing towards improvements across more areas in older groups was observed. Future evaluations should strengthen the group analysis to explore age patterns more systematically. This could involve larger sample sizes or a more detailed breakdown of the results per question to explore whether differences in year group improvements depend on the question and/or block of outcomes. Moreover, since this programme is delivered across multiple year groups (Years 7-8 and potentially Year 9), it is strongly recommended to examine potential differences in impact between students who participate in the programme for a single year and those who experience it across multiple years (e.g., both in Year 7 and Year 8). Such an analysis would help assess whether repeated exposure leads to cumulative or sustained benefits. To enable this comparison, a larger sample size would be required.

References

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