

Report on the National Survey of Literature Teachers' Beliefs and Practices



An Institute of



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NATIONAL SURVEY OF LITERATURE TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

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INTRODUCTION

Governments, policymakers, and educators around the world have emphasised the need to educate students for a complex and interconnected world. What is the role of Literature education in developing twenty-first century knowledge, skills and values that will enable students to thrive in a global age?

This publication reports on the beliefs and practices of English Literature teachers in Singapore secondary schools. The report is based on a national survey conducted with 232 Literature teachers from 47 secondary schools between October 2018 and January 2019, comprising a representative range of mainstream schools (76% of teachers) and integrated programme schools (24% of teachers).

The purpose of the survey was to provide a contextual picture of the beliefs Literature teachers hold about the key objectives of teaching Literature and the desired attributes of the ideal Literature student as well as their practices involving the texts selected for teaching, the instructional strategies employed and how they engage students with values.

The survey was divided into 5 sections comprising 31 questions in total:

- I. Objectives of Teaching Literature
- II. Selection of Literary Texts
- III. Instructional Strategies Employed by Literature Teachers
- IV. Cultivating Values through Teaching Literature
- V. Survey Demographics

The survey was funded by the Ministry of Education (MOE), Singapore under the Education Research Funding Programme managed by the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University (OER 22/17 CSL).

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OBJECTIVES OF TEACHING LITERATURE

"To discover the joy of reading, to uncover the layers of meaning, and to recover a sense of wonder."

– Level Head, 11 to 20 years of experience

"Students should eventually have a love for language and its instability. Students should be able to explore different worlds via Literature."

– Teacher, 11 to 20 years of experience

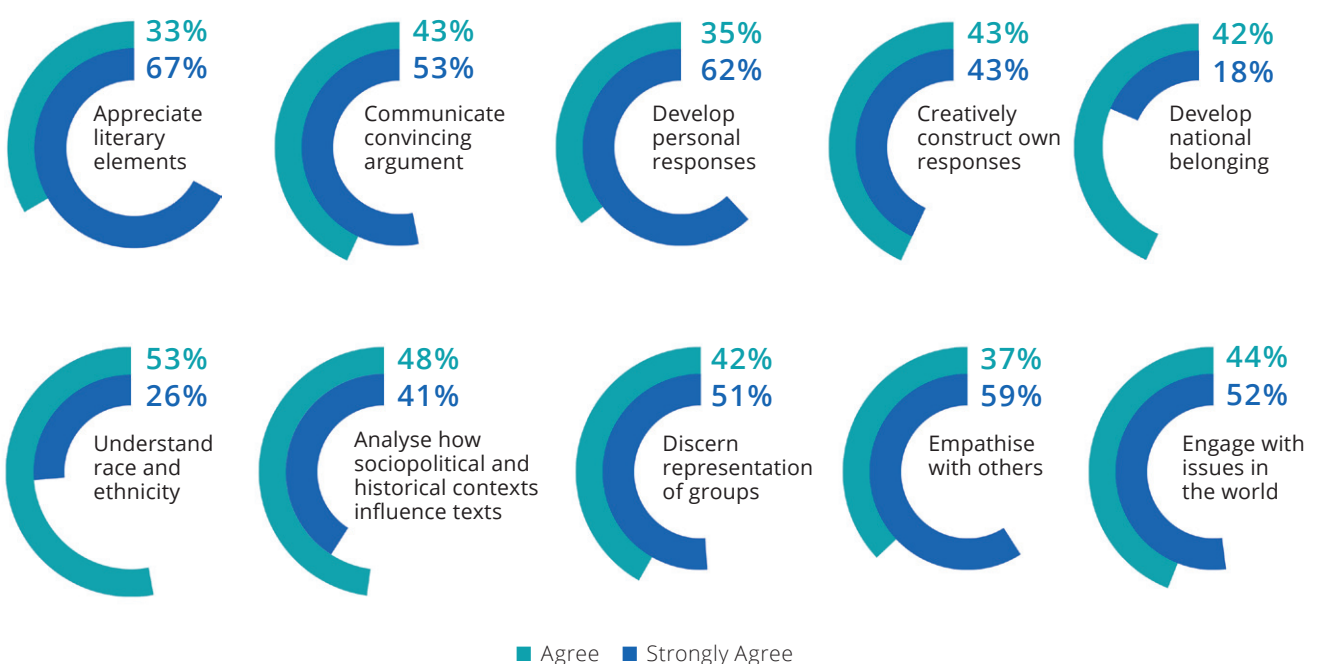


Overall, teachers believe that the key objectives and skills should centre on developing students' ability to analyse the author's craft, make personal connections to texts, and cultivate empathy towards others. To teachers, the ideal Literature student should enjoy reading literature, be equipped to unpack the subtleties of language, draw on personal responses while reading and demonstrate the capacity to empathise with others.

KEY OBJECTIVES IN TEACHING LITERATURE

The survey showed that the top three objectives of Literature education centred on appreciating the literary elements of texts (plot, character, setting, style and themes), encouraging personal response by having students make connections to their own experiences, and fostering a sense of empathy and concern for others in the world.

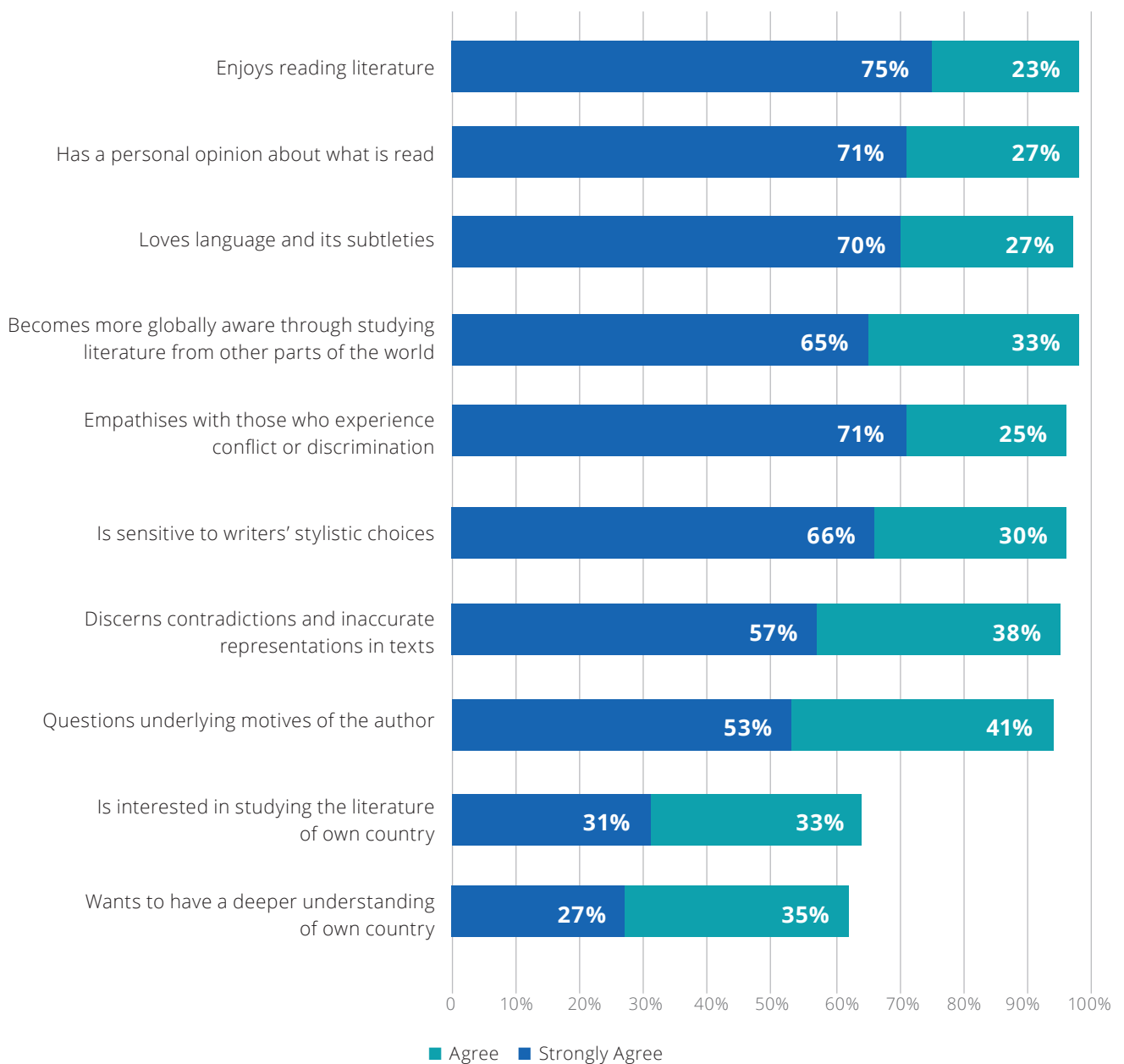
Percentage of teachers who indicated "strongly agree" and "agree" to the following objectives of Literature education



ATTRIBUTES OF THE IDEAL LITERATURE STUDENT

More than 95% of teachers surveyed “strongly agree” and “agree” that the ideal Literature student is one who should enjoy reading, have a personal opinion, love language and its subtleties, and be able to empathise with those who experience conflict or discrimination in the world.

Percentage of teachers who indicated “strongly agree” and “agree” to the following desired attributes of the ideal Literature student



SELECTION OF LITERARY TEXTS

"I want my students to be interested in the contexts and cultures that shape a text, to recognise how texts reflect past and current issues in the real world. I want them to feel deeply about language and ideas in the texts, whether they are from other countries or our own."

– Teacher, 11 to 20 years of experience

"When I embark on a literature text with my students, I am committed to mentally removing them from their classroom and immersing them in the initially-unfamiliar world of these new characters and settings, till it begins to feel like home for them."

– Teacher, 6 to 10 years of experience

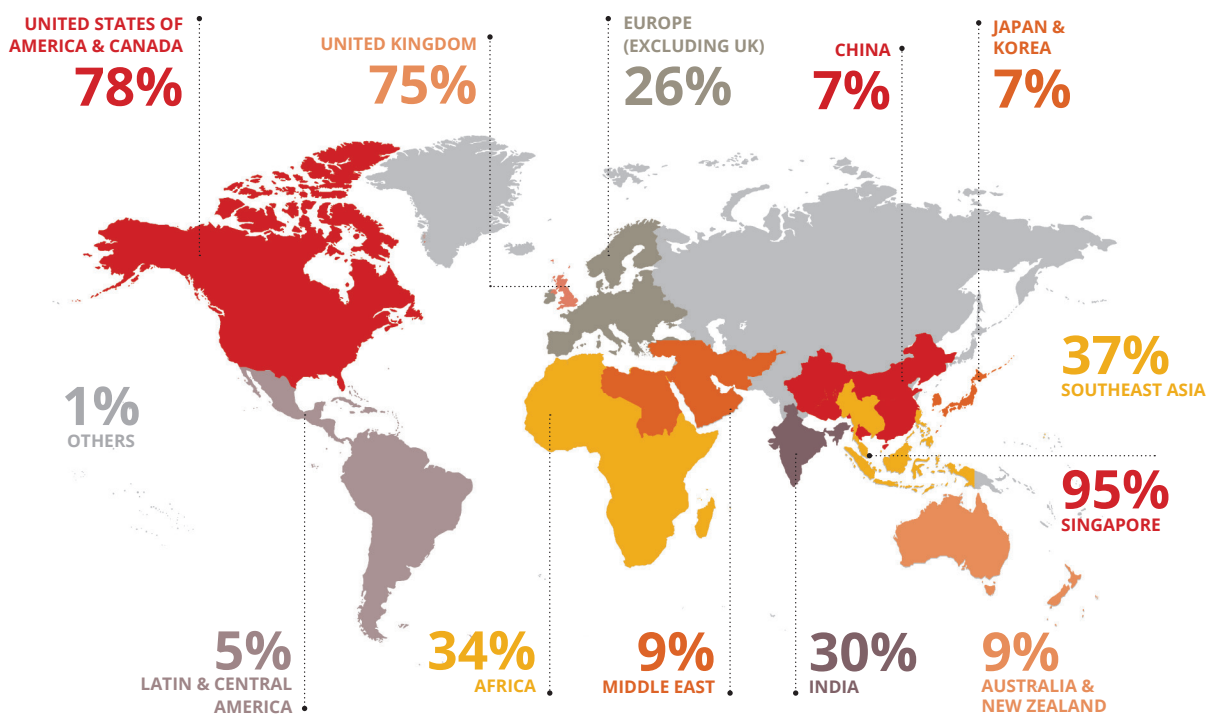


In selecting texts for study, teachers preferred choosing texts from Singapore, the United Kingdom and North America. Teachers preferred themes that were relatable to adolescents. Furthermore, teachers were mindful about pedagogical factors (e.g. appreciating rich, well-written works; analysing literary techniques), practical factors (e.g. appropriate for their student profile; time-sensitive concerns) and personal factors (e.g. aligning with teachers' values) in selecting texts. Teachers also frequently complemented the main literary text with other poems and multimodal texts.

COUNTRIES EXPLORED IN LITERATURE LESSONS

Over the past year, almost 95% of teachers incorporated literary texts set in Singapore which enabled students to explore issues in the country. More than 75% incorporated texts set in Canada, United States of America and United Kingdom. Literary texts set in the following countries were least included for study – Latin and Central America, China, Japan and Korea.

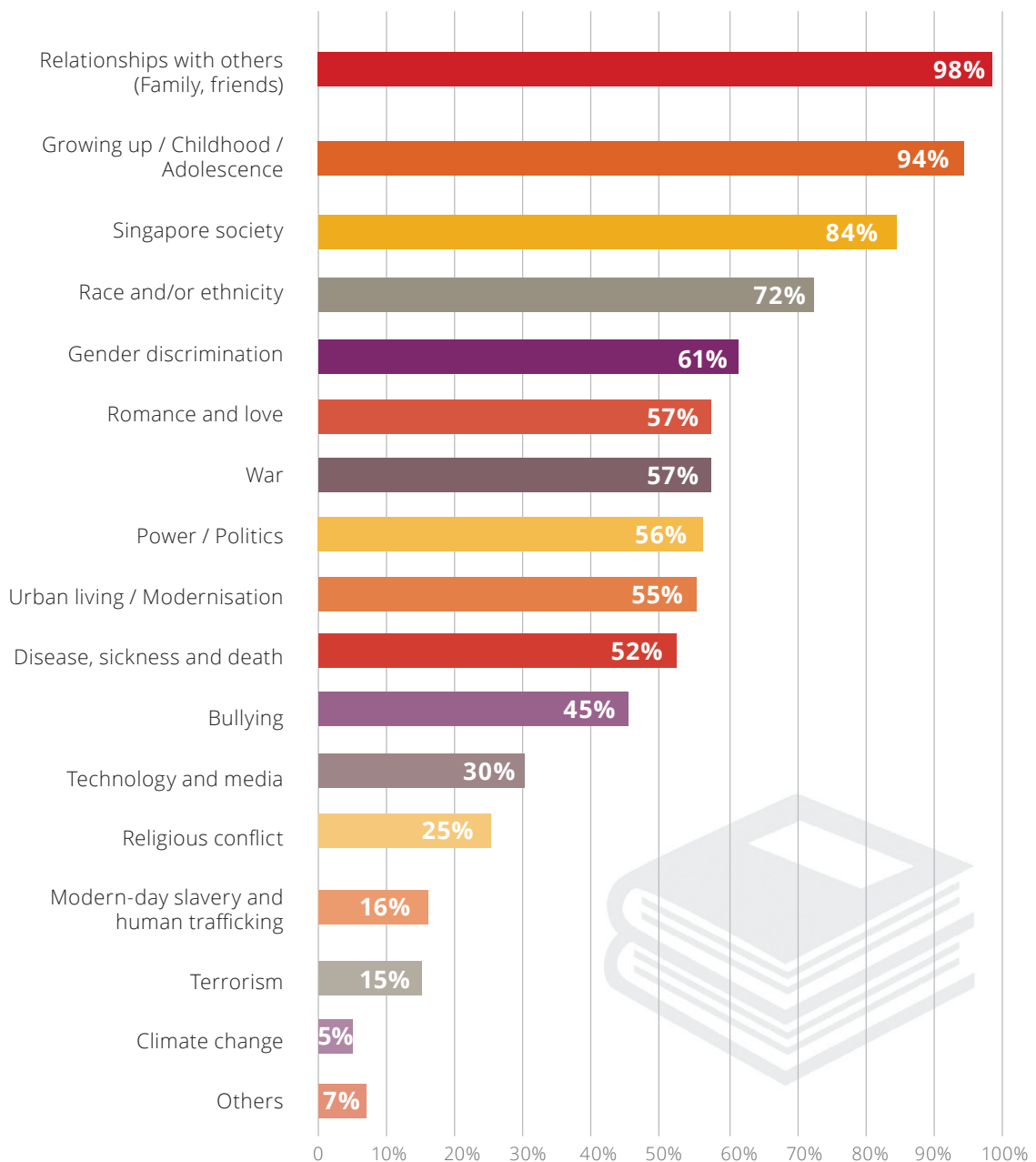
Percentage of teachers who incorporated literature set in the following countries



THEMES DISCUSSED IN LITERATURE LESSONS

Over the past year, more than 90% of teachers discussed themes related to relationships with others as well as growing up, childhood, and adolescence while more than 80% discussed issues related to Singapore society. Other popular themes were race and ethnicity, gender discrimination, war, power and politics, and modernization. On the other hand, other global themes such as climate change, terrorism, and modern-day slavery were less discussed in Literature lessons.

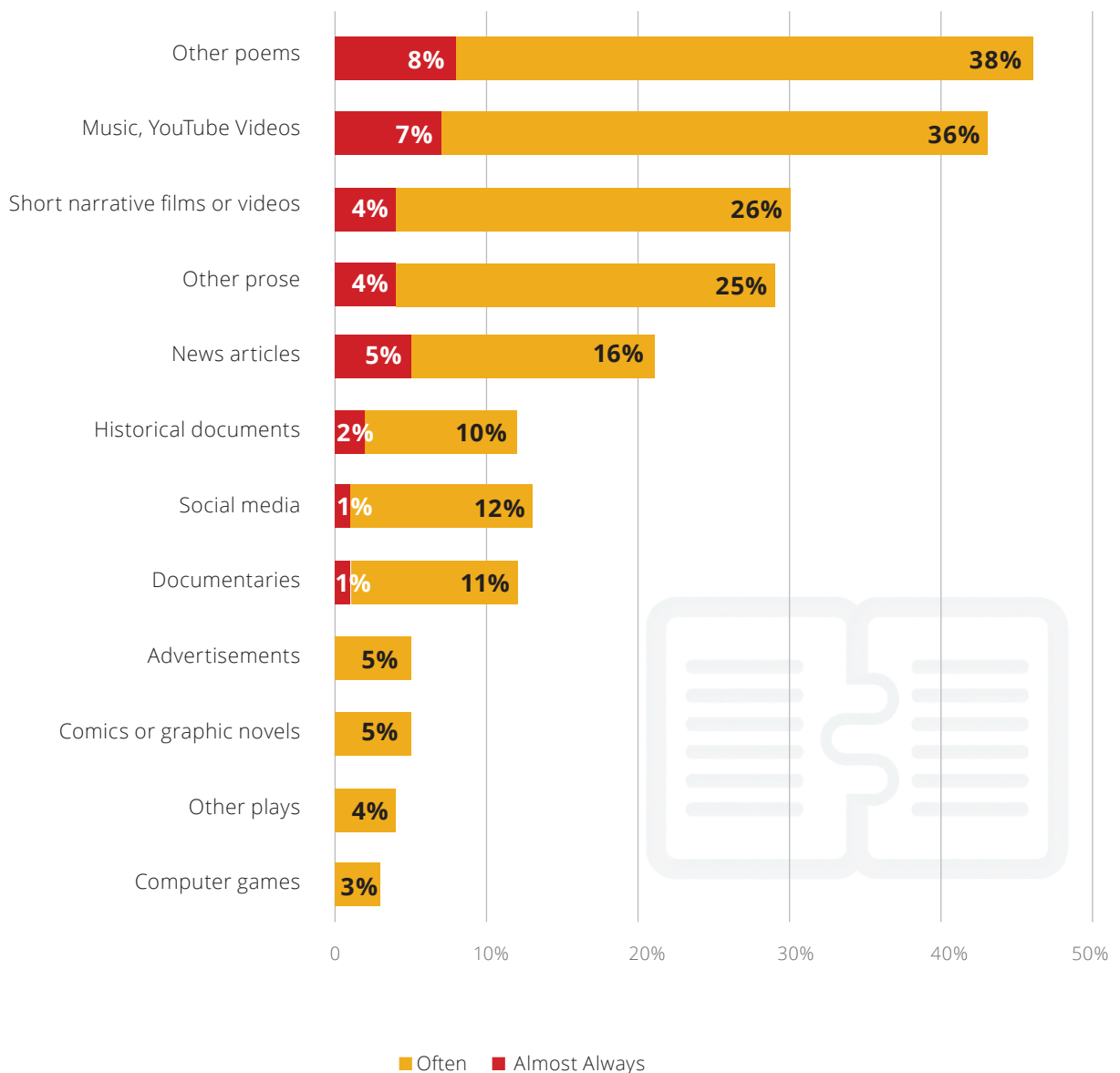
Percentage of teachers who discussed the following themes in Literature lessons



INCLUSION OF OTHER TEXT TYPES

Over the past year, less than half of teachers “almost always” and “often” incorporated a range of other texts to supplement the main literary text studied. The most popular were other poems (46%), music and YouTube videos (43%), and short narrative films or videos (30%).

Percentage of teachers who “almost always” and “often” incorporated these other texts to complement main literary texts



FACTORS INFLUENCING SELECTION OF TEXTS

94% of teachers indicated “strongly agree” and “agree” that key factors influencing their selection of texts were related to providing opportunities for students to appreciate rich, well-written works of literature and to analyse word choice, imagery and other literary techniques used for effect.

Almost equally important to the critical appreciation of texts was the opportunity for students to critically examine underlying values and intentions in the text (91% of teachers indicated “strongly agree” and “agree”).

Percentage of teachers who indicated “strongly agree” and “agree” to the following factors influencing choice of texts



INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

EMPLOYED BY LITERATURE TEACHERS

"I believe students need assistance in providing a personal informed response. I find students hesitant to share during class discussion so I will try to probe this. A Literature student needs to be comfortable in developing and engaging with the text to critically explore text and their ideas."

- Teacher, 3 to 5 years of experience

"Students cannot study Literature under the guise that it is just another unrelatable subject that isn't applicable to the real world. They need to understand that it is the very same ideologies and motives that govern general human behaviour like theirs that galvanise the characters in their texts too."

- Teacher, 6 to 10 years of experience



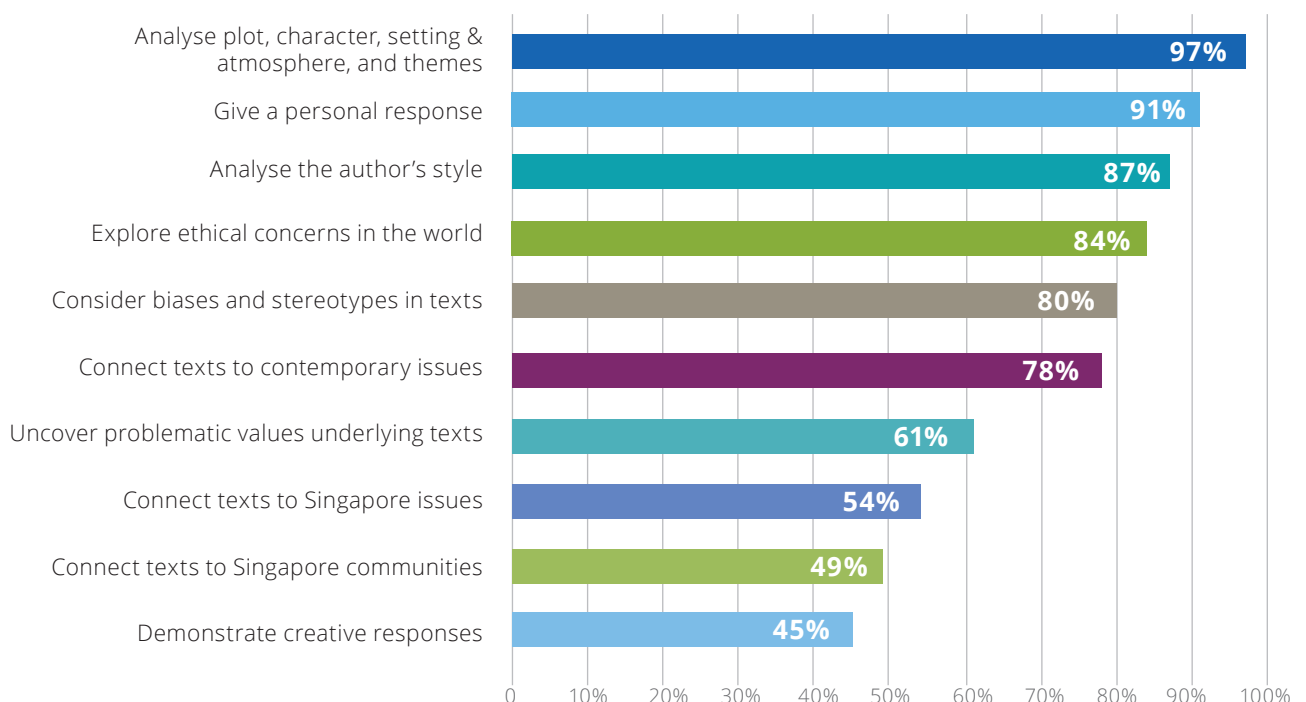
In reflecting on their instructional strategies, teachers emphasised the need to facilitate classroom discussions with questions that focused on analysis of the five areas of study (plot, character, setting and atmosphere, style and theme). These choices were motivated partly by the practical need to prepare students for written essays in both school and national examinations. At the same time, teachers also used visual texts, sharing of personal experiences and current affairs to relate texts to real-world contexts. To encourage students to empathise with others, teachers would discuss complex moral dilemmas faced by characters and encourage students to imagine characters' experiences using videos, photos and role-play.

QUESTIONS ASKED BY TEACHERS WHEN FACILITATING CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

Over the past year, teachers indicated they “almost always” and “often” asked the following top three questions when facilitating discussions about a literary text – analyse plot, character, setting & atmosphere, and themes (97%), give a personal response to the text (91%), and analyse author’s style (87%).

Other common questions involved having students consider biases and stereotypes in texts (80%) and ethical concerns e.g., unjust treatment, discrimination, inequality in the world (84%).

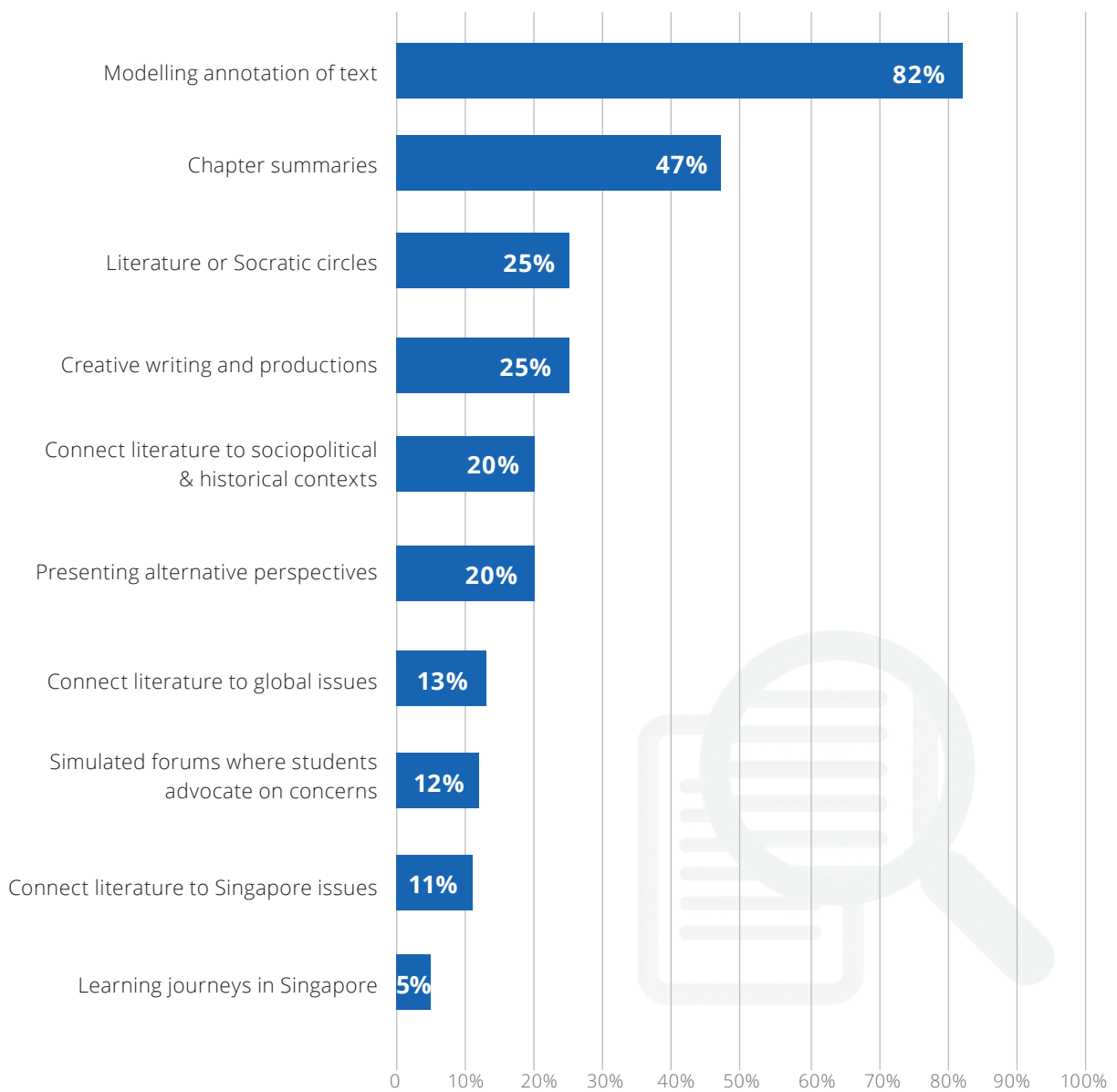
Percentage of teachers who indicated “almost always” and “often” to the following questions asked when facilitating classroom discussions



STRATEGIES EMPLOYED TO HELP STUDENTS ANALYSE TEXTS

Over the past year, when facilitating discussions about a literary text, teachers indicated “almost always” and “often” to strategies closely aligned with close reading and understanding of texts such as modelling the annotation of text (82%) and chapter summaries (47%). Teachers also encouraged literature circles, creative writing and simulated forums.

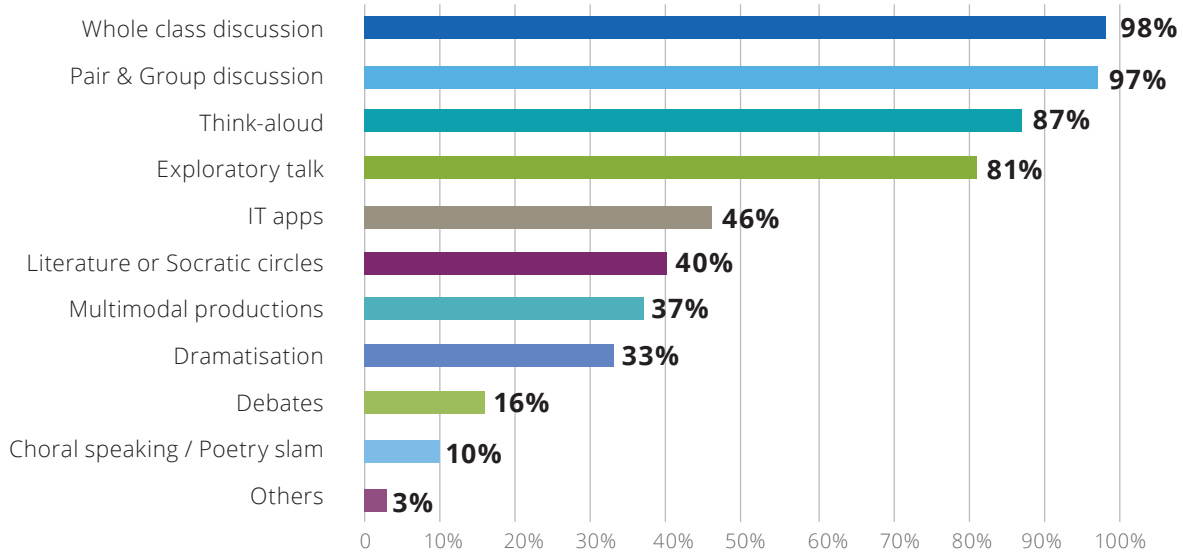
Percentage of teachers who indicated “almost always” and “often” to the following strategies employed to help students analyse text



STRATEGIES EMPLOYED TO HELP STUDENTS ENGAGE WITH THEIR PEERS

Over the past year, the most common strategies teachers incorporated at least once a month to encourage students to engage and discuss texts with their peers were whole class discussion (98%), pair/group discussion (97%), think-aloud (87%), and exploratory talk (81%).

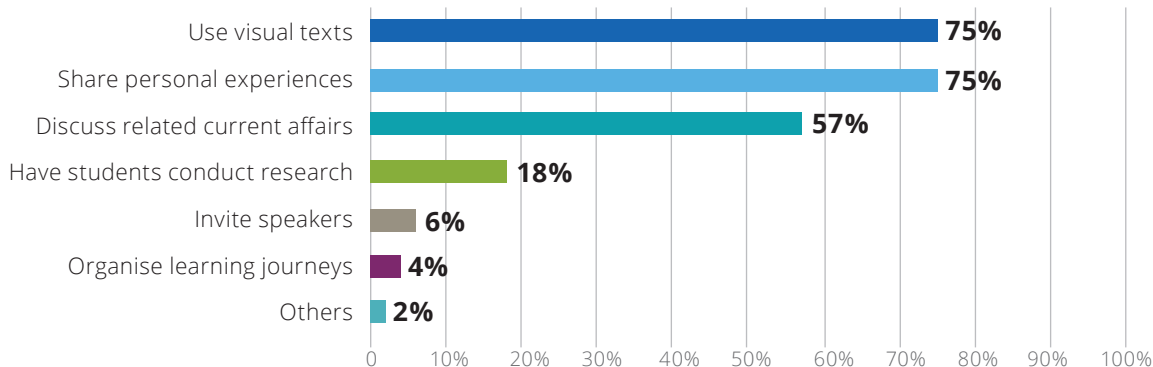
Percentage of teachers who indicated at least “once a month” to the following strategies to encourage students to engage with texts with their peers



Percentage of teachers who indicated at least “once a month” to the following strategies to connect texts to real-world

STRATEGIES EMPLOYED TO CONNECT TEXT TO REAL-WORLD

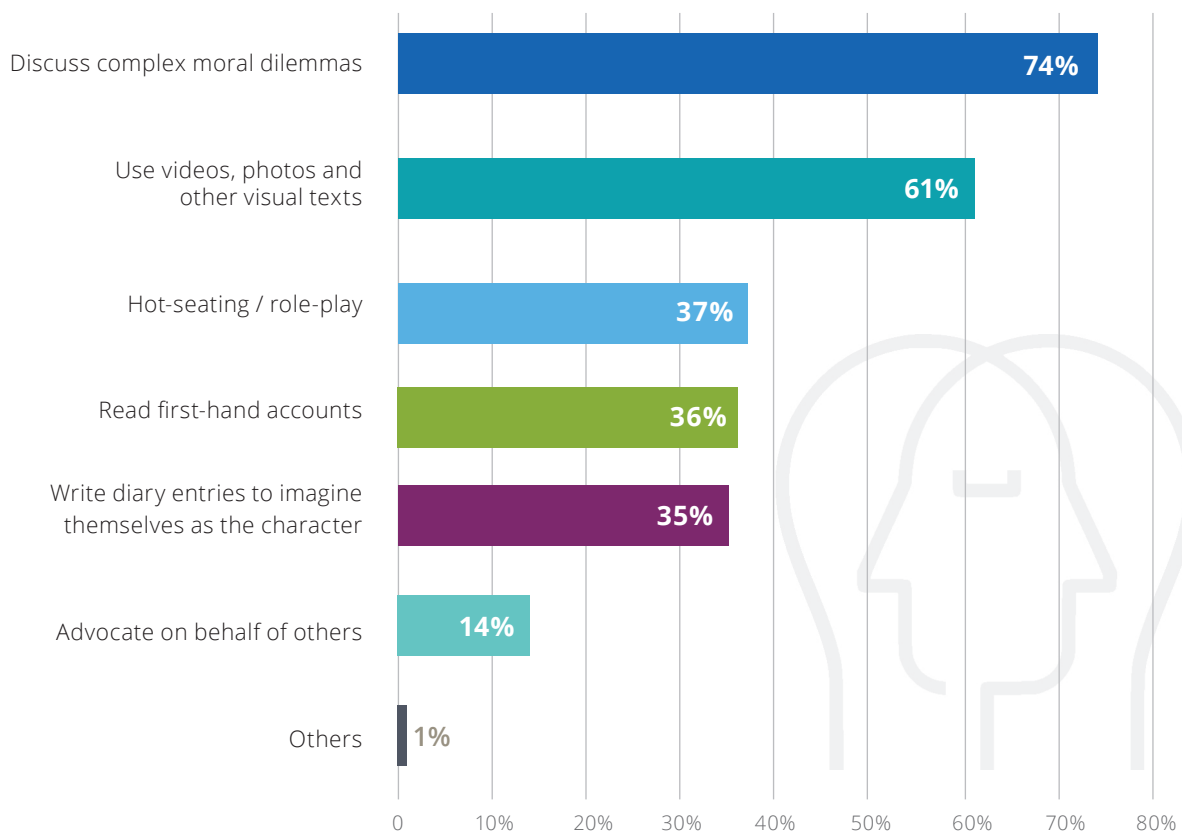
Over the past year, 75% of teachers incorporated visual texts and shared personal experiences at least once a month to encourage students to connect the literary text to the real-world. 57% of teachers also encouraged students to discuss current affairs related to the text at least once a month.



STRATEGIES TO HELP STUDENTS EMPATHISE WITH OTHERS

Over the past year, to help students empathise with others, teachers employed these key strategies at least once a month – they provided opportunities for students to discuss complex moral dilemmas faced by characters in the text (74%); they encouraged students to imagine the experiences of characters through videos, photos and other visual materials (61%); and they had students represent characters via hot-seating or other forms of dramatic role-play (37%).

Percentage of teachers who indicated at least “once a month” to the following strategies to help students empathise with others



CULTIVATING VALUES

THROUGH TEACHING LITERATURE

"Some of the values are linked to others as imagination aids one in empathy, and one who can accept ambiguity in texts is likely to be more open-minded. I also feel that discernment is an important value because it allows one to reflect on one's own / society's biases and not take everything at face value. Finally, persuasion is essential as in life, one will often have to learn how to effectively convince others in order to stand up for oneself and others."

- Teacher, 6 to 10 years of experience

"Students should be independent enough to form their own opinions and not be overly-reliant on the 'model answer' from the teacher. They need to be able to respond to the texts themselves. I also feel that Literature should definitely encourage students to try to experience what others, especially the marginalised, would feel."

- Teacher, 3 to 5 years of experience



To encourage students to engage with values in class, teachers would discuss, reflect and question values explored in the texts by giving students opportunities to discuss moral dilemmas and values that students considered important to them. Lastly, teachers rated “Openness”, “Empathy” and “Independence” to be crucial values to be inculcated through Literature education.

STRATEGIES EMPLOYED TO ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO ENGAGE WITH VALUES IN THE LITERATURE CLASS

Teachers indicated “strongly agree” and “agree” to employing the following strategies to encourage students to engage with values – encourage students to discuss the values explored in the text (99%); encourage students to reflect on their own values as they read the text (96%); and encourage students to question the underlying values that they read in texts (95%).

Percentage of teachers who indicated “strongly agree” and “agree” to employing the following strategies to encourage students to engage with values



Discuss values explored



Reflect on their own values



Question underlying values



Appreciate other cultures' values



Explore values relevant to Singapore

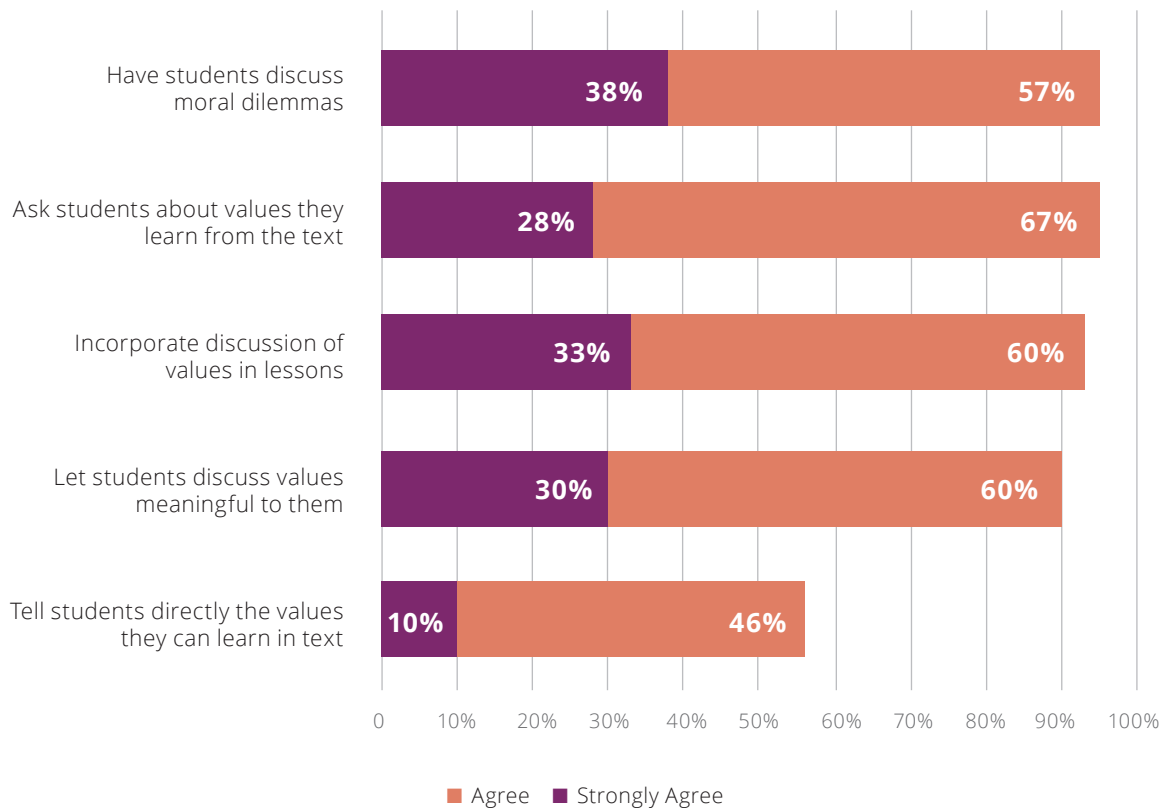


Appreciate values relevant to own race

GUIDING STUDENTS TO ENGAGE WITH VALUES IN THE LITERATURE TEXT

When teachers were asked the extent they guided students to engage with values, 95% of them indicated “strongly agree” and “agree” that they gave students the opportunity to discuss moral dilemmas in texts. Similarly, 95% asked students to share about the values they learnt from the text. The least common approach involved the use of didactic teaching where teachers explicitly told students the values they can learn in the text (56%).

Percentage of teachers who indicated “strongly agree” and “agree” to employing the following strategies to guide students to engage with values in texts

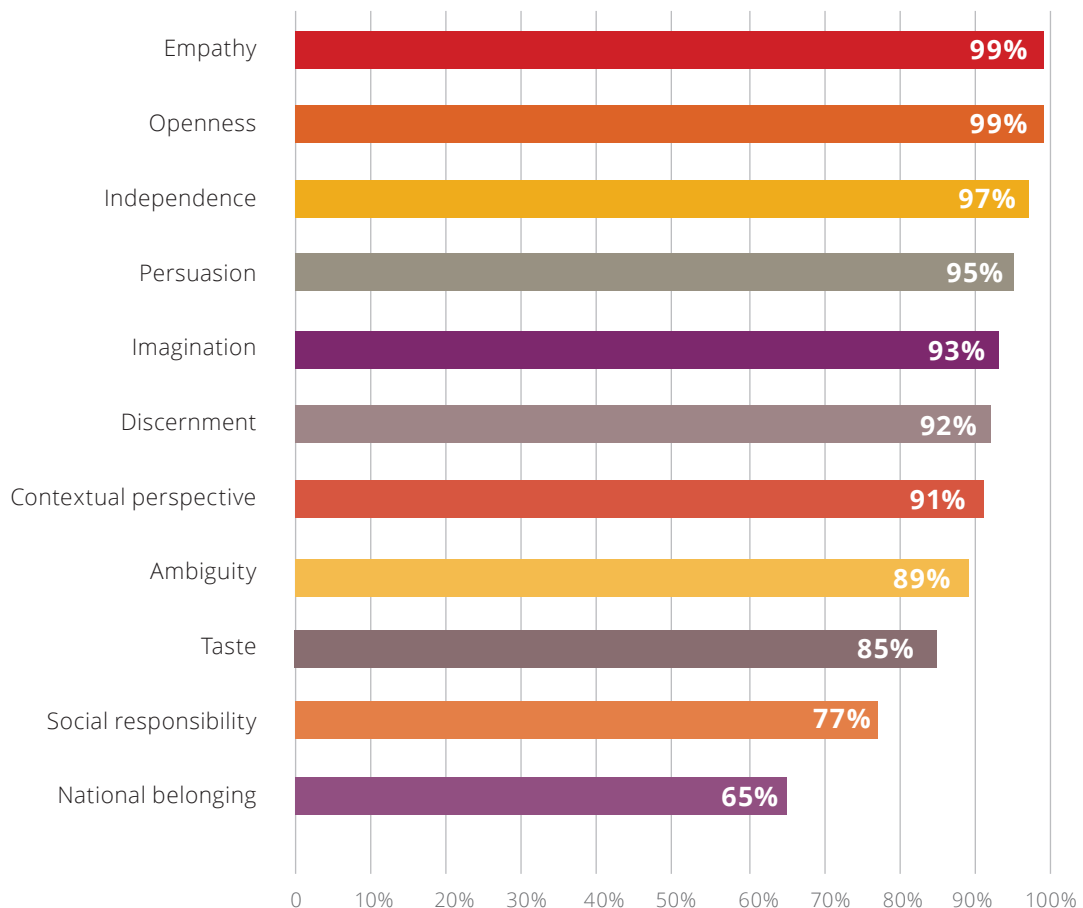


VALUES IMPORTANT TO THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

When asked about the values important to the teaching of literature, teachers indicated “strongly agree” and “agree” to the following top five values:

1. **Empathy** – Capacity to put oneself in the shoes of others (99%)
2. **Openness** – Capacity to be open and willing to accept differences (99%)
3. **Independence** – Capacity to formulate an individual response to the text (97%)
4. **Persuasion** – Capacity to convey a convincing argument supported by evidence from the text (95%)
5. **Imagination** – Capacity to wonder and explore new ways of seeing life (93%)

Percentage of teachers who indicated “strongly agree” and “agree” to the following values that are important to the teaching of Literature



V

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

“Responding to the text is essential. Thus, a student’s response must always be considered and that is the heart of Literature Education. From there, a student can learn to empathise, learn more and of course, question the world.”

– Teacher, 3 to 5 years of experience

“I believe that as a Literature teacher, it is my job to equip my students with the literary skills (critically analysing the text) such that they are able to eventually analyse on their own and discover new meaning.”

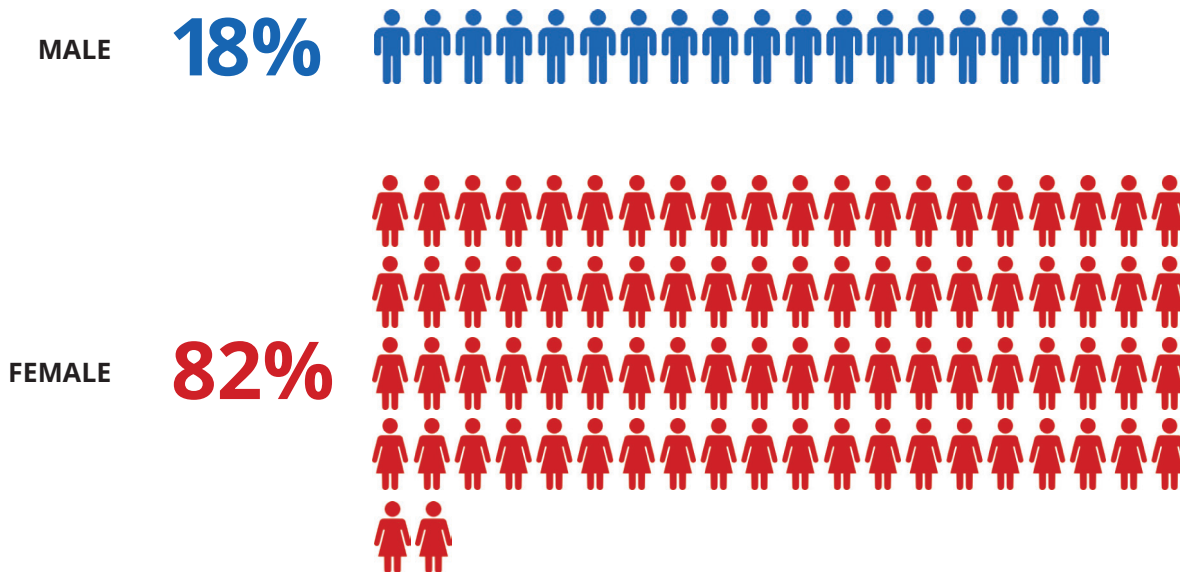
– Teacher, less than 1 year of experience



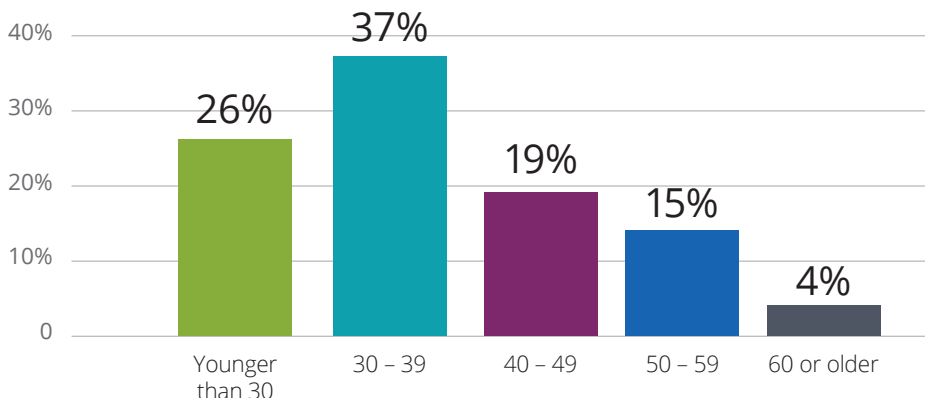
GENDER AND AGE

The total sample comprised **232 teachers** including 41 males (18%) and 191 females (82%). In terms of age, the majority of teachers (63%) were under the age of 40.

Percentage of teacher respondents in terms of gender



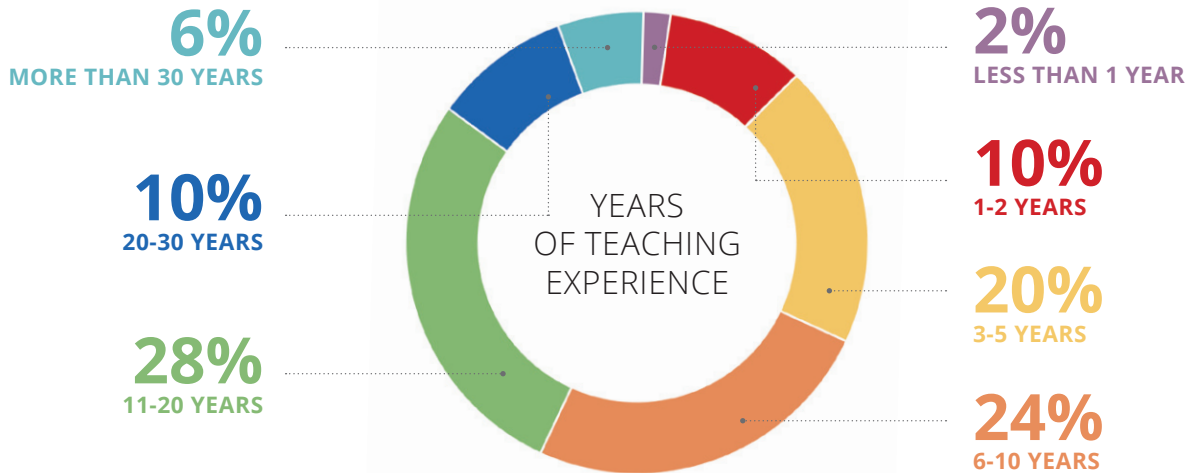
Percentage of teacher respondents in terms of age



YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE

The teachers who participated had a range of experience – 1-2 years (10%); 3-5 years (20%); 6-10 years (24%); 11-20 years (28%). Only 16% had 20 years of experience or more.

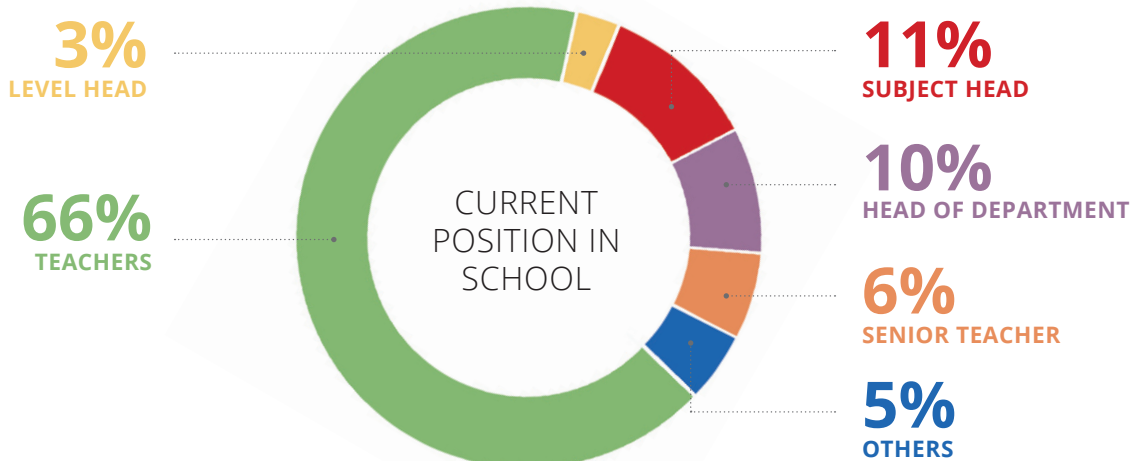
Percentage of teacher respondents in terms of years of teaching experience



CURRENT POSITION IN SCHOOL HELD BY TEACHERS

Most of the participants indicated they were teachers (66%) in their current position. The remainder comprised mainly Level and Subject Heads (14%), Head of Department (9%) and Senior Teachers (6%).

Percentage of teacher respondents in terms of current position in school





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