

Mapping the Learning Crisis: Learning Deprivation as an Early Warning Indicator Among In-School Children in Nigeria.

Authors:

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Introduction

Reading proficiency is a foundational skill for future learning as the child progresses through school.¹ This forms the basis of learning numeracy, science and other subjects in school.² According to the World Bank, every child should be able to read by age 10. Learning poverty is the inability to read and comprehend a simple text by the age of 10.³⁻⁴ It is expected that by this age, children should possess minimum reading proficiency: be able to read simple, short narrative and expository texts independently and fluently.⁴ Prior to the pandemic in 2019, the global learning poverty rate in low- and middle-income countries was 57%, the learning poverty rate in sub-Saharan Africa was 86% which is higher than the global average.²

Although the 2015 Nigeria Education Data Survey (NEDS, 2015)

reports the reading proficiency (comprehension level) of class 5 and 6 pupils as 49% and 56% respectively, there is, however, no data on the learning poverty rate for Nigeria.^{2,5} The learning poverty rate is a signal of the scale of the efforts to reach the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) target of achieving universal quality education for all by 2030.⁶ The SDG 4.1.1b target indicator estimates the percentage of pupils who are proficient in foundational skills, including literacy and numeracy by end of the primary school cycle.⁷ Given the importance of this indicator in meeting the SDG 2030 education Goal 4 targets, it is important to assess the reading proficiency of pupils in late primary or by age 10 to fill learning poverty data gaps in Nigeria.

Study Aim

This study was conducted to assess:

- The reading proficiency of primary 5 and 6 pupils in primary schools in Nigeria.
- Learning deprivation among in-school children in Nigeria
- Perception of in-school children about their reading self-efficacy and associated factors.

Methods

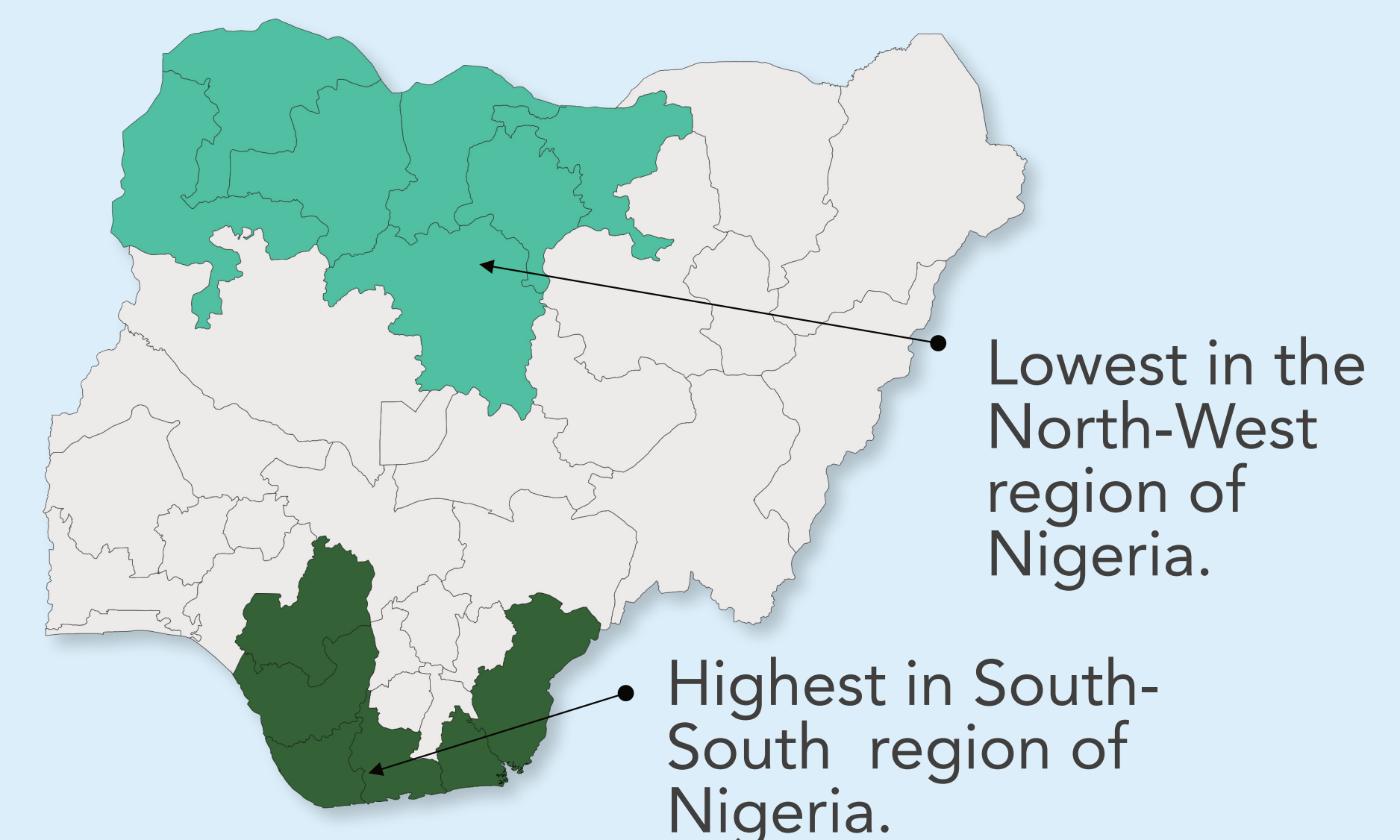
This survey was part of a larger country-wide mixed method study on learning poverty in Nigeria. We conducted a survey among 2,450 primary 5 and 6 pupils, drawn from 241 public schools in six (6) states, Gombe, Sokoto, Ekiti, Edo, Anambra and FCT, each representing a geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The states were purposively selected based on: primary education indices, alternative pathways for out-of-school children and geo-political spread. Stratified random sampling was used to select the schools within each state. The Nigerian Reading Assessment Toolkit (NRAT) was randomly administered to 1,242 out of the 2450 pupils surveyed. The NRAT is a comprehensive instrument developed to measure learning proficiency among children aged 10 years or in late primary school (5 and 6) in Nigeria. The NRAT is aligned with Bloom Taxonomy and benchmarked with global and Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council's standards for primary school. The NRAT tools were printed in flashcards, and each pupil was independently assessed through the 5 stages of reading proficiency namely; Letter Level; Words Level; Paragraph Level; Story Reading Level; Story Comprehension Level (Recall, Comprehension, Understanding).

Summary of findings

11
Years
Median age of respondents

92
Percent
Average Learning Deprivation Rate

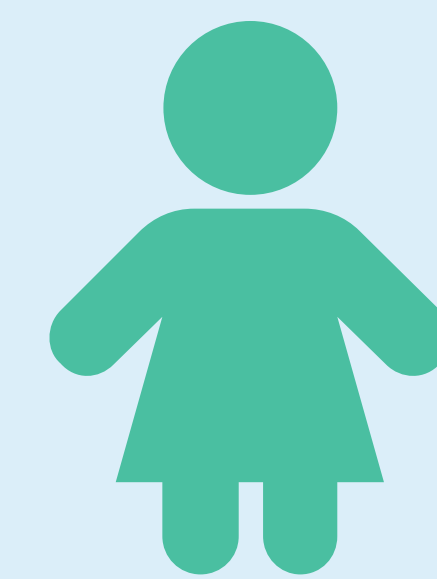
Reading proficiency:



Two out of five in-school children were proficient at reading

19.3
Percent
Reading proficiency

Reading proficiency



21.7
Percent
Reading proficiency

Reading proficiency



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Findings

Pupils' Demographics

About half of the respondents were male (49%) and resided in urban areas, (52%) median age for all respondents was 11years. More than half of the respondents were from households with a low wealth status (62%).

School Status

Two of every five pupils in primary five (45%) and more than one-third of those in primary six (36%) were overage. According to the Nigerian Education Data Survey (NEDS), children are over-aged when they are at least 2 years older than the age expected for their class. Based on the NEDS, pupils who were above the age of 11years in primary five, and 12years in primary six were classified as overage.

NRAT Assessments by Geo-political Zones

The NRAT Assessment showed a reading proficiency of 41% among in-school children across all the geo-political zones in Nigeria. Three regions namely north-west (16%), north-east (21%) and south-west (40%) reported reading proficiencies below the national average. South-south, south-east and north-central regions reported 60%, 58% and 50% respectively which was above the national average (See Fig. 1)

Reading Proficiency and Learning Deprivation

Overall, female pupils (22%) were more proficient at story comprehension level compared to male pupils (19%). Urban residents (24%) were more proficient than rural residents (17%). Seventy-eight percent (969) of pupils who participated in the NRAT assessment were aged 11 years and above, 17% of pupils (211) were 10 years old and 5% (62) were below 10 years old. This reflects the fact that children are enrolling in school later than expected for their class level. It also suggests that children aged 10 years are more likely to be in Primary 3 and 4 and it is not feasible to assess learning deprivation at that level. Only 8% of those aged 10 years were proficient at reading at story comprehension level implying that 92% were learning deprived. About 11% of those aged 11 years were proficient at reading at story comprehension level implying that 89% were learning deprived. Across all the regions, reading proficiency increased with age up to 11years and steadily declines afterwards suggesting that older pupils experience higher learning deprivation than younger children.

Figure 1: NRAT Assessment Performance among Primary School Pupils (ARC-P Survey, 2022; n=1242)

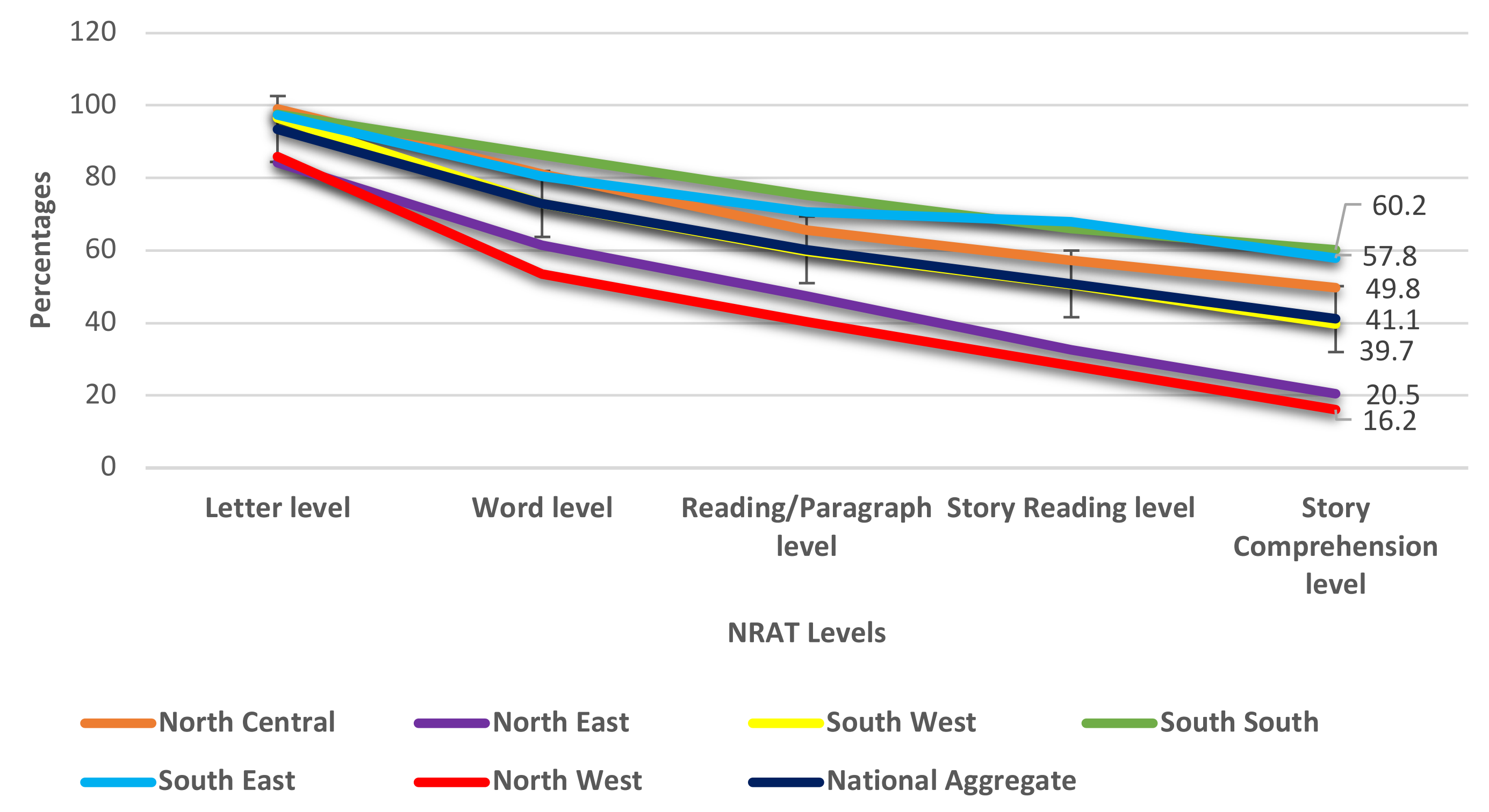


Figure 2: Story Comprehension Level by Pupils' Demographics (n=1242)

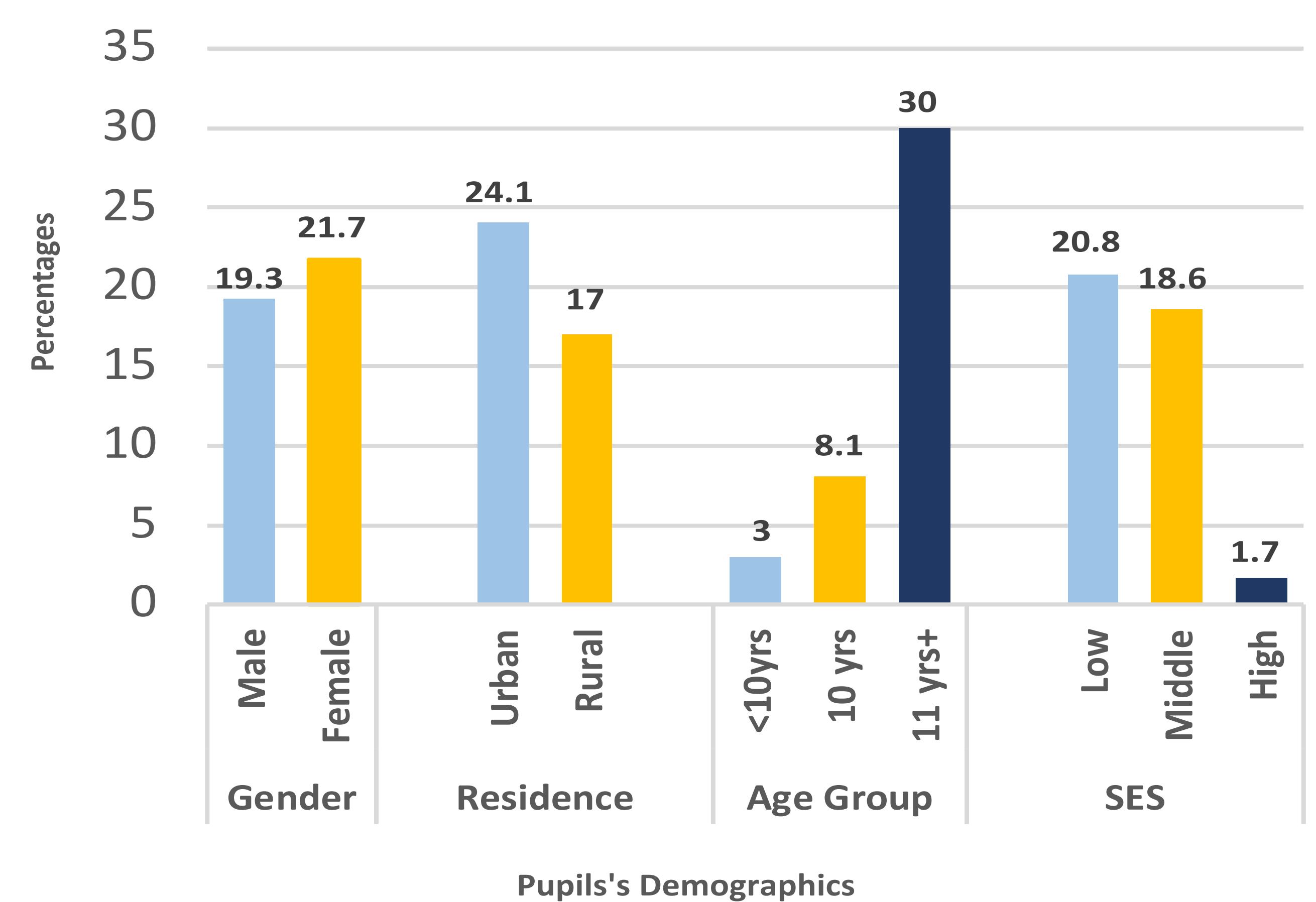
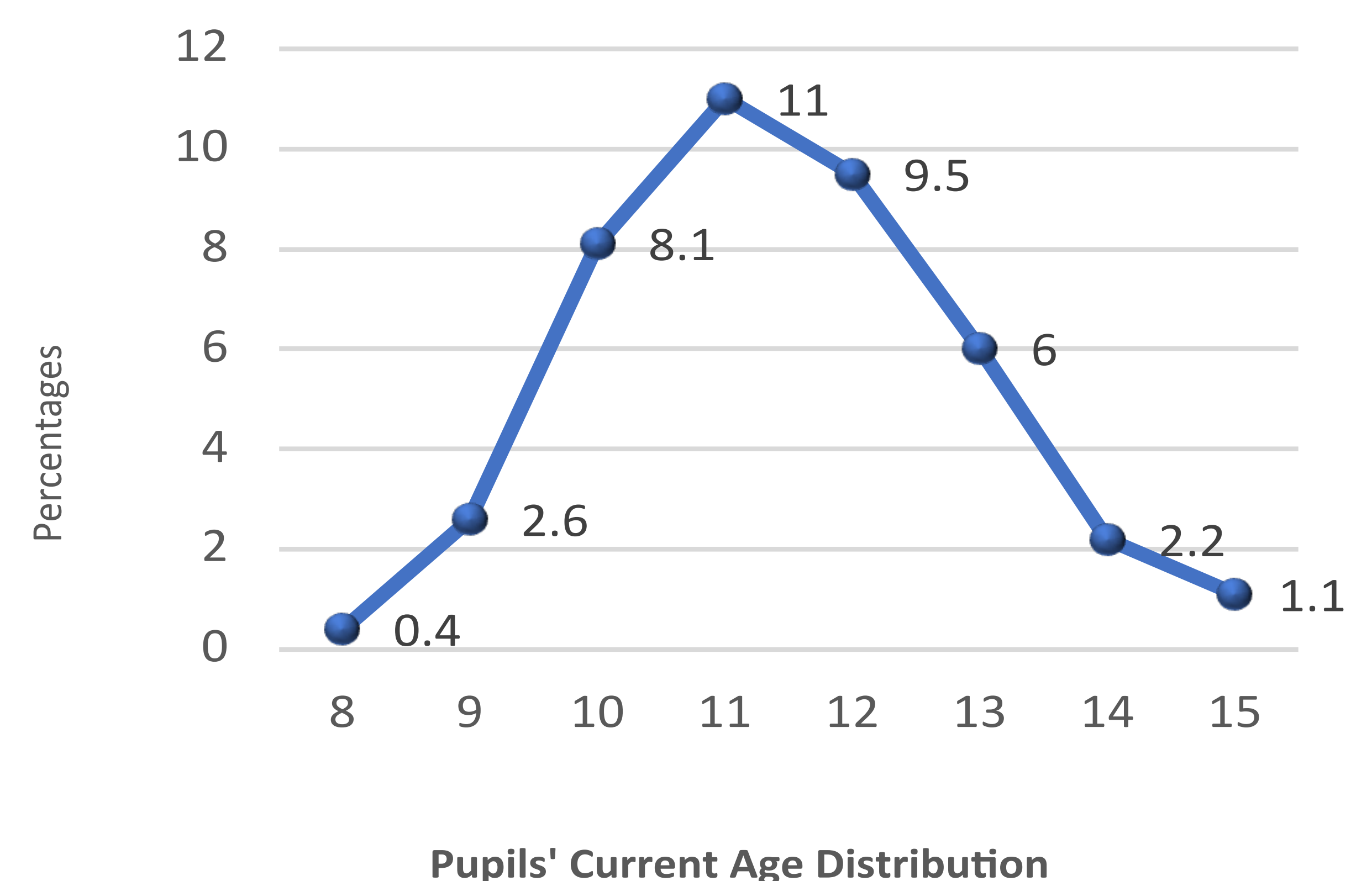


Figure 3: Proficiency by Story Comprehension Level by Pupils' Age Distribution (n=1242)

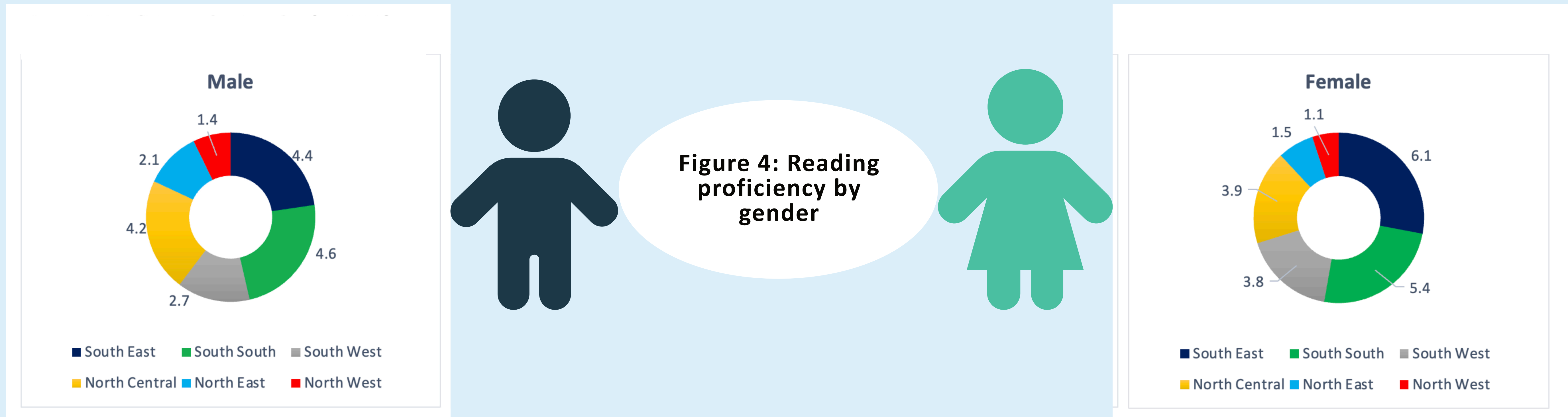


Regional Reading Proficiency Disaggregated by Gender

Male pupils from South-South were the most proficient at story comprehension level (5%) while those from North-West were the least proficient (1%). Females from the South East were the most proficient at story comprehension level (6%), while those from the North West were the least proficient (1%).

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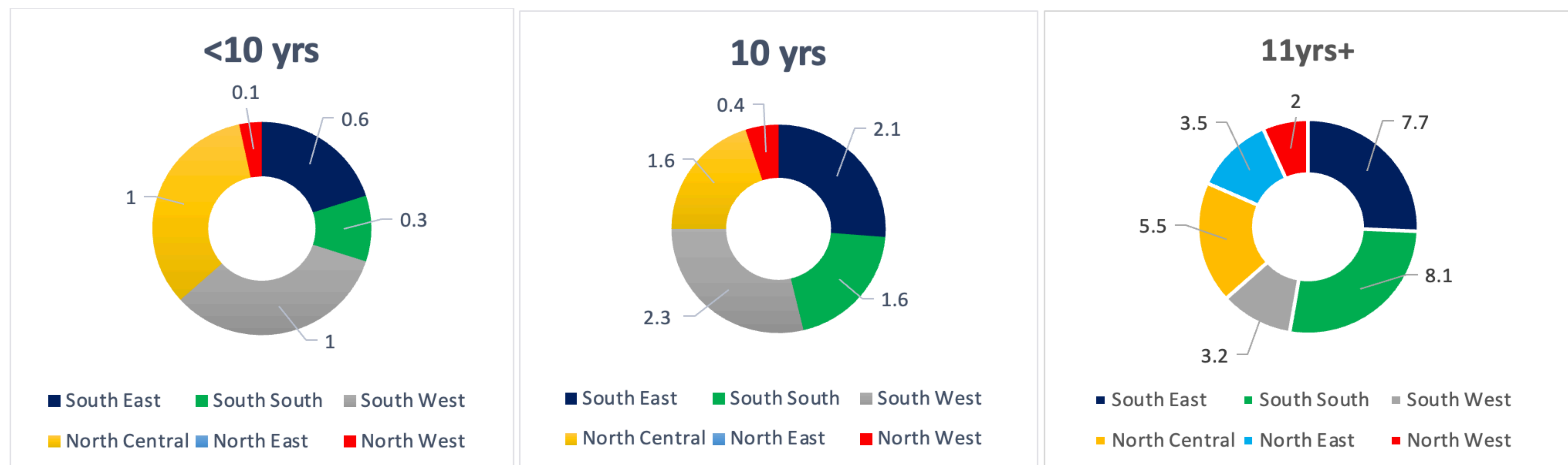
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Regional Reading Proficiency Disaggregated by Age

Among pupils aged 10 years, reading proficiency was highest in the South West (2.3%) and least in the North West (0.4%). Among pupils aged 11 years and above, reading proficiency was highest in the South-South (8.1%). However, among pupils aged 9 years or below, reading proficiency was highest in two regions namely South-West (1%) and North Central (1%).

Figure 5: Proficiency by Pupils' Age Group



Perceived Reading Efficacy

A self-assessment of pupils on their perceived reading efficacy revealed that, one of every three pupils (30%) always required the assistance of their teachers while reading. Two of every five pupils did not understand stories without pictures while only one of every three comprehended what they read. Overall, one of every three pupils read always (see Figure 6a).

Perceived Aids required to improve Reading Ability

When pupils were asked what aids could improve their reading ability, about half of the pupils opined that extra mural lessons (56.4 percent), story books (53.8 percent), and having a personal teacher (53.0 percent) would improve their reading ability and comprehension.

Figure 6a: Perceived Reading Efficacy (n=1242)

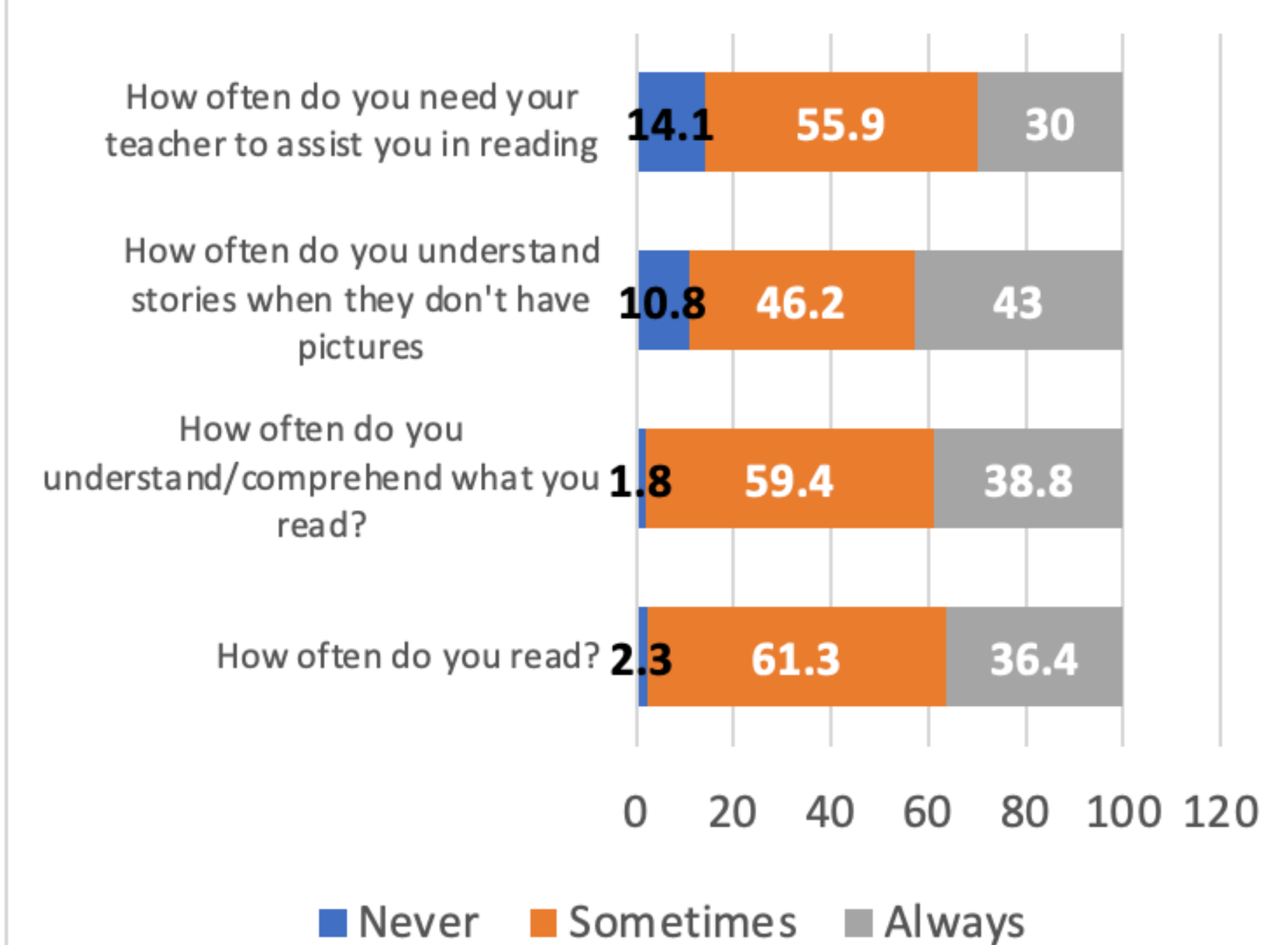
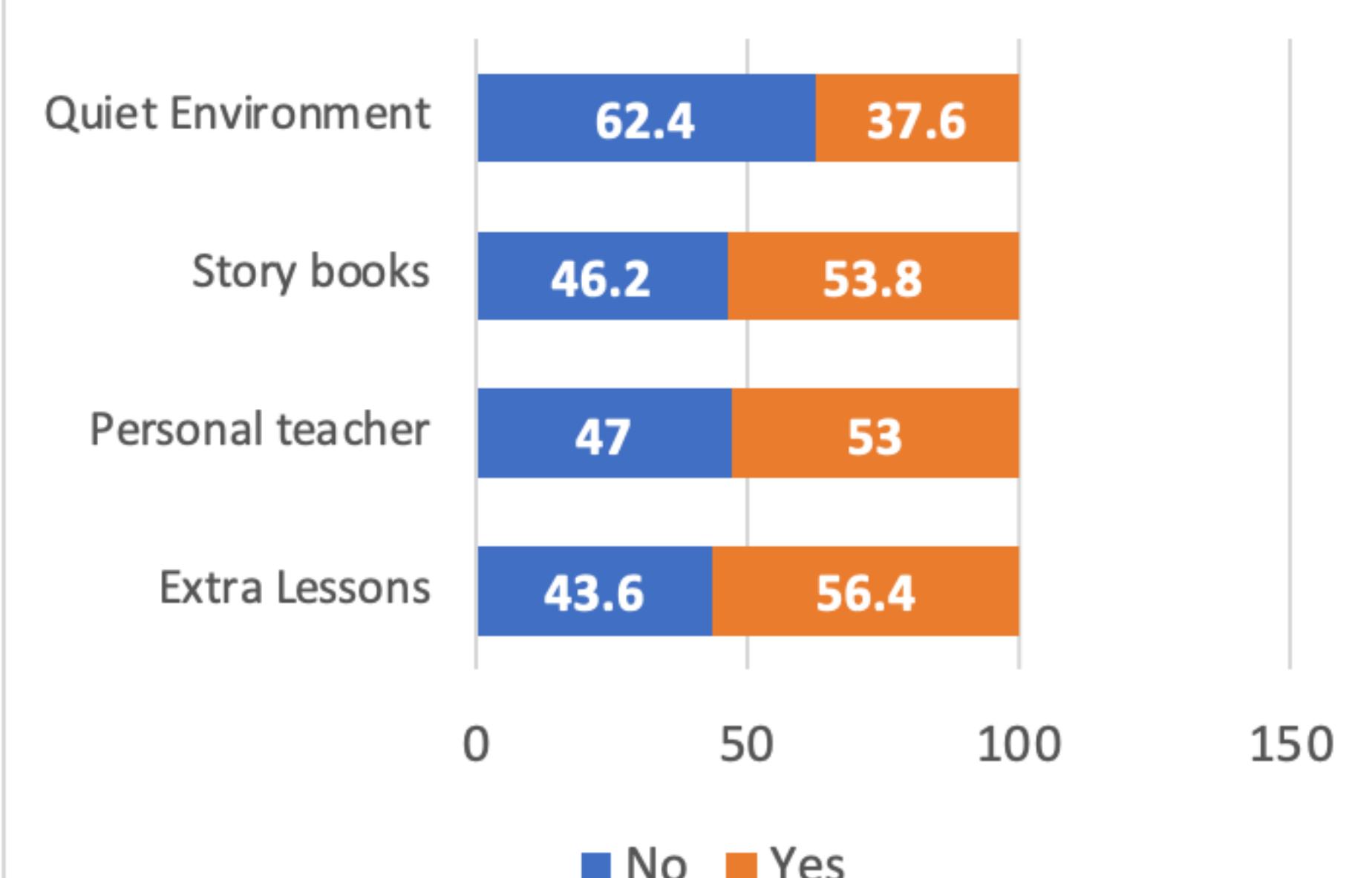


Figure 6b: Perceived Aids required to Improve Reading Ability (n=1242)



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Recommendations for Policy and Programmes

- The reading proficiency rate in Nigeria is below the global average, a situation that demands an urgent policy and program response by government to address the learning losses and meet the SDG education targets.
- Given the declining rate of reading proficiency after age 11 and high proportion of overage children in primary 5 & 6, it is important for programs targetting pupil enrolment to ensure primary school enrolment is age-appropriate.
- Programs aiming to improve reading proficiency in schools should adopt a systems approach that includes providing conducive learning environment, books and adequate supply of quality teachers to make significant impact.
- In line with UNICEF's RAPID framework for instructional efficiency, the need for extra lessons, or catch-up lessons is important for accelerated learning recovery for pupils as evidence abounds that reading efficacy depends on group size and frequency of session.
- Government should assess learning deprivations regularly at national and subnational levels to enable evidence-based responses and recovery plans that prioritize regional contexts.

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