

# Teaching In & Beyond Specialism



Professional Development  
for Secondary Teachers  
in Arts and Science

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*Professional Development  
for Secondary Teachers in  
Arts and Science*

April 2026

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Teacher Development Trust is a  
Registered Charity, no. 1200705.

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## ► About Us, Our Work and Values



### When Teachers Thrive, Children Succeed.

The Teacher Development Trust (TDT), founded by teachers and school leaders in 2012, is a national charity dedicated to helping leaders to build stronger schools through effective professional development.

Through evidence-based approaches and key principles drawn from international research, TDT works at both practice and policy levels to empower educational leaders - providing tools, training, and networking opportunities that enable them to implement and sustain effective professional development cultures in their settings.

By developing and delivering programmes, influencing policy, and conducting research, TDT ensures that teachers receive the highest quality professional development, helping to create environments where both educators and children can experience the most effective learning.



#### **We are SMART**

All of our work is deeply rooted in evidence. We want to know what works and seek out the brightest and the best minds to help shape our programmes, research and advocacy.



#### **We have HEART**

Teaching and learning is about people and connection. Even the strongest evidence for improvement will be ineffective if not implemented by expert, empowered teachers at the front of the classroom.



#### **We are HUMBLE**

We are always curious, we are always learning. We are led by the evidence, but we also have the humility to keep testing our understanding and adapt.

## ► About Our Collaborators

This report has been carried out jointly with Gatsby Charitable Foundation and The Cultural Education Network, powered by Arts Council England.



**Gatsby Charitable Foundation** was set up by David Sainsbury to realise his charitable objectives. This includes a commitment to strengthening the country's science and engineering skills by developing innovative programmes and informing national policy on technical education, skills and good careers guidance. To achieve our ambition to increase the quality and supply of STEM skills to the UK workforce, we must ensure that young people are taught by well-qualified and motivated specialists.



**The Cultural Education Network** was established by Arts Council England in 2025 to support those who deliver the arts, culture and creativity for children and young people across England. We provide free one-to-one advice sessions to teachers, freelance teaching artists and staff from creative and cultural organisations. The Cultural Education Network is one of three programmes for schools and cultural educators, brought to you by Arts Council England. We also offer the Artsmark Award, the only award for arts and culture provision in England, and the Creativity Collaboratives, a research programme supporting schools to explore and embed creativity across the curriculum.

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## ► Acknowledgements

TDT would like to extend our sincere thanks to **Andrea Bean** and **Emily Thomson** for expertly leading this report. Their work engaging with partners and conducting sector research and in-depth analysis has been central in shaping the findings and recommendations.

We are grateful to **Teacher Tapp** for sharing their expertise in question formulation, conducting the data collection, and providing robust analysis. Their support enabled us to reach a far greater number of respondents than would otherwise have been possible.

We would also like to thank our academic partner, **Emily Perry** at Manchester Metropolitan University, for her guidance throughout the project, from its inception to the final report. It has been a privilege to be able to draw on her knowledge and skills within the CPD field and her academic research expertise.

A number of subject associations generously contributed insights and foundational thinking, particularly **STEM, The Royal Society of Chemistry, Music Mark**, and the **Royal Ballet and Opera**. Their perspectives were invaluable in helping TDT understand the pressures faced by teachers teaching both within and outside their specialism.

Additional thanks go to **George Hutton** for the design of the final report. His work has ensured that the findings are clearly presented and accessible to a wide range of audiences.

The partnership with, and funding from, the **Gatsby Foundation** and the **Cultural Education Network**, powered by **Arts Council England**, has been instrumental in making this report possible. Special thanks go to **Jenni French** (Gatsby) and **Kenna Hearnly** (Cultural Education Network), who worked jointly with the TDT team at every stage of the project.

Finally, we are especially grateful to all the **teachers** who took the time to complete the Teacher Tapp survey or participated in focus groups. Their voices have been pivotal in ensuring this work reflects their experiences and supports developments across the education system.

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## ► Executive Summary

**N**ational data, including the Teacher Development Trust (TDT, 2025) CPD Landscape report, indicate that access to subject-specific CPD is inconsistent, and there is limited evidence on whether current provision adequately differentiates between the needs of specialist and non-specialist teachers. This raises the central research question of this report:

Do teachers teaching outside their specialism require different forms of CPD, and is the current provision equitably designed to meet those needs?

This report examines how continuous professional development (CPD) currently supports secondary teachers in both specialist and non-specialist roles in science and arts subjects. Drawing on national workforce data, Teacher Tapp survey findings, focus group evidence, and academic research, it explores differences in CPD experiences, barriers to effective professional learning, and the forms of CPD teachers perceive as most impactful. Specifically, the research addresses four interrelated questions:

- 1) What are the professional development experiences of secondary teachers teaching within their subject specialism compared with those teaching outside it, across science and arts subjects?
- 2) What gaps, barriers, and unmet needs exist in current CPD provision, particularly for non-specialist teachers?
- 3) Which forms and features of professional development are perceived to be most effective in strengthening subject knowledge, pedagogy, and professional confidence?
- 4) What evidence-informed principles can guide CPD provision to better meet the distinct needs of specialist and non-specialist teachers?

The research finds that subject specialism cannot be understood as a simple binary. Instead, it exists on a continuum shaped by:

- Qualifications
- Teaching experience
- Confidence
- Professional identity

Many teachers move in and out of their specialist area across the week, particularly within science departments where shortages are acute.

Evidence from both national data and teacher accounts shows that teaching outside specialism has implications for classroom practice, teacher workload and professional identity. Teachers working beyond their subject area frequently report significantly increased planning time and heightened cognitive load as they prepare and deliver unfamiliar content. Confidence when teaching outside their expertise is a particular challenge, especially in practical and disciplinary subjects such as science and the arts, where secure subject knowledge underpins exploratory

and creative learning. Over time, these pressures extend beyond classroom practice, affecting teacher wellbeing and potentially contributing to retention challenges as teachers shift from an initial willingness to broaden their expertise into a mode of professional 'survival', prioritising accuracy and risk management over creativity and adaptation.

The research also highlights significant gaps in current CPD provision. While many teachers report being able to access CPD, fewer believe that the time and resources invested meaningfully improve their capability. Subject-specific CPD remains unevenly distributed, and existing provision often prioritises generic pedagogical themes rather than the subject-contextualised development teachers say they need. Evidence suggests that teachers teaching outside specialism are less likely to receive relevant development and often find available CPD less useful.

Across both science and arts subjects, confidence emerged as the central factor shaping teachers' professional experiences. Crucially, confidence should not be understood as a personality trait, but as a professional condition shaped by subject alignment, access to expertise and the quality of professional learning available. Where teachers feel secure in their subject knowledge, they describe greater adaptability, creativity and willingness to innovate. Where confidence is fragile, particularly when teaching outside specialism, teaching becomes more risk-averse and teacher-led.

Teachers also emphasised that professional identity plays an important role in how they engage with professional learning. For subject specialists, CPD that deepens disciplinary knowledge and connects them to wider professional networks sustains professional identity and expertise. For non-specialists,

development that strengthens subject knowledge, provides modelling of expert practice and creates psychologically safe environments for expressing uncertainty is essential.

Taken together, these findings suggest that CPD systems must move beyond generic provision towards differentiated professional learning that reflects teachers' varying levels of subject alignment and confidence. In a system where teaching outside specialism has become structurally embedded, professional development is not a supplementary support but a structural necessity.

The report therefore identifies several principles for future CPD design:

- 1) Prioritise subject-contextualised development, particularly for those teaching outside specialism.
- 2) Develop structured pathways for teachers to build additional subject specialism.
- 3) Establish structured professional development cycles that provide both protected implementation time and psychologically safe professional dialogue.
- 4) Develop expertise of specialists as teachers of teachers, not just subject experts.
- 5) Establish advanced disciplinary pathways beyond leadership accreditation.

**At policy level**, recognition of the developmental implications of non-specialist teaching is essential, particularly in light of ongoing curriculum and assessment reform. Policy frameworks should acknowledge the professional learning required when teachers work outside their subject specialism.

**At provider level**, CPD design should differentiate according to teacher confidence and subject alignment, rather than assuming uniform needs based solely on formal specialist labels.

**At school and trust level**, leaders should consider structural conditions that enable meaningful professional learning. This includes cross-department scheduling, protected observation opportunities, coaching and mentoring capacity, and access to wider subject networks beyond the individual school.

Ultimately, where teachers are required to work beyond their original specialism, the quality of professional development determines whether that experience becomes developmental or detrimental. Well-designed CPD has the potential not only to strengthen teaching practice and pupil outcomes, but also to support teacher confidence, professional identity and long-term retention in shortage subjects.

# 1

## Introduction



“High-quality professional development has long been recognised as a powerful lever for **improving teacher expertise, classroom practice and pupil outcomes**”

**T**his report examines the continuous professional development (CPD) experiences and needs of secondary teachers in England who teach science and arts subjects, comparing those teaching within their subject specialism with those teaching outside it. For the purposes of this report, and in line with the Department for Education guidance (DfE), a specialist teacher is defined as:

A teacher who holds a relevant post A-level qualification – such as a degree or subject-specific initial teacher training – in the subject they teach.

However, as will be explored in Section 2, definitions of subject specialism vary across research, school contexts and professional development programmes, and therefore exist on a spectrum shaped by qualifications, experience, confidence and professional identity.

Secondary education in England has always been structured around subject specialism, with pupils taught by different teachers across distinct subject areas. Pupils move between teachers who are expected to have deep subject knowledge and to model the ways of thinking and practising that define each



curriculum area. In principle, this structure depends on teachers working within their area of training and professional identity. In practice, this alignment is increasingly fragile.

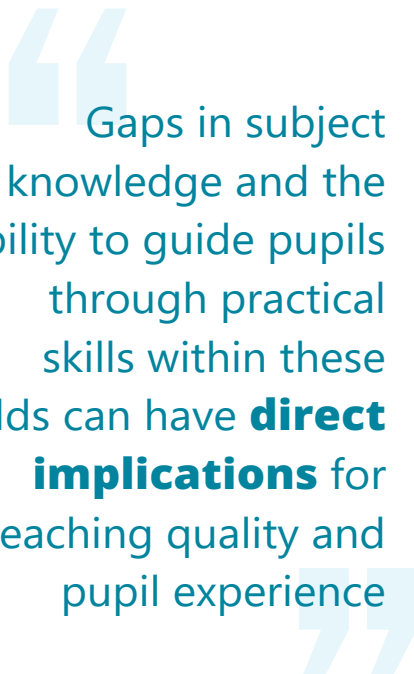
An increasing number of secondary teachers now teach outside their subject specialism as part of their regular timetable, particularly in shortage subjects such as physics, as well as in several arts disciplines. This is not necessarily led by school improvement strategies but rather a response to structural pressures, which include:

- ▶ Subject-specific recruitment shortfalls
- ▶ Uneven regional distribution of teachers
- ▶ Financial constraints
- ▶ Retention challenges

(Hobbs & Porsch, 2021)

While in some instances, teachers choose to broaden their expertise and extend their practice into new or linked subjects, others are deployed to fill gaps, often without support or adequate preparation. This raises important questions about curriculum depth, pupil experience and teacher wellbeing and workload. It also raises questions about professional identity and sustainability in the sector.

It is within this landscape that CPD becomes particularly critical. High-quality professional development has long been recognised as a powerful lever for improving teacher expertise, classroom practice and pupil outcomes. It also plays a significant role in teacher morale and retention. However, national data evidence, such as the Teacher Development Trust (TDT, 2025) CPD Landscape report, suggests that subject-specific CPD access is inconsistent, and there is limited evidence on whether the current provision adequately differentiates between the needs of specialist and non-specialist teachers.



Gaps in subject knowledge and the ability to guide pupils through practical skills within these fields can have **direct implications** for teaching quality and pupil experience

This raises the central question explored within this report:

Do teachers teaching outside their specialism require different forms of CPD, and is the current provision equitably designed to meet those needs?

These issues are particularly acute in science and arts subjects, both of which rely heavily on a combination of theoretical knowledge as well as practical application and understanding. Within this report, secondary science encompasses physics, chemistry and biology, while the arts include music, dance, drama, art and design and film/media studies. Each individual science requires secure conceptual understanding and confidence with practical experimentation. Arts subjects often depend on creativity and physical and practice-based learning, often expressed through rehearsal, performance, iterative critique and material experimentation. Gaps in subject knowledge and the ability to guide pupils through practical skills within these

fields can have direct implications for teaching quality and pupil experience. At the same time, both science and arts face distinctive workforce challenges, which make them valuable lenses through which to examine how well CPD systems respond to differentiated needs. They allow us to explore not only whether subject-specific CPD exists, but whether it is sufficiently tailored to support teachers navigating different levels of subject alignment, confidence and identity.

This research is also timely in light of the current policy developments taking place. The Curriculum and Assessment Review, the forthcoming New National Curriculum, the recent White Paper, planned investment in SEND and inclusion training, and the revised Ofsted inspection framework, all signal increased expectations around teacher expertise and professional development. In addition, recent commitments to strengthen arts education - including the establishment of a new National Centre for Arts and Music Education and the introduction of the Enrichment Framework to broaden pupils'



access to cultural and creative experiences - reinforce the expectation that schools will deliver high-quality provision across these subjects. This makes it particularly important to consider how best to support teachers already in post, especially those working beyond their original specialism.

Against this backdrop, Teacher Development Trust, in partnership with The Gatsby Foundation and Arts Council England's Cultural Education Network, has undertaken this research to examine how CPD experiences and needs differ for specialist and non-specialist teachers in secondary science and arts subjects. While workforce supply remains a national priority, this study focuses on the lived professional experience of those currently fulfilling these roles and on how CPD systems might better support them.

The research addresses four questions:

- 1** What are the **professional development experiences** of secondary teachers teaching within their subject specialism compared with those teaching outside it, across science and arts subjects?
- 2** What **gaps, barriers and unmet needs** exist in current CPD provision, particularly in relation to non-specialist teaching?
- 3** Which forms and features of professional development are perceived to be most effective in **strengthening subject knowledge, pedagogy and confidence**?
- 4** What **evidence-informed principles** can guide CPD provision to better meet the distinct needs of specialist and non-specialist teachers?

# 2

## Evidence and Trends in Subject Specialism



“Across both science and arts, non-specialist teaching is now **more widely embedded than ever**”

**T**his section examines what is known about specialist and non-specialist teaching in secondary science and arts, drawing together national workforce data, subject association evidence and academic research to consider implications for professional development and retention.

## ► The Prevalence and Nature of Non-Specialist Teaching

The starting point for understanding the professional development needs of both specialist and non-specialist teachers is clarity about exactly what is meant by subject specialism. However, as Worth and Faulkner-Ellis (2022) argue, measuring a teacher's subject specialism can be somewhat complex.

The Department for Education (DfE, 2016) classifies non-specialist teachers as those lacking a relevant post A-level qualification in the subject they teach, while academic research commonly refers to out-of-field teaching, describing it as the assignment of teachers to subjects or phases they are inadequately prepared or not formally trained in (Hobbs & Porsch, 2021). A teacher may

lack formal qualifications yet still possess deep knowledge in the area they teach, such as a French speaker without post A-level certification in French. Other teachers may teach across adjacent disciplines within a broader curriculum area. For example, a biology specialist who also teaches chemistry or a music specialist delivering drama. In many secondary contexts, teachers move in and out of field across the week, such as the chemistry specialist who is also timetabled to teach physics and biology. It follows, therefore, that when we refer to a specialism, we need to consider a continuum rather than a fixed category. It is this fluidity that further complicates any attempts to quantify need, having significant implications for how CPD is designed, delivered and evaluated.

Despite this complexity, national data reveal some consistent patterns around teacher deployment beyond specialism in secondary schools. Physics remains the most acute example of this; workforce analyses show that it has the highest proportion of teachers without relevant post A-level qualifications among the sciences, with only 16% of GCSE double award science content delivered by teachers classed as physics specialists, compared to 65% in biology (Worth, 2025).

Senior leaders frequently report relying on non-specialists to fill timetables in physics (Worth, 2025), which results in a structural reliance on teachers working outside their main specialism within science departments.

In the arts, patterns differ in form, but consequences are similar. While the overall secondary workforce has grown steadily, the number of teachers in expressive arts has declined, with music vacancy rates now aligning with physics and computing (Cultural Learning Alliance, 2025). Drama has experienced sustained reductions in staffing and a substantial proportion of teachers in drama and music do not hold subject-specific post A-level qualifications (DfE, 2016; Darlington, 2017). Simultaneously, initial teacher training recruitment targets in art and music continue to be missed, which limits future supply (National Society for Education in Art and Design [NSEAD] 2025).

This evidence highlights that across both science and arts, non-specialist teaching is now more widely embedded than ever within national staffing structures, with significant implications for professional development. While the scale and documentation of workforce shortages differ between science and arts subjects, both areas illustrate how schools increasingly rely on teachers working beyond their original specialism. For this reason, they provide useful comparative lenses for examining how CPD systems respond to differing levels of subject alignment.

### **Subject knowledge, pedagogy and classroom practice**

If subject specialism operates along a continuum, then subject expertise must be viewed in the same multidimensional way

- beyond secure content knowledge alone. The Institute of Physics (2020) conceptualises mastery as comprising three interrelated components: substantive knowledge (core concepts and principles), disciplinary knowledge (how knowledge is generated and validated within the subject) and Pedagogical Content Knowledge, known as PCK (the combination of subject matter expertise and effective teaching strategies). While teachers teaching outside their specialism may develop sufficient substantive knowledge to deliver lessons, disciplinary understanding and PCK typically require sustained engagement over time. Where these are lacking, impacts on classroom practice become more evident.

Research suggests that teaching outside specialism affects classroom practice in multiple ways. Teachers report heightened cognitive load and increased planning time when preparing unfamiliar material (National Education Union [NEU], 2023). In practical subjects such as science, this may include reduced confidence in managing experimental work, responding to unanticipated outcomes or addressing pupils' subject-specific questions. In arts subjects, teachers without formal training may feel less confident and therefore rely more heavily on tightly structured tasks or externally produced schemes to help them manage uncertainty (AccessArt). These adaptations are understandable responses to insecurity; however, they can lead to the adoption of a more teacher-led approach, which, in turn, reduces the likelihood of pupils engaging in exploratory or dialogic strategies associated with disciplinary thinking (Campbell et al., 2023).

These shifts in classroom approaches are not just technical adjustments; they have the potential to impact pupil experience and attainment. Without teachers feeling confident or able to design and deliver lessons that span

both theoretical and practical teaching, there is potential for learning to be limited. National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT, 2025) members' report concerns that examination preparation could become compromised due to teachers lacking deep subject expertise, particularly in content-heavy or technically demanding subjects. This is exemplified, but not isolated to, art and design, where specialist teaching has been positively associated with attainment outcomes (Xu et al., 2017).

Together, this evidence suggests that the impact of teaching out of specialism extends beyond just instructional technique. For pupils, there are questions about curriculum depth, exam preparation and access to authentic disciplinary experiences, particularly in subjects where practical competence and technical knowledge are central, such as physics, chemistry, drama and music (NASUWT, 2025). These concerns reinforce the argument that subject knowledge and pedagogical fluency are intertwined and both are essential to securing high-quality learning experiences.

## Workload and retention

While the implications for pupils are significant, the effects of out-of-specialism teaching also carry consequences for teachers themselves. In schools facing recruitment challenges, coping strategies such as larger class sizes, reduced non-contact time and cross-subject deployment are increasingly common (Worth & Faulkner-Ellis, 2022). For teachers required to plan and teach unfamiliar content within these constrained conditions, workload and cognitive demand intensify. Increased planning time, heightened cognitive load and reduced professional confidence are frequently reported when unfamiliar subject content is not supported by structured development opportunities (NEU, 2023). Emerging evidence suggests that sustained exposure to these pressures may contribute to dissatisfaction and attrition, potentially exacerbating the very workforce shortages that necessitated non-specialist deployment in the first place (Rentala, 2023).

Teachers report that sustained teaching outside of their specialism can generate stress, exhaustion and diminished confidence (NEU, 2023). Hobbs and Porsch (2021), in their international study, describe how initial willingness to broaden expertise may shift into 'survival' mode if the support provided is insufficient or even lacking completely. Planning unfamiliar lessons presents a challenge not only in time management but also requires significant cognitive effort. Alongside this, responding to spontaneous pupil questions can heighten anxiety and working within more practical subjects adds another layer of logistical complexity.

“40% of teachers and leaders **did not believe** the CPD they undertook over a 12-month period improved their ability to perform their role”

### ► Gaps and Barriers in Current CPD Provision

National data suggest that access to CPD remains uneven, as evidenced by TDT (2025), which found that 40% of teachers and leaders did not believe the CPD they undertook over a 12-month period improved their ability to perform their role. This unevenness appears particularly pronounced in the secondary phase. Compared with primary colleagues, secondary teachers were less likely to engage in sustained external CPD, with only 36% reporting time spent on formal CPD compared to 55% of primary teachers. They were also approximately half as likely to access formal external CPD (32% compared to 62%). Together, these figures suggest a structural disparity in both participation and perceived impact, particularly affecting the secondary workforce.

If we begin to dig deeper, we can see that subject-level evidence reinforces these concerns. In physics, many teachers report receiving little or no subject-specific CPD in a typical year (Institute of Physics, 2023). Similar patterns are reported in chemistry (Royal Society of Chemistry, 2025). In art and

design, nearly one-third of secondary teachers report no specialist CPD over a two-year period (NSEAD, 2023). However, data suggest that while teachers value subject-specific development, competing whole-school priorities and workload pressures frequently limit participation (Allen et al, 2024).

Although we are acutely aware of the crucial role organisational culture plays in the effective implementation of CPD in schools, structural barriers often determine whether teachers can access high-quality CPD in the first place. Budget constraints and timetabling challenges often restrict access to external CPD provision. In schools facing staffing shortages, releasing teachers for development may exacerbate both cover and financial pressures (TDT, 2025; DfE, 2024). Given these challenges, schools are increasingly relying on internally delivered CPD.

However, the issue is not simply whether teachers access CPD, but whether that provision is perceived as high-quality and impactful. Evidence suggests the picture is



more nuanced. Pollard et al. (2024), in their study of teachers' professional development journeys, found that although external CPD was accessed less frequently than internal, it was often associated with high-quality professional learning described as relevant, engaging, practical, convenient and cost-effective. In contrast, other studies have highlighted that teachers often value internal CPD for its contextual relevance and applicability (Bean, 2025; DfE, 2024). This suggests that both the source and the design of CPD shape how quality is measured and impact gained. In general, both internal and external CPD models are often found to prioritise generic pedagogical themes: behaviour management, assessment policy and whole-school initiatives without sufficient consideration of how these might apply to specific teacher needs (TDT, 2025), including across different subject areas.

Crucially, few national datasets disaggregate CPD access by subject specialism status. As a result, the extent to which non-specialists receive targeted support remains unclear. Where CPD is offered, it may not be differentiated to reflect varying starting points, as identified as crucial by Bean (2025). This goes beyond years of experience; a physics specialist and a biologist teaching physics may

attend the same session, yet require different forms of scaffolding and depth in order for it to have an impact on confidence, knowledge and practice.

Previous government-funded programmes for specific subject areas (namely science, computing and modern foreign languages), including the forty-day Science Additional Specialism Programme (SASP) and subsequent Subject Knowledge Enhancement (SKE+) and Teacher Subject Specialism Training courses, provided structured support to teachers working outside of their specialism. These programmes aimed to develop both subject knowledge and pedagogy, and evidence suggests they significantly improved participants' confidence and practice - sometimes in transformative ways - particularly through sustained tutor contact and professional community (Perry et al., 2024). Although some provision remains, for example, the Subject Knowledge for Physics Teaching (SKPT) delivered by Ogden Trust, which offers fully funded CPD for teachers of physics out of specialism - there is a lack of consistently available, extended and funded support programmes across subjects. Therefore, access to sustained subject-specific professional development for out-of-specialism teachers remains uneven.

“For many secondary teachers, **subject identity** is central to their sense of **professional purpose**, and when CPD fails to recognise this, it can undermine engagement”

### ► Features of Effective and Differentiated CPD

Research consistently demonstrates that effective professional development needs to be sustained, supported, focused, collaborative and integrated with classroom application, and that a ‘one size fits all’ approach is much less likely to produce lasting change to practice than structured programmes that combine theory, modelling and practice (Cordingley et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2017; Trust Wide CPD Leads, 2025). Education Endowment Foundation (2021) identifies four core mechanisms underpinning effective professional development: building knowledge, motivating teachers, developing teaching techniques and embedding practice. Importantly, these are most effective when grounded in a clear understanding of the contextual nuances and needs that exist within a school.

Subject associations across both arts and sciences focus their CPD on discipline-specific models, built from their close engagement with subject teachers. The Institute of Physics CPD programmes combine developing teachers’ subject knowledge with pedagogical rehearsal, whilst arts-based programmes frequently prioritise collaborative critique, practitioner modelling and iterative experimentation. In drama, for example, effective professional development needs to incorporate practical work that exemplifies both pedagogical and theoretical principles. This requires sufficient time for exploration, reflection and the assimilation of relevant research (National Drama, 2023). Such approaches suggest that subject knowledge and pedagogy are inseparable.

Evidence about programme design is further strengthened by the voices of teachers across various studies, including both Pollard et

al. (2024) and DfE (2024), who report that teachers particularly appreciate practical, 'hands-on' and subject-focused CPD, often above whole-school training. For non-specialists, effective provision includes explicit unpacking of core concepts, opportunities to observe expert teaching and structured rehearsal of explanations. This is further strengthened by expert facilitation from those with expert subject knowledge and a strong understanding of teaching (Perry et al, 2024). For specialists, CPD that enables engagement with disciplinary developments, research-informed innovation and professional networks supports continued growth. As Hollis highlights (Bean, 2025), what both groups share is the need for psychologically safe spaces where they can articulate any uncertainty, although this may seem different depending on specialism as well as experience. Evidence from subject-specialism programmes illustrates how these design principles translate into impact.

Perry et al. (2024), in their exploration of subject specialism CPD programmes, found that participants reported improvements in both subject and pedagogical knowledge and increased confidence in teaching their non-specialist subject following specialist training. Together, this underlines the importance of targeted professional development that integrates subject knowledge with relevant pedagogical application in order to deliver high-quality teaching to all pupils.

Beyond instructional technique, effective CPD must also attend to professional identity. For many secondary teachers, subject identity is central to their sense of professional purpose, and when CPD fails to recognise this, it can undermine engagement. Bean's (2025) *What is Didagogy?* report emphasises the significance of identity in shaping teachers' engagement with learning - teachers engage most deeply

when their professional identity is aligned with the learning they are undertaking. Working outside of a specialism can create dissonance between professional self-concept and daily practice. Where CPD assumes expertise that is not secure, or offers generic provision that does not address subject-specific needs, teachers may feel unsupported and undervalued. This challenge applies to CPD more broadly, but may be particularly acute for those working outside their specialism, where the gaps between professional identity and daily practice might be wider.

Retention research reinforces the significance of these dynamics, with NFER findings showing that teachers' perceptions of CPD quality and impact are associated with their likelihood of remaining in the profession (Worth et al., 2026). Taken together, this suggests that when professional development is experienced as meaningful and relevant, teachers are more inclined to remain in the profession, whereas ineffective or misaligned provision may heighten attrition risk. TDT (2025) reports that personalised CPD is likely to support retention among teachers who plan on leaving, as well as those not actively planning to do so. In contexts where teachers are already navigating unfamiliar subject demands, inadequate CPD can compound dissatisfaction.

Taken together, these findings suggest that deployment decisions cannot be viewed in isolation from professional development structures. Where teachers are required to work beyond their specialism, CPD is not a supplementary support but a structural necessity. While recruitment shortfalls drive non-specialist deployment, the quality of professional development determines whether that deployment becomes developmental or detrimental. In this sense, CPD functions not only as a pedagogical lever but as a strategic retention mechanism.



## ► Implications and Evidence Gaps

The evidence reviewed indicates that:

- 1** Subject specialism is multidimensional and unevenly distributed across science and arts.
- 2** Teaching outside specialism influences workload, retention, pedagogical and content knowledge, and professional identity.
- 3** Subject-specific CPD access is inconsistent, and differentiation by specialism status is limited in national data.
- 4** High-quality professional development is associated with improved teacher confidence and retention.
- 5** Subject knowledge and confidence have a direct impact on the learning experiences and outcomes for pupils.

There are clearly still significant gaps that remain:

- Few studies directly compare the CPD experiences of specialist and non-specialist teachers within the same subject.
- Arts research is less extensive than science research.
- National workforce data classifies qualification status, but there is a lack of evidence around perceived preparedness or confidence.
- More granular evidence based on teacher CPD needs is required to inform policy.

Nevertheless, there are some clear opportunities for improvement. In a system where non-specialist teaching has become structurally embedded, professional development must move beyond generic provision towards deliberate, differentiated support that is sustained. Without this alignment, inequities in teacher experience and pupil educational experiences risk widening. With it, effective CPD offers a route not only to improved teaching quality but also to addressing retention challenges in shortage subjects.

# 3

## Findings





**A**s part of this research, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Quantitative findings were drawn from six Teacher Tapp survey questions, alongside one open-ended response item. For each question, the number of respondents can be found alongside the data contained within this section. Qualitative data was subsequently gathered through four focus groups comprising 15 teachers in total from across science and arts, including both specialists and those teaching outside their specialism. A detailed overview of the methodology is provided in Appendix A.

The findings presented in the following section are displayed as statistical data and thematic analysis with illustrative teacher quotations. Together, they reflect teachers' reported experiences and perceptions of professional development across subject contexts.

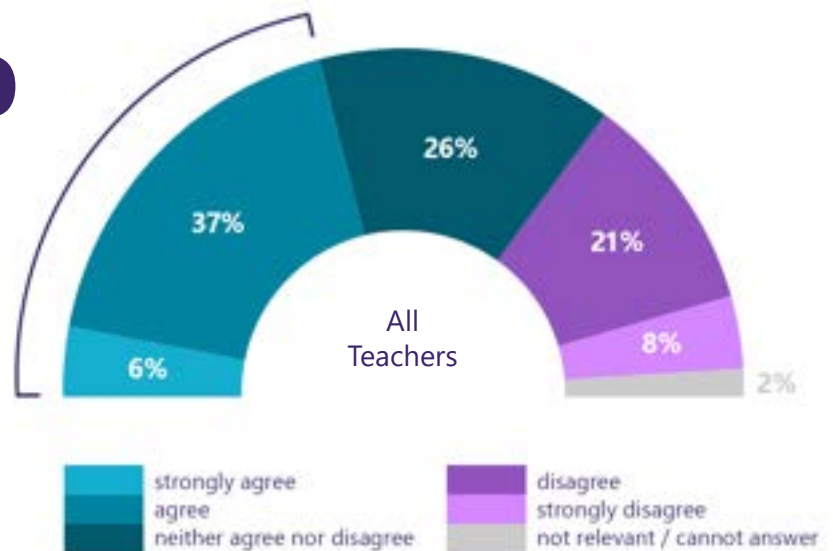
**Q1**

**“At my school, time and resources allocated to professional development are used in ways that enhance teachers’ instructional capabilities.”**

[To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?]

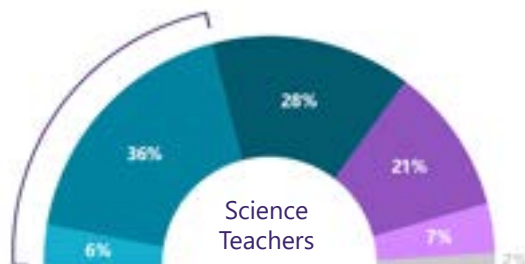
- ▶ **Less than half** (43%) of all the secondary teacher respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their school time and resources allocated to professional development were used in ways that enhanced their instructional capabilities:

**43%**

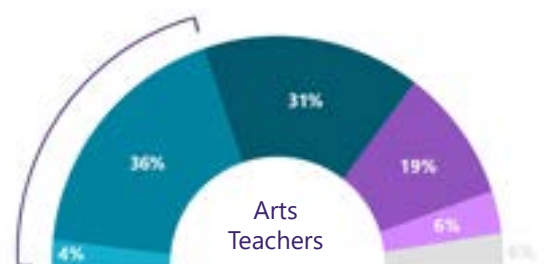


- ▶ When the data is broken down by subject area, 42% of science teachers and 40% of arts teachers (inc. D&T) agreed that CPD had been helpful to them:

**42%**



**40%**



Question answered by 3,826 teachers in total on 6th February 2026 (results weighted to reflect teacher and school demographics)

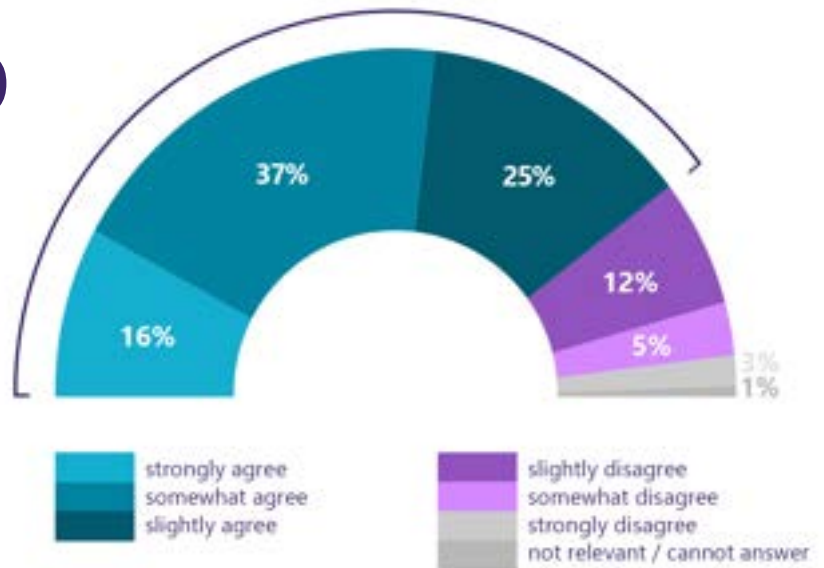
**Q2**

**“I can access the professional development that I need.”**

[To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?]

- ▶ **Over three quarters** (78%) of all the secondary teacher respondents agreed (slightly, somewhat or strongly) that they are able to access the professional development that they require:

**78%**



- ▶ The figures can be broken down by subject and specialism. The following percentages of teachers agreed that they can access the professional development they need:

**78%**  
of science-only specialists

**78%**  
of arts-only specialists

**79%**  
of those teaching a science subject as a non-specialist

**74%**  
of those teaching an arts subject as a non-specialist

*Question answered by 5,373 teachers in total (1,273 science teachers, 365 arts teachers) on 7th February 2026 (results weighted to reflect teacher and school demographics)*

**Q3**

Thinking about when teaching **within your subject specialism**, how useful has the CPD you have received in the past 12 months been for supporting that teaching?

▶ **Just over half** (54%) of all state-funded secondary teachers reported that the **CPD** they have received within their specialism in the past 12 months was **at least somewhat useful**. One in ten teachers (10%) across all subjects report not having received any CPD this year in their subject specialism.

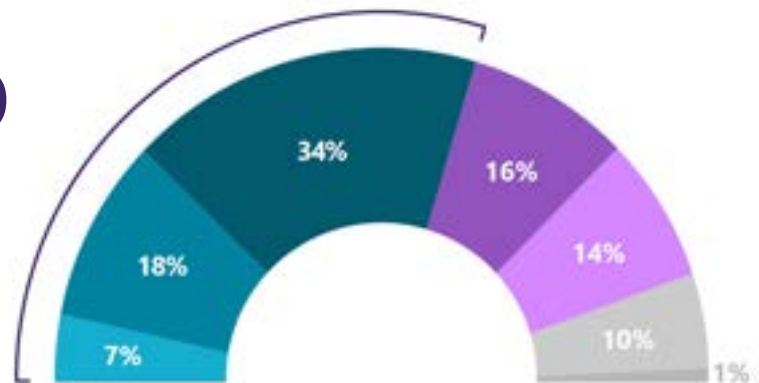
▶ For **science specialists**, the figure is 56%:

**56%**



▶ Of the **arts specialists**, 59% found their recent CPD useful:

**59%**



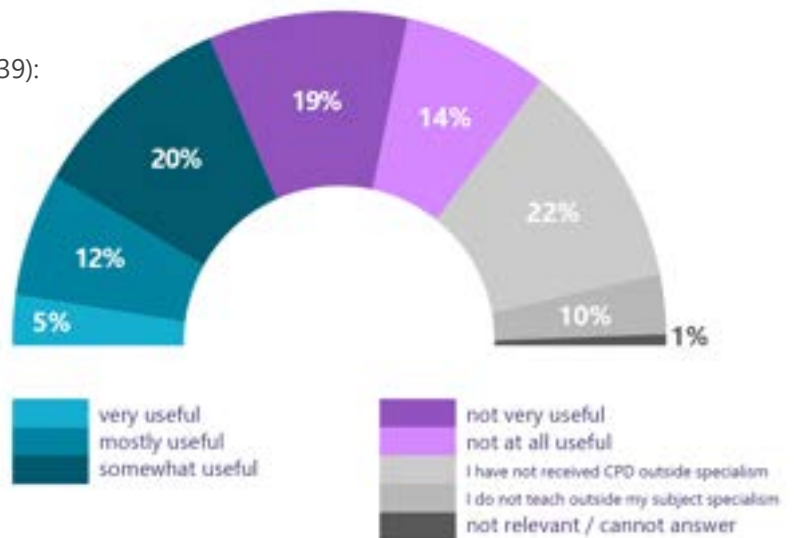
Question answered by 3,924 teachers in total on 7th February 2026 (results weighted to reflect teacher and school demographics)

**Q4**

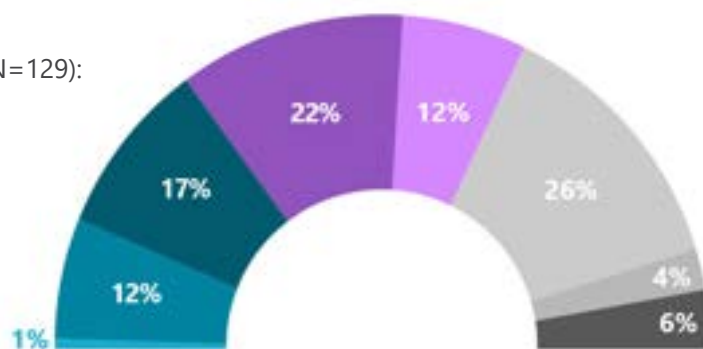
Thinking about when teaching **outside your subject specialism**, how useful has the CPD you have received in the past 12 months been for supporting that teaching?

- ▶ Just **27%** of all state-funded secondary teachers reported finding the **outside-of-specialism CPD** they had received in the past 12 months **at least somewhat useful**.
- ▶ Those teaching science as a non-specialist found the CPD they received in the past twelve months slightly more useful than those teaching arts as a non-specialist. 17% of non-specialist science teachers reported finding their CPD at least mostly useful, compared with 13% of those teaching arts as a non-specialist. Around a quarter of both groups reported not receiving any CPD outside their subject specialism.

- ▶ Those who teach **science as a non-specialist** (N=239):



- ▶ Those who teach **arts as a non-specialist** (N=129):



Question answered by 3,911 teachers in total on 7th February 2026 (results weighted to reflect teacher and school demographics)

## Q5

When teaching outside your subject specialism, **what most limits how useful CPD is for you?**

- ▶ The most common reported reasons secondary teachers found CPD outside their subject specialism limiting were **lack of time** to engage fully (42%), CPD being **too generic** and not subject-specific (29%), and **cost or funding constraints** (21%). Just 4% reported that there was nothing limiting how useful CPD was. When compared with teachers overall, the reported limitations from science and arts non-specialists were broadly similar:

#### Those who teach **science** as a non-specialist:

<b>Most limiting factor</b>	44%	Lack of time to engage fully
	34%	CPD is too generic and not subject-specific
	29%	I struggle to find relevant CPD
	27%	Cost or funding constraints
	14%	CPD does not reflect my teaching context
<b>Least limiting factor</b>	13%	I prioritise CPD for my specialist subject
	5%	CPD assumes too much prior knowledge

#### Those who teach **arts** as a non-specialist:

<b>Most limiting factor</b>	48%	Lack of time to engage fully
	26%	CPD is too generic and not subject-specific
	26%	I struggle to find relevant CPD
	21%	Cost or funding constraints
	16%	I prioritise CPD for my specialist subject
<b>Least limiting factor</b>	15%	CPD does not reflect my teaching context
	12%	CPD assumes too much prior knowledge

Question answered by 337 teachers in total (216 non-specialist science and 121 non-specialist arts) on 7th February 2026 (results weighted to reflect teacher and school demographics)

## Q6

If you were provided with funding to complete **30 hours of CPD** during the school day this year, **what activities would you choose to undertake**, assuming all options are available to you? [open-ended]

- Overall responses from teachers across all subjects regarding how they would utilise 30 hours of funded CPD reveal the following:
- Strong appetite for **classroom-relevant CPD** that supports both immediate practice and longer-term career progression.
  - Clear demand for **cross-school collaboration**, including observing best practice and learning from different leadership models.
  - Ongoing need to **strengthen subject expertise**, particularly for non-specialists and in response to curriculum and exam changes.
  - Interest in **practical, hands-on training** that teachers often lack time to develop independently.

"[I would like] something to **make me more confident** teaching subjects outside of my specialties (maybe a primary conversion course?)."

*Art non-specialist*

"Departmental improvement, how to really **understand the strengths and weaknesses of my department** and the best way to run CPD to address any findings."

*Science specialist*

Q6

cont.

If you were provided with funding to complete **30 hours of CPD** during the school day this year, **what activities would you choose to undertake**, assuming all options are available to you? [open-ended]

- ▶ In **science**, non-specialist respondents (n=137) describe urgent subject knowledge needs, particularly in physics and chemistry, whereas specialists (n=281) focus on instructional quality and curriculum development rather than foundational content gaps.

### Science Teachers: Non-Specialist vs Specialist Emerging Themes

	Science Non-Specialists	Science Specialists
<b>Overall Orientation</b>	Closing significant knowledge gaps	Refining and improving established practice
<b>Subject Knowledge</b>	Acute gaps, particularly in physics and chemistry	Strong baseline knowledge; focus not on content deficits
<b>Priority Content Areas</b>	Physics for non-specialists; chemistry content gaps; Exam specification clarity	Instructional quality; curriculum coherence; exam-level precision
<b>Professional Learning Format</b>	Subject knowledge enhancement; formal courses; deeper academic grounding	Targeted training; departmental planning; practice refinement
<b>System Friction</b>	Frustration around funding barriers limiting access to CPD	Less focus on access; more focus on improvement
<b>Broader Professional Concerns</b>	Primarily content-driven	SEND differentiation; AI integration; behaviour refinement

*Question gathered 2000 responses from all state-funded secondary teachers*

**Q6**

cont.

If you were provided with funding to complete **30 hours of CPD** during the school day this year, **what activities would you choose to undertake**, assuming all options are available to you? [open-ended]

- A selection of responses from **science teachers**, describing what they would do with 30 hours of CPD:

**"Subject-specific planning** to improve departmental resources."

*Science specialist*

"Training on how to **deliver and mark new qualifications.**"

*Science non-specialist*

**"Chemistry and physics for non-specialists** at the National STEM Centre in York... it used to be funded but now schools are expected to pay over £2000 per course so it isn't an option any more."

*Science non-specialist*

**"Subject-specific on Chemistry.** Probably self study as there is little available that is relevant for experienced teachers with a degree in Chemistry."

*Science specialist*

"How to **magically give me enough time** to implement any CPD. Until teaching hours are reduced all CPD is fundamentally flawed."

*Science specialist*

Q6

cont.

If you were provided with funding to complete **30 hours of CPD** during the school day this year, **what activities would you choose to undertake**, assuming all options are available to you? [open-ended]

- ▶ As for **art teachers**, the contrast between the two groups suggests non-specialists (n=76) are primarily seeking foundational security, while specialists (n=125) are oriented toward leadership, precision, and system-level contribution.

### Art Teachers: Non-Specialist vs Specialist Emerging Themes

	Art Non-Specialists	Art Specialists
<b>Overall Orientation</b>	Filling knowledge gaps; building confidence	Refinement, progression, leadership development
<b>Subject Knowledge</b>	Strong demand for subject enhancement and curriculum understanding	Deepening expertise and precision (e.g. moderation accuracy)
<b>Priority Content Areas</b>	Qualification updates; assessment moderation	Moderation precision; refining assessment practice
<b>Professional Learning Format</b>	Practical workshops; observing specialists; visiting other schools	Training courses; research engagement; cross-school collaboration
<b>System Friction</b>	Primarily focused on classroom competence	Considering NPQs; leadership pathways
<b>Broader Professional Concerns</b>	Behaviour, SEND, dealing with parents more frequently cited	Less focus on behaviour/ SEND; more strategic orientation

**Q6**

cont.

If you were provided with funding to complete **30 hours of CPD** during the school day this year, **what activities would you choose to undertake**, assuming all options are available to you? [open-ended]

- A selection of responses from **art teachers**, describing what they would do with 30 hours of CPD:

"I would begin a **masters**."

*Art non-specialist*

"**Away days** and **practical workshops** with other professionals."

*Art non-specialist*

"I've done most things for my level as HoD including NPQSL so maybe some time to **do research** and **write a paper** on my subject somehow."

*Art specialist*

"**Deepening practical skills** that I don't feel as equipped as I should be."

*Art specialist*

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## ► Focus Groups

### ► Experiences of CPD

#### Professional identity and confidence

Across both science and arts, teaching within specialism was described as identity-affirming and secure. Specialists reported engaging in self-led CPD outside of school, with one teacher referring to this as “naturally occurring CPD”, including reading, research and keeping abreast of subject progression and innovations. For arts specialists in particular, professional and personal identity frequently overlapped, with engagement in galleries, performance or musical practice feeding directly into classroom teaching. While much of this development occurred in their own time, it was framed positively - as an extension of commitment rather than an imposed requirement.

*“[I’m] always reading around the subjects, you know, in your own time, you read articles, you look at news articles, and it’s these little stories and anecdotes, I can really bring the subject to life a little bit and make it more relevant.”*

Specialists described CPD as enhancing an already secure professional identity rather than compensating for any insecurity. This also meant they felt more confident and were able to translate whole-school initiatives into subject-specific practice independently.

In contrast, teaching outside specialism is described across both subject areas as exposing. Non-specialists often expressed concern about “doing the subject a disservice” or that pupils would be able to detect their lack of expertise, demonstrating a significant lack of confidence. Science non-specialists feared factual inaccuracy and conceptual misunderstanding, particularly around terminology and exam specification, often meaning more time is taken up planning and preparing - one participant described the invisible workload involved:

*“...it'd take me a lot longer to plan a lesson... am I using the correct vocabulary? They're gonna potentially lose marks.”*

This was echoed by non-specialists in arts who also reported the planning as being cognitively and emotionally heavy.

*“I have to go over the lesson multiple times... it just doesn't come naturally.”*

They also reported anxiety around judgment and assessment accuracy, with participants describing feeling like an imposter in front of pupils, particularly at higher key stages, where subject depth and critique become more obvious.

Across all contexts, teachers reported greater comfort at lower key stages but significantly reduced confidence at examination level, raising concerns about the equity of pupil experience.

*“Students will miss out on core learning, potentially, as a result of teachers' lack of confidence or understanding.”*

“Non-specialists often expressed concern about **“doing the subject a disservice”** or that pupils would be able to detect their lack of expertise”

**Informal conversations and corridor discussions** were frequently described as the primary source for subject clarification

### **Whole school CPD versus subject-specific development**

Across science and arts, formal (planned and structured through school) CPD was widely described as generic, focusing on general teaching practices such as behaviour, feedback, literacy, compliance or SEND. While its value was acknowledged, it was perceived as insufficient for strengthening subject expertise.

Art specialists in particular highlighted the mismatch between practical disciplines and more generic initiatives such as those that are literacy driven, noting that examples “don’t really fit” the more practical subjects. SEND CPD was also described as not often accounting for the specifics of some subjects in relation to adaptations in contexts such as those that are lab-based or performance based.

For non-specialists, this lack of structured development posed greater difficulty. A number of science participants reported leadership assumptions that “science is one subject” with one teacher being told: “It’s all teaching...you should be able to adapt.”

Informal conversations and corridor discussions were frequently described as the primary source for subject clarification. However, these interactions were framed as dependent on goodwill rather than by design and were acknowledged as being a necessity in the absence of structured, planned CPD:

*“I end up going to my specialist colleagues, but then, again, sometimes you feel like you are putting that on that person. Especially when you sort of go into them a couple of times.”*

## Support systems and structures

Where strong subject communities existed, experiences improved significantly. Non-specialists particularly valued modelling, observation and team teaching:

*“Because I’d seen it being demonstrated, I can then teach it.”*

In these contexts, participants described increased confidence and improved clarity in subject knowledge.

However, participants emphasised that such arrangements were often informal and reliant on timetabling or individual generosity. Smaller departments, particularly in physics and music, amplified challenges. Single specialists reported carrying disproportionate mentoring responsibility, while non-specialists described reluctance to “drain” colleagues’ time.

Trust-wide collaboration varied. Some participants described effective cross-school networks; others reported siloed practice and missed opportunities to mobilise subject expertise.

Across both areas, the distinction became clear:

- Within specialism, CPD was self-directed and interest-driven.
- Outside specialism, CPD relied heavily on informal structures and specialist goodwill.

Without mentoring, terminology guidance, and structured planning support, teaching outside of specialism was described as cognitively draining and emotionally costly.



“ Across both science and arts, CPD provision was perceived as **misaligned** with subject needs ”

## ► Gaps, Barriers and Unmet Needs in Current CPD Provision

### CPD and subject need

Across both science and arts, CPD provision was perceived as misaligned with subject needs. Professional development is primarily organised around generic pedagogy, rather than subject-specific development. Whole-school sessions therefore, require teachers to translate and adapt broad strategies into disciplinary practice independently. For non-specialists, this posed a particular difficulty. Without the secure foundational knowledge or subject-specific confidence, adapting generic training to classroom realities - including behaviour or SEND adaptations - was cognitively demanding. While specialists could interpret and contextualise whole-school initiatives with relative ease, non-specialists were still grappling with core conceptual understanding, limiting their capacity to apply or adapt training creatively.

Although both specialists and non-specialists reported unmet needs, the nature of those needs differed in focus.

**Non-specialist teachers** identified unmet needs in:

- Subject-specific language and terminology (across both areas)
- Examination and assessment expectations (across both areas)
- Adapting pedagogies to specific subjects

*"I think sometimes it is quite difficult when we're actually trying to mark them subjectively and trying to get an accurate mark ... you're not a specialist."*

- How to meet the needs of all learners (particularly in arts)
- Addressing misconceptions and explaining concepts in multiple ways (predominantly science)

*"You know what they need to learn and you've learned it yourself but you just can't transfer it from you to them."*

- Contextualising the learning to deepen understanding (particularly in science)

In contrast, **specialist teachers** did not describe deficits in subject knowledge, rather their unmet needs centred on:

- Expertise sharing and cross-school collaboration (both subject areas)

*"There's lots of schools who seem to operate in silo. There's so much subject expertise that we could be linking up with."*

- Deeper subject knowledge and expertise
- External CPD from subject and industry experts

*"We just bounce off one another, but there's only so much, until it feels a bit repetitive."*

- Structured support to build mentor skills



## Key barriers to effective engagement

### Department constraints and isolation

Department size emerged as a significant structural barrier. In small departments, non-specialists reported limited access to expertise and reluctance to repeatedly seek support from a sole specialist:

*"We only have one person we can go to and they often have a lot of questions regularly from people."*

Where CPD was delivered at departmental level (for example, separate physics, chemistry and biology meetings, or distinct art and music departments), teachers working across multiple subject areas reported practical exclusion. Departmental CPD sessions were often scheduled simultaneously, meaning teachers could only attend one. As a result, non-specialists were frequently unable to access development in the subject where need was greatest, as they were required to attend CPD within their primary specialist department.

For specialists, small departments reinforced professional isolation and limited outward-facing engagement, even within multi-academy trusts. Expertise existed, but mechanisms for its mobilisation were inconsistent.

### Time

Time was the most consistently reported barrier across all groups. Teachers described multiple layers of time scarcity:

- Limited release to attend subject-specific training.
- No protected time for peer observation.
- Department meetings repurposed for logistics.
- No structured implementation systems following external training.

One teacher described the frustration of returning from high-quality external training:

*"We get this fantastic training. I come away buzzing with these ideas, and then it's time to actually implement them and put them into place."*

For non-specialists in particular, the lack of time intensified their level of professional vulnerability. Planning beyond specialism required significantly longer preparation simply to secure conceptual clarity.

Across both groups, the core unmet need was not just access to CPD, but protected time to convert development into practice.

## ► Effective Forms and Features of CPD

### Observation, modelling and co-teaching

Observing subject specialists was consistently identified as one of the most impactful forms of professional development. Non-specialists in particular emphasised the value of structured time with internal experts, beyond informal corridor conversations:

*"If we had time to sit down with those colleagues that were specialists and sort of go over common topics. Rather than just the snatched 5 or 10 minutes here or there that would be probably the most impactful"*

The distinction between ad hoc support and structured modelling was significant, and non-specialists valued pre-emptive workshops held prior to new topics, where specialists modelled explanations and highlighted misconceptions. This enabled teachers to feel more prepared, as this reduced uncertainty and strengthened classroom confidence.

Within the arts, collaboration with colleagues is similarly centred on the sharing of expertise and resources, both within schools and across multi-academy trusts. However, while the appetite for this type of collaboration was strong, opportunities to do so were often constrained by timetable realities, limiting sustained engagement.

“Non-specialists in particular emphasised the value of **structured time with internal experts**”

### Coaching and development models

Specialist science teachers emphasised the importance of coaching-based approaches rather than any top-down models:

*"Coaching and observation, they can go hand in hand, so those things, I think, are really valuable if you can actually make that happen."*

Both arts and science specialists valued coaching, mentoring and structured dialogue - these were often used interchangeably, particularly when linked to departmental or trust-level networks. Such models were perceived to support ongoing professional learning and reflective practice, creating space for subject-specific problem-solving rather than generic reflection.

## Outward-facing and specialist development

Specialists across both areas expressed desire for advanced, subject-specific development beyond generic leadership pathways. While nationally recognised qualifications such as NPQs provide structured progression routes, participants identified a “disconnect” between leadership accreditation and disciplinary depth:

*“We have to go somewhere else to find it, and then it’s our responsibility to bring it all together, which I don’t think’s a bad thing but it would be nice if some of that was brought together in some programmes somehow.”*

This disconnection impacted how specialists navigated their own CPD. For many, professional development beyond early career stages was framed as either moving into leadership or pursuing academic study independently. Several specialists described turning to Master’s-level qualifications due to the absence of structured, subject-specific alternatives. Others looked outwardly towards industry and higher education partnerships as a means of deepening their subject expertise:

*“There could be more national things... more government strategies*

*to get other institutions, whether they’re in industry or universities to really... develop some CPD for teachers.”*

Art specialists, in particular, reflected on how observing others earlier in their careers had been formative, yet such opportunities for development diminished over time. They emphasised the value of encountering “fresh material,” broadening movement vocabulary, and refining pedagogical technique through peer observation and collaboration.

Across both groups, there was a clear call for sustained outward-facing CPD that extended beyond internal operational priorities and enabled teachers to remain intellectually and creatively connected to their discipline.

Overall, across the focus groups, access to subject-specific CPD was inconsistent. Teachers relied heavily on informal peer networks. Confidence emerged as a key differentiator in how CPD was experienced, particularly between specialists and non-specialists.

# 4

## Conclusion and Recommendations



Effective professional development is **more than just knowledge and skill transfer**

**T**his research reinforces earlier findings that subject specialism cannot be reduced to a simple binary. The distinction between specialist and non-specialist is less categorical and more relational, shaped by confidence, context, departmental structure and professional identity - all of which can impact how teachers view and engage with professional development.

### **Experience of CPD: access, impact and professional identity**

As can be seen from the Teacher Tapp data, there is a clear tension between respondents' access to CPD. Over three quarters of science and arts teachers stated they are able to access the CPD they need. However, fewer than half felt that the time and resources allocated to CPD are used in ways that enhance their capabilities, indicating that availability does not equate to meaningful impact for teachers.

When comparing non-specialists with specialists, differences also arise. Those teaching outside their specialism report finding the CPD they engage with less useful than those teaching within their specialism, with a greater proportion not receiving any

CPD at all over the last 12 months in their non-specialist area.

One explanation for this disparity may relate to the role professional identity plays in teacher development and their ability to engage with the learning. Effective professional development is more than just knowledge and skill transfer; in order for it to lead to meaningful change in their practice, it needs to attend to how teachers understand themselves as learners (Bean, 2025). Evidence from the focus groups highlights the extent to which CPD can reinforce or destabilise professional identity. Where identity is secure, teachers effectively adapt and innovate; where identity is destabilised, teachers prioritise survival.

When teachers work within their specialism, this is identity-affirming as their disciplinary language, habits of thinking and sense of expertise are deeply embedded in how they understand themselves professionally. Any CPD then carried out within their specialism further strengthened that identity. For the most confident specialists, even generic whole-school training could be reinterpreted through a secure disciplinary lens.

For non-specialists, however, teaching outside their specialism often destabilised their professional identity, leaving them feeling exposed, concerned they were not doing justice to the subject and, more importantly, worried about fully equipping pupils with the knowledge and skills required to succeed in the subject area. This last concern resonated with science subjects, where terminology was felt to be of particular importance. In the arts, vulnerability centred more on curriculum breadth, practical expertise and inclusive adaptation. These are not minor fluctuations in confidence, but rather they signal a misalignment between how teachers see themselves professionally and what they are

required to deliver in the classroom.

When teachers lack subject security, they report reverting to more traditional, didactic forms of teaching in which pupil agency is reduced. Lessons become more teacher-led and risk-averse, limiting opportunities for creativity and adaptation. Over time, this not only undermines teacher confidence but can also affect the quality of pupils' educational experience.

### **Gaps, barriers and unmet need: structural pressures on identity**

The most significant barriers experienced by teachers were structural rather than motivational, which aligns with findings from the TDT Landscape Report (2025). Therefore, it is unsurprising that time emerged consistently as the primary constraint for both specialists and non-specialists, but for different reasons. Teachers teaching outside their specialism carry additional cognitive and planning load without additional protected time, resulting in cumulative strain. In an accountability-heavy system, this amplifies the pressure teachers feel to be responsible for pupil outcomes while simultaneously feeling underprepared in their teaching.

Departmental structures can compound this pressure in some schools when non-specialists span departments, such as art and music. In these instances, a number of focus group participants reported practical exclusion from subject-specific CPD due to simultaneous scheduling. Beyond logistics, this departmental split can impact their sense of belonging. This risks them feeling less entitled, less confident, or less able to request support in a department they might not consider their own. This may also limit access to development when CPD occurs during departmental meetings, further dividing their professional identity.



In small departments, such as physics or music, a different but equally significant pressure emerges for those classified as specialists. Where a department consists of one or very few subject specialists, supporting non-specialists becomes an additional, often invisible responsibility layered onto existing teaching and leadership duties. This support role is rarely formally recognised, timetabled or resourced. Crucially, teaching teachers is a distinct discipline from teaching pupils, as highlighted in the Didagogy report (Bean, 2025). The knowledge and skills required to develop teachers are distinct from classroom instruction. Yet specialists are not afforded structured preparation to undertake this work effectively.

As outlined in Section 2, the increase in non-specialist teaching is due to teacher shortages, particularly within certain subjects, rather than a response to the needs of children or teachers. It is a pragmatic attempt by schools to do the best they can in the circumstances. Therefore, although schools often timetable as though subject knowledge can be easily carried across contexts, teachers' experiences show that it is

not this simple. Structured development and sustained support are required to equip non-specialists with the knowledge and professional confidence necessary for high-quality teaching.

Differences between science and arts were evident, but these reflected the way each subject operates in practice. In science, non-specialists consistently prioritised examination progression, accurate terminology and secure understanding of key subject concepts. Concerns raised centred on 'getting it right', being able to address misconceptions and explain abstract concepts in multiple ways in response to pupils' needs and questions. Teachers noted that in subjects such as physics or chemistry, misunderstanding foundational concepts can have significant implications for pupil progression and assessment performance, which intensified feelings of vulnerability when teaching outside their specialism. While foundational knowledge also exists in the arts, this issue was raised most strongly by science teachers in the focus groups.

In the arts, non-specialists' concerns were framed around practical fluency and curricular

“  
**Building subject confidence requires deliberate development over time, grounded in the specific demands of each discipline**”

breadth. Teachers spoke about a lack of inspiration or the confidence to extend high-attaining pupils. Here, lack of confidence limits creativity in approach and content. The arts often rely on hands-on practice and personal judgment that cannot easily be acquired through generic pedagogical training alone. Non-specialists, therefore, emphasised the need for modelling, co-planning and opportunities to observe technique in action. These findings also raise questions about the time dimension of out-of-specialism teaching. Short-term teaching outside specialism may require support that helps teachers respond to immediate classroom needs, whereas sustained out-of-specialism teaching may require more structured opportunities to develop deeper subject knowledge and confidence over time.

Specialists across both subject areas, however, were more aligned as they sought opportunities to deepen their disciplinary knowledge and increase collaboration across schools, often looking to engage more externally with universities, industry or subject networks. Their concerns were less about survival and more about stagnation, particularly

the lack of development pathways beyond leadership.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that the divide is not just between specialist and non-specialist teachers, but it lies between current CPD structures - often generic and disconnected from subject practice - and the lived realities of different subjects. CPD provision frequently assumes that pedagogical knowledge is broadly transferable across contexts, yet teachers' accounts indicate otherwise. Building subject confidence requires deliberate development over time, grounded in the specific demands of each discipline.

### **Forms and features of effective CPD: confidence-building by design**

Teachers across both focus groups and Teacher Tapp data were clear in what works for them and what they need in terms of effective CPD. Observation and modelling were consistently identified as highly impactful, particularly for non-specialists. Observing specialists made disciplinary thinking visible. The TDT Landscape

Report (2025) identifies observation as one of the least-used CPD formats, yet one of the most impactful when undertaken, as it can allow teachers to move from simply covering content to understanding how the subject is structured and applied in the classroom.

Specialists also referred to coaching and mentoring when describing their support for non-specialists, although these were used interchangeably. A greater understanding of these approaches, including their purpose and application, would strengthen their impact for all teachers, specifically non-specialists and those with less confidence in specific subject areas. Like observation, coaching was among the least-used formats nationally but reported as highly impactful by those who experienced it (TDT, 2025). Structured mentoring and coaching created psychologically safer spaces for teachers to express insecurity and build competence.

Collaborative interactions were also valued, particularly when they were supported through formalised structures. Informal corridor conversations often provided immediate solutions to pressing classroom problems and functioned as a form of informal professional learning. However, participants noted that these exchanges were typically ad hoc and dependent on the availability of colleagues. While they offered valuable day-to-day support, they did not provide the sustained or structured engagement often required to develop deeper disciplinary expertise or to reshape teaching practice over time. These findings suggest that schools may benefit from creating more deliberate opportunities for such collaborative dialogue, allowing informal support to become part of a more systematic approach to professional development.

For specialists, outward-facing networks and

advanced subject engagement were important for sustaining professional identity. However, participants highlighted limited structured opportunities within the system to develop deeper disciplinary expertise. As a result, some teachers looked beyond school-based provision, for example, through Master's study—particularly in science—or through industry partnerships. These routes were valued but came with significant financial and time commitments. At the same time, existing progression pathways often position leadership as the primary route for professional growth, which does not align with the aspirations of all specialist teachers. This reflects a broader challenge within teacher career development, where opportunities for professional learning and progression beyond leadership roles can be limited, particularly for mid-career teachers (Muller et al, 2021).

Across both groups of specialists and non-specialists, there were shared characteristics for effective CPD design:

- Subject contextualisation
- Visible modelling of disciplinary thinking
- Sustained engagement over time
- Protected implementation space

There were, however, some crucial differences. Non-specialists were more likely to seek subject security, whereas specialists seek subject development and evolution. It is important to note that these categories are not fixed. An early-career specialist may require similar support to a non-specialist, while a teacher who has taught outside specialism for several years may experience greater confidence than their formal category suggests. In this context, confidence levels and sense of identity become a more meaningful factor than simple labelling of specialist/non-specialist.

## Report gaps and limitations

This report combines a rapid evidence review, survey data, and qualitative insights, but several gaps still remain. Qualitative findings reflect a limited participant pool and may not capture the full diversity of experiences, and the data does not explore intersectional factors such as gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic context. Finally, sole subject specialists in small departments, particularly those early in their career, emerge as a potential area for future research on balancing personal development with supporting others.

## Recommendations for future CPD: designing for identity and equity

If schools continue to require teachers to work across subject specialisms, then the absence of appropriate structural CPD support poses continued risks to professional identity, quality of teaching and pupil outcomes. Intentional and strategic design of CPD alongside effective support structures is therefore essential.

Across this research, confidence emerged as the central factor, not as a personality trait, but as a professional condition shaped by subject alignment, structural access to expertise and the quality of development available. Where teachers felt secure in their subject knowledge, they described greater adaptability and confidence to innovate. Where confidence was fragile, particularly when teaching outside specialism, energy was redirected towards managing risk and avoiding error.

Teaching outside specialism, therefore, does more than just redistribute curriculum hours; it impacts the relationship between teacher identity, the ability to engage in learning and classroom performance. Without structured subject-specific support, this misalignment can

“Where teachers felt **secure** in their subject knowledge, they described greater **adaptability** and **confidence** to innovate”

accumulate into cognitive overload, stress and lower levels of wellbeing - all factors which make it more likely for teachers to leave the profession.

If CPD is treated as an add-on or ‘nice to have’, there is increased risk of deepening inequities in both teacher experience and pupil provision. However, CPD that is intentionally designed to increase subject confidence and respond to teachers’ different starting points can become a powerful lever not only for instructional improvement, but for workforce stability and professional sustainability.

Just like in the classroom, equity in CPD doesn’t mean the identical provision; it means provision is responsive to:

- Degree of subject alignment
- Professional confidence
- Departmental context
- Career stage

Understanding the landscapes within which specialist and non-specialist teachers operate, as well as their individual needs, is essential for policy makers, CPD providers and schools themselves.

Future CPD design should:

**1) Prioritise subject-contextualised development, particularly for those teaching outside specialism.**

This may involve subject-specific strands to more generic CPD that takes account of the nuances associated with teaching different subjects. In practice, this could include targeted workshops led by subject specialists and curriculum-focused sessions that address common misconceptions, disciplinary language and subject-specific pedagogical approaches.

**2) Develop structured pathways for teachers to build additional subject specialism.**

Where teaching outside specialism becomes sustained rather than temporary, systems should support teachers to develop an additional subject specialism. This could provide structured access to subject-specific professional development, mentoring and subject networks, enabling teachers to build confidence, knowledge and teaching expertise within the additional subject area. Such pathways could provide a clearer route for teachers who are expected to teach beyond their original discipline, while recognising the development of subject capability over time.

**3) Establish structured professional development cycles that provide both protected implementation time and psychologically safe professional dialogue.**

Professional development structures should include dedicated time for teachers to trial,

reflect on and refine new approaches in the classroom. This may be supported through coaching-based professional learning, collaborative planning, peer observation and departmental dialogue. Such structures can offer time and help create environments where both specialist and non-specialist teachers can discuss subject uncertainty openly and engage in iterative professional growth rather than independent training events.

**4) Develop the expertise of specialists as teachers of teachers, not just subject experts.**

Investing in specialist teachers will enable them to support and facilitate the learning of others, including non-specialists. This would recognise the unique expertise of specialists and provide structured opportunities for them to act as teacher educators, extending their professional growth beyond traditional leadership pathways. Such an approach supports both non-specialists' development and the continued advancement of subject specialists themselves.

**5) Establish advanced disciplinary pathways beyond leadership accreditation.**

National and local career development opportunities could support experienced specialist teachers to deepen subject expertise through research-informed practice, focused curriculum leadership or advanced disciplinary study, without requiring progression solely through formal leadership roles.

**At policy level,** recognition of the developmental implications of non-specialist teaching is essential, particularly in light of ongoing curriculum and assessment reform. Policy frameworks should acknowledge the professional learning required when teachers work outside their subject specialism.

**At provider level,** CPD design should differentiate according to teacher confidence and subject alignment, rather than assuming uniform needs based solely on formal specialist labels.

**At school and trust level,** leaders should consider structural conditions that enable meaningful professional learning. This includes cross-department scheduling, protected observation opportunities, coaching and mentoring capacity, and access to wider subject networks beyond the individual school.



# 5

## References and Appendix



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## Appendix: Research Methodology

### Research design

This report draws on a mixed-methods approach combining a rapid evidence review, national survey data and qualitative teacher insights. The evidence review synthesised existing research on out-of-specialism teaching and CPD, informing the study design and situating the findings within the wider literature. The primary research gathered evidence from teachers of arts and science subjects working both within and outside their subject specialism, with a particular focus on access to and experiences of CPD.

A mixed-methods design was adopted to combine large-scale survey data with qualitative insights, enabling patterns in teachers' access to and perceptions of CPD to be identified and explored in greater depth through discussion.

Two complementary methods were used:

- a national survey conducted through the Teacher Tapp app, providing quantitative data on teachers' experiences and perceptions of CPD
- focus groups with secondary teachers, providing qualitative insights into teachers' experiences, reflections and perspectives on CPD provision

Together, these methods enabled both a broad national picture and richer insight into how teachers experience CPD when teaching within and beyond their subject specialism.

### Teacher Tapp survey

Survey data were collected through the Teacher Tapp - an external daily survey app that asks over 11,000 teachers questions each day and reweights the results to make them representative. For this research, TDT used a combination of previously asked questions and new questions designed specifically for this project. The analysis presented in this report reflects responses from secondary teachers in England working in state-funded schools.

Teacher Tapp applies statistical weighting to ensure the responding sample reflects the national population of teachers in England. Weighting is calculated by comparing the survey sample with the School Workforce Census across multiple characteristics, including phase, funding, gender, age and job role. This produces weighted results that better represent the national teaching population. As with all survey samples, results remain subject to a margin of error reflecting potential random variation.

The survey combined closed-response questions with open-text responses, allowing for both comparative analysis of teachers' views and additional insight into the reasoning behind their responses. Questions explored teachers' perceptions of CPD provision in their school, their access to professional development, and the usefulness of CPD when teaching both within and outside their subject specialism.

Questions asked:

- **At my school, time and resources allocated to professional development are used in ways that enhance teachers' instructional capabilities.**  
Question answered by 3,826 teachers in total on 6th February 2026 (results weighted to reflect teacher and school demographics. 839 teachers of science and 265 teachers of arts.
- **I can access the professional development I need.**  
Question answered by 5,373 teachers in total (1,273 science teachers, 365 arts teachers) on 7th February 2026 (results weighted to reflect teacher and school demographics. 1,173 teachers of science and 365 teachers of arts.
- **If you were provided with funding to complete 30 hours of CPD during the school day this year, what activities would you choose to undertake, assuming all options are available to you? [open-ended]**  
Question gathered over 2000 responses from all state-funded secondary teachers

  - **Thinking about when teaching within your subject specialism, how useful has the CPD you have received in the past 12 months been for supporting that teaching?**  
Question answered by 3,924 teachers in total on 7th February 2026 (results weighted to reflect teacher and school demographics. 467 teaching only science as a specialist and 213 teaching only arts as a specialist.
  - **Thinking about when teaching outside your subject specialism, how useful has the CPD in the past 12 months been for supporting that teaching?**  
Question answered by 3,911 teachers in total on 7th February 2026 (results weighted to reflect teacher and school demographics. 216 teaching science as a non-specialist and 129 teaching arts as a non-specialist.
  - **When teaching outside your subject specialism, what most limits how useful CPD is for you?**  
Question answered by 2,364 teachers in total on 7th February 2026 (results weighted to reflect teacher and school demographics. 239 teaching science as a non-specialist and 212 teaching arts as a non-specialist.



## Focus groups

To complement the survey data, TDT conducted four focus groups with secondary teachers. A total of 279 teachers expressed interest in participating. From this pool, 15 teachers were selected to take part across four groups.

Participants were purposely sampled to ensure representation across subject areas (arts and science), teaching experience, and whether participants taught within or outside their subject specialism. Participants included teachers who:

- taught science within their subject specialism
- taught arts subjects within their subject specialism
- taught science outside their specialism
- taught arts subjects outside their specialism

In practice, several participants taught both within and outside their specialism. For example, some teachers specialised in one science discipline but regularly taught others. These participants were therefore able to reflect on their experiences from both perspectives.

### Focus group participant breakdown by subject specialism and teaching experience

Number of participants who taught science as a specialist	<b>7</b>
Number of participants who taught science as a non-specialist	<b>7</b>
Number of participants who taught arts as a specialist	<b>6</b>
Number of participants who taught arts as a non-specialist	<b>5</b>
Percentage of teachers who taught for less than 5 years	<b>7%</b>
Percentage of teachers who taught for between 5 and 10 years	<b>53%</b>
Percentage of teachers who taught for more than 10 years	<b>40%</b>

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Each focus group lasted approximately one hour and explored teachers' views on:

- what constitutes subject specialism
- CPD provision within their school
- CPD they had accessed
- CPD that had supported their teaching
- effective and ineffective forms of CPD
- expectations around internal support
- ways in which CPD provision could be improved

Focus group discussions were held online and were recorded and analysed thematically to identify recurring themes related to CPD access, effectiveness and barriers. The qualitative insights helped contextualise and interpret patterns observed in the survey data. Focus group findings provide insight into teacher experiences but are not intended to be statistically representative.

Participants volunteered to take part and provided informed consent. A voucher was offered as a token of appreciation for their participation. Responses were anonymised during analysis to protect participant confidentiality.



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