Thrive

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Understanding Trauma and Responding to Need

What helps educators turn understanding into practical, consistent support



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Research conducted by The Education Company on behalf of Thrive.

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Executive summary

About this research

Trauma may be one influence on a child or young person's development, relationships and current needs. It is rarely the only one.

Educators are not expected to diagnose trauma or assume that a particular behaviour has a particular cause. Their role is to consider what is known about a child's experiences alongside their development, communication, relationships, strengths, SEND-related needs and wider circumstances, and decide what they may need now.

This research explores what helps educators do that in practice.

It draws on survey responses from 690 education professionals, including teachers, teaching assistants, school and trust leaders, and staff working in SEND, pastoral, safeguarding and wellbeing roles. Respondent numbers vary between questions. The sample includes a substantial proportion of staff with specialist responsibilities, which should be considered when interpreting the findings.

The research examined how equipped educators feel to respond, what their professional learning involved, and the support available when they try to apply it. **These are respondents' reported views and experiences, not independently observed measures of classroom practice or pupil outcomes.**



What we found

Educators largely see responding to current need as part of their role

58.7%

described it as a core responsibility even where the cause of difficulty is unclear, while a further 35.8% said responsibility should be shared with pastoral, SEND or other specialist staff.

Understanding is stronger than practical confidence

50.4%

felt very or extremely equipped to understand trauma, compared with 34.7% who felt similarly equipped to work out what a child might need when the cause was unclear. Fewer than four in ten felt very or extremely equipped to choose a practical first response or adapt an approach that was not helping.

Professional learning gives more attention to understanding than application

83.5%

said their most substantial learning covered the possible impact of trauma. Only 22.5% reported opportunities to practise or apply the learning, and 21% had covered what to do when an initial response was not helping.

Just under half say responding to individual need is embedded across most of their setting

48.7%

described it as part of everyday teaching and relationships across most of their setting. These respondents were also more likely to report practical guidance, access to skilled advice and organisational conditions that supported adaptation.

Support is associated with greater confidence, even among educators reporting capacity pressures

60%

Among respondents who identified limited time or staffing capacity as a barrier, 60% of those who reported ongoing coaching or supervision felt very or extremely equipped to adapt an unsuccessful response, compared with 28.6% of those who did not. Similar differences appeared for opportunities to practise, discuss situations and review responses.

Practical learning and follow-up are associated with greater confidence and more useful learning

81%

Educators who felt better equipped were more likely to report opportunities to practise and discuss situations after learning. Those whose learning included opportunities to practise or apply it were also more likely to rate it as very or extremely useful for making lasting changes to their everyday practice: 81%, compared with 47.5% of those who did not report these opportunities.

What the findings suggest

The clearest gap is between understanding trauma and feeling confident about what to do in practice.

Having information about trauma does not, on its own, appear to be what distinguishes the staff who feel most ready to respond. Better-equipped educators are more likely to have experienced learning that helps them apply what they know, make decisions in less straightforward situations, understand the boundaries of their role and discuss real situations afterwards.

The setting around staff also deserves attention. Practical guidance, skilled advice, opportunities to observe strategies and leadership expectations are associated with educators' confidence or their reported ability to adapt under pressure.

These relationships remain apparent among respondents who identify time or staffing capacity as a barrier. This does not mean they face identical pressures, or that professional development can compensate for inadequate resources.

For school and trust leaders, the findings point towards examining how learning is designed, what happens afterwards and how support is used in everyday practice. The challenge is helping staff **use their understanding well when the right response is not immediately obvious.**

About the author

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Viv is an experienced education leader whose career spans school leadership, safeguarding, SEND and inclusion. A former SENCO, Headteacher and Executive Headteacher, she has worked across different age groups, with particular expertise in early years and SEND, and helped establish a multi-academy trust.

Viv has spent more than 10 years at Thrive and is a member of its senior leadership team. As Head of Theory and Practice, she leads work on the theoretical foundations and practical application of the Thrive Approach. Her expertise spans attachment theory, neuroscience, child development and trauma-responsive practice, with a focus on helping educators understand children's social and emotional needs and make informed decisions about how to respond in everyday situations.

Alongside her role at Thrive, Viv is Director for Safeguarding, Personal Development and Wellbeing at Exceed Learning Partnership and a Distinguished Fellow of the International Forums of Inclusive Practitioners. She also serves on the Department for Education's Anti-bullying and Behaviour Toolkit Expert Panel, contributing her expertise to the development of national guidance for schools.

Viv is also a foster carer and Mockingbird hub home carer, supporting children who have experienced trauma and loss, as well as other foster families. This gives her first-hand experience of the challenges of supporting children affected by trauma, and the importance of ensuring the adults caring for them feel supported too.

1. Introduction and purpose

Children and young people come to education with different developmental histories, relationships, strengths, needs and experiences. For some, adversity or trauma may be part of that picture.

Experiences of trauma do not provide a simple explanation for behaviour or need. Difficulties seen in school may also be influenced by communication needs, neurodevelopmental differences, relationships, family circumstances, physical health or the learning environment.

Educators need to consider what they know about a child without assuming what has caused their difficulties.

A USEFUL QUESTION IS:

> **What might this child or young person need from me now, and what can I appropriately do within my role?**

An educator may understand how trauma can affect development and relationships but still be unsure what to do when a pupil is struggling. They may know useful strategies but find it difficult to choose an appropriate response, maintain expectations while making adjustments, or decide what to try when their first approach has not helped.

The setting can make these decisions easier or harder. Staff may have access to advice, opportunities to reflect and clear expectations about adapting responses. They may also encounter policies, priorities or working arrangements that make it difficult to apply what they have learned.

THE CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION WAS:

> **What helps educators take the possible impact of trauma into account, alongside other influences on a child or young person's development and needs, and translate that understanding into practical, adaptable and consistent everyday practice?**

The research considers both educators' learning and the conditions around them. It also asks what distinguishes those who feel better equipped despite reporting time or staffing pressures. These were central questions in the research brief.

A note on language

Throughout this report, trauma is treated as one possible influence on a child or young person's development and current needs. It should not be assumed to explain a particular behaviour or difficulty.

The report avoids using "trauma-informed" as a general description of good practice. Its focus is on responding to current need: considering different influences, recognising strengths and protective relationships, maintaining appropriate expectations and boundaries, and knowing when additional advice or expertise is required.

About the research

The survey received responses from 690 education professionals, with 56.3% completing it in full. The largest phase group was primary at 41.4%, followed by secondary at 27.3%. Phase percentages are based on respondents who gave their phase (n=686).

By role, 34.4% worked in SEND, pastoral, safeguarding or mental health/wellbeing roles. Teachers represented 9.4%, teaching assistants or learning support staff 10.5%, other senior leaders 13.8%, and headteachers or executive headteachers 7.4%. Role percentages are based on respondents who gave their role (n=688).

The research examined overall response patterns alongside differences by role, phase, professional learning, practical confidence and organisational support.

To compare respondents' experiences, confidence levels were grouped as follows:

Less equipped:
Not at all equipped or slightly equipped.

Moderately equipped:
Moderately equipped.

Well equipped:
Very equipped or extremely equipped.

The research also compared respondents who described responding to individual need as embedded in everyday teaching across most of their setting with those who reported practice as more specialist-led or inconsistently established.

The findings are based on educators' reported experiences. Feeling well equipped does not necessarily mean someone demonstrates stronger practice, and the relationships identified cannot establish cause and effect.

Comparisons between groups are descriptive. Selected additional relationships were examined using statistical tests and exploratory models, but these cannot remove all possible alternative explanations. For a defined set of 23 exploratory comparisons, two-sided Fisher exact tests were used, with p-values adjusted using the Holm method to account for multiple testing. Exploratory models were used as sensitivity checks, not to establish causation or rank interventions.

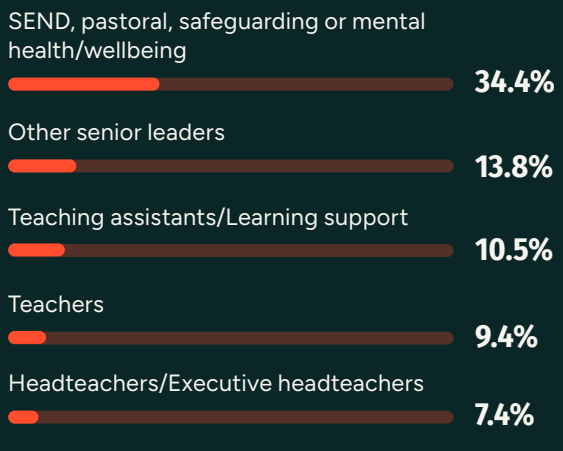
Base sizes vary between questions because not every respondent answered every item. Learning and follow-up comparisons use applicable answers and exclude contradictory responses where appropriate. Professional learning experiences could overlap.

For comparisons involving time and staffing pressures, respondents were grouped according to whether they identified limited time or staffing capacity as a barrier. This does not mean that everyone within the group experienced the same level or type of pressure. The respondents should not be treated as a nationally representative sample of the education workforce.

Who took part?

690 **Education professionals surveyed**

Selected roles:



Bases vary - not all findings are based on 690 respondents.

2. Understanding is not the same as knowing what to do

Staff largely accept the responsibility

Most respondents see responding to individual need as part of an educator's responsibility, even when the cause of a child's difficulty is unclear.

58.7% **described this as a core part of their role.**

A further

35.8% **said responsibility should be shared with pastoral, SEND or other specialist staff.**

Only

1.1% **said responsibility should mainly sit with specialists.**

Respondents also reported considering several influences on a child's needs. When asked what might form part of their first response where the reasons for difficulty were unclear, the most common selection was the child's strengths, trusted relationships and what was already helping. Current presentation, the child's own view, known experiences, SEND-related needs and wider circumstances also featured.

Trauma was one consideration among several. The greater difficulty appears to be deciding how to respond.

94.5% (430 of 455 respondents)

saw responding to current need as part of an educator's role, either directly or shared with specialists.



Confidence is lower for practical decisions

Respondents felt most confident about knowing when to seek advice, take safeguarding action or involve additional expertise, with 70.3% feeling very or extremely equipped to do so.

Half (50.4%) felt similarly equipped to understand trauma, but confidence was lower when it came to deciding how to respond. Only around a third felt very or extremely equipped to work out what a child might need when the cause was unclear, while fewer than four in ten felt equipped to choose a practical first response or adapt an approach that was not helping.

The findings suggest that professional learning needs to give greater attention to the practical decisions educators face, rather than assuming that a better understanding of trauma will automatically leave them feeling confident about what to do.

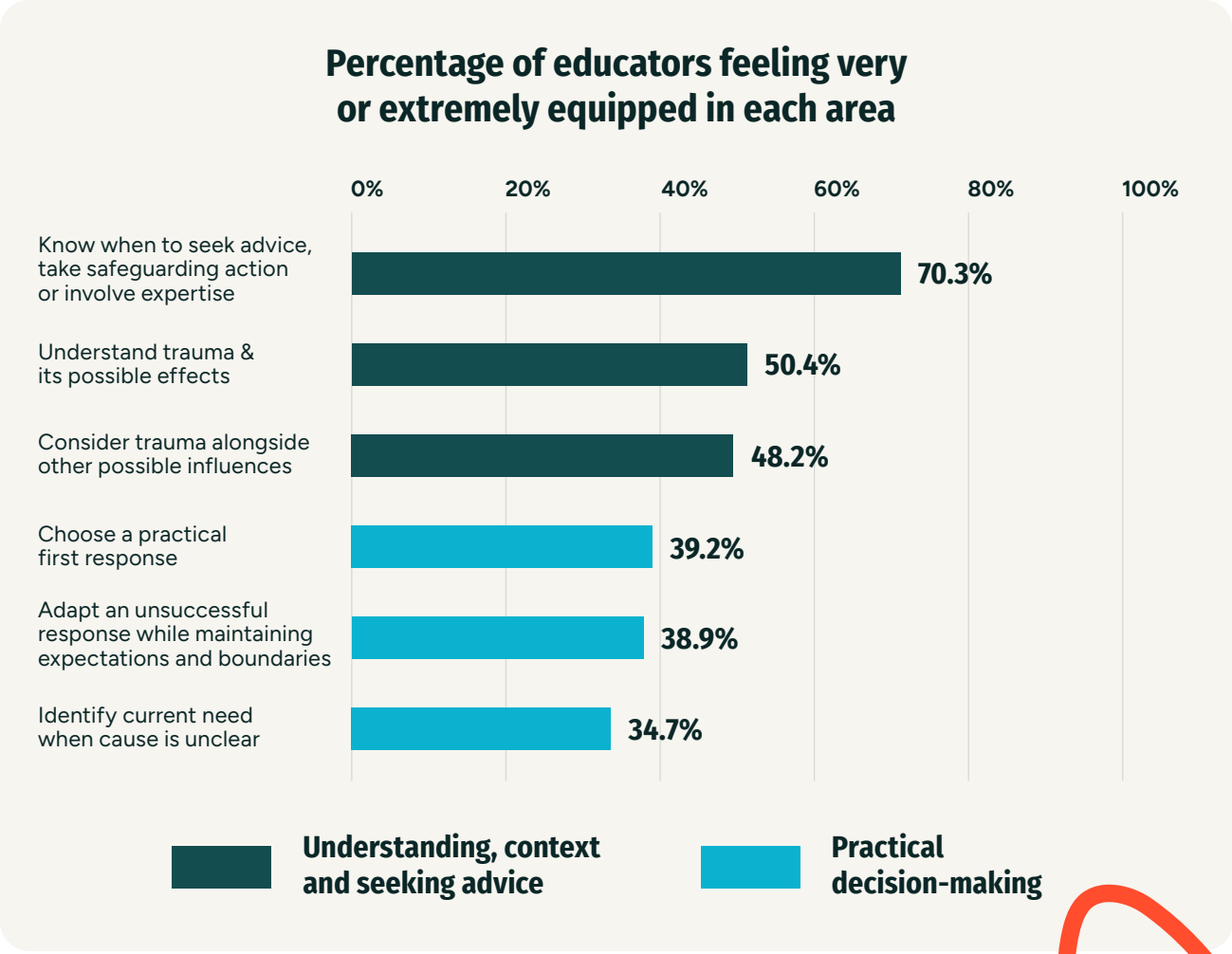


Figure 1. *Self-reported confidence across six areas. Bars show the share feeling very or extremely equipped; applicable bases vary between 445 and 453 respondents.*

Professional learning shows a similar imbalance

Many respondents had engaged with learning about trauma. Self-directed learning through reading, videos, podcasts or other resources was reported by 62.9%. Training lasting between one and three hours was reported by 39.8%.

Ongoing coaching, reflective practice or supervision was reported by 28.5%, while 24.1% had taken part in a programme delivered over several sessions.

The content of that learning reveals a considerable difference between understanding trauma and learning how to respond. 83.5% said their most substantial learning had covered the possible impact of trauma on development, relationships and learning.

Far fewer had covered practical classroom or relational strategies, opportunities to practise, or what to do when an initial response was not helping.

Learning covers understanding more often than practical application

Percentage of respondents selecting each area as part of their professional learning

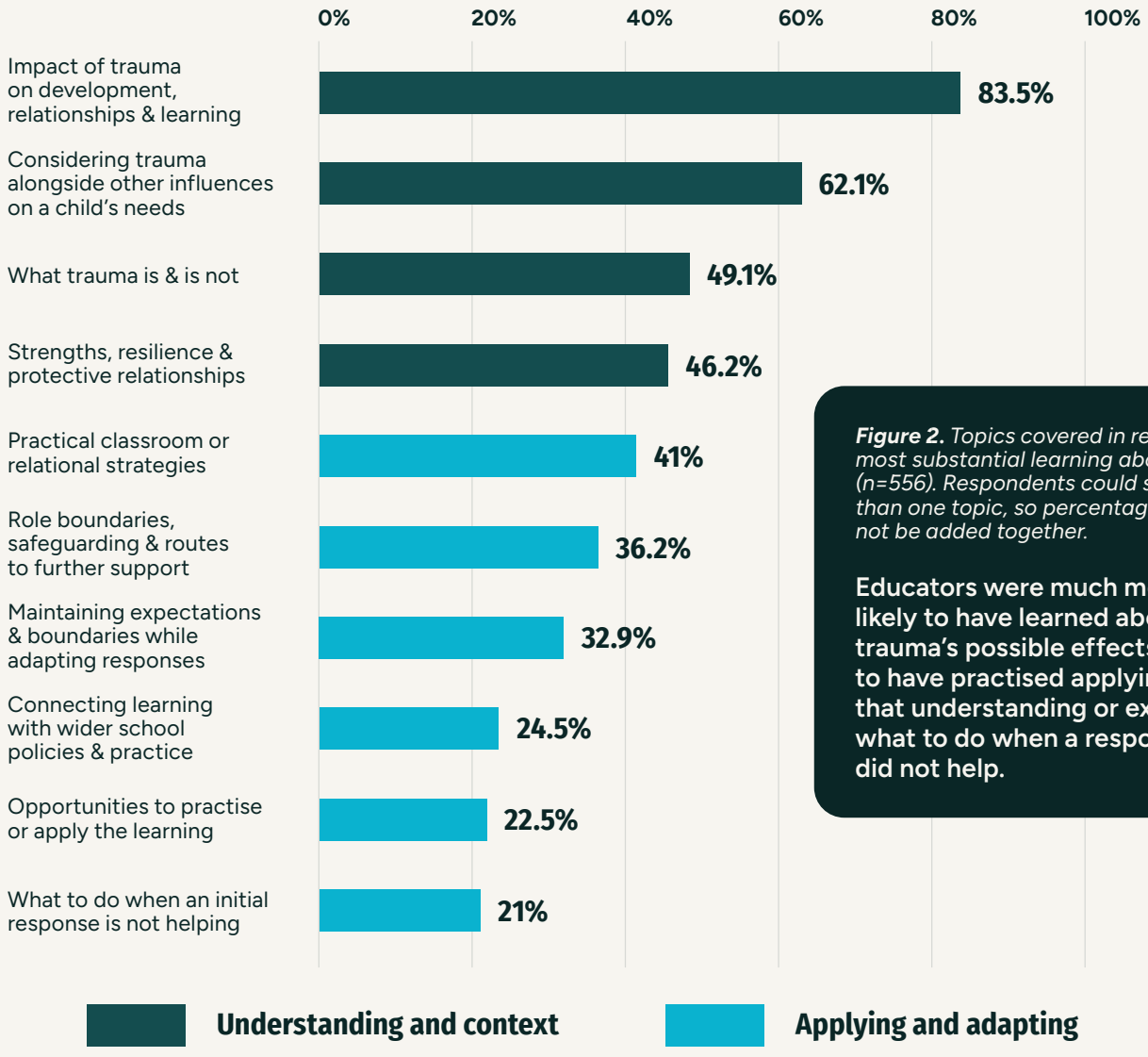


Figure 2. *Topics covered in respondents' most substantial learning about trauma (n=556). Respondents could select more than one topic, so percentages should not be added together.*

Educators were much more likely to have learned about trauma's possible effects than to have practised applying that understanding or explored what to do when a response did not help.

When an initial response does not help

Respondents generally valued the professional learning they had received, although its usefulness varied.

62% rated it very or extremely useful for understanding trauma alongside other influences on a child's development and needs. A smaller proportion (53.3%) said it had been very or extremely useful for making lasting changes to their practice.

The lowest-rated area was knowing what to try when an initial response was not helping, at 37.5%.

This matters because even a well-considered response will not always help as expected. Staff then need to consider what has happened and decide whether to change their approach or seek further advice.

When asked about the most recent time an initial response had not helped, 66.4% reported adjusting their interaction, teaching or immediate environment, while 65.9% discussed the situation with colleagues.

Checking whether the revised response had helped was less commonly reported, at 36.2%.

Of the 304 respondents who reported making an adjustment, 139 (45.7%) also selected checking afterwards.

This does not necessarily mean the remaining respondents failed to review what happened. They may have done so informally or through another process. However, making an adjustment was more commonly reported than checking its effect.

The findings raise an important question about how educators are supported to review their responses and decide what to do next.

BASE FOR REPORTED ACTIONS:

> **458 respondents, including those who selected that the situation was not applicable or could not recall a relevant example. Learning usefulness bases vary by question.**



45.7% (139 of 304 respondents)

who reported making an adjustment also reported checking afterwards.

3. What seems to turn understanding into practical confidence

Educators who felt better equipped reported different experiences of professional learning and support.

Across three areas - choosing a first response, adapting when an approach was not helping and identifying need when the cause was unclear - they were more likely to have taken part in structured development, covered practical strategies and had opportunities for coaching and follow-up.

Table 1. Differences in reported learning and support between well and less-equipped educators (percentage points)

Experience	Choosing a first response	Adapting an unsuccessful response	Identifying need when the cause is unclear
Multi-session programmes	+28.3pp	+27.0pp	+31.6pp
Ongoing coaching, reflective practice or supervision	+28.6pp	+30.8pp	+31.4pp
Practical classroom or relational strategies	+36.7pp	+27.4pp	+38.7pp
Opportunities to practise or apply learning	+27.3pp	+24.1pp	+33.4pp
Discussion with colleagues after learning	+46.8pp	+34.8pp	+37.2pp
Reported that no follow-up took place	−54.3pp	−42.8pp	−43.1pp

Figures show percentage-point differences between respondents who felt well equipped (very or extremely equipped) and less equipped (not at all or slightly equipped). Positive figures indicate an experience was more commonly reported by well-equipped respondents; negative figures indicate the opposite. Follow-up comparisons exclude contradictory, inapplicable and "too early to say" responses. Bases vary by measure. The findings do not establish cause and effect.

The pattern is consistent across all three areas. Better-equipped educators were more likely to report learning that helped them apply what they knew, as well as opportunities to discuss situations afterwards.

The differences around follow-up are particularly striking. Discussion with colleagues was much more common among well-equipped respondents, while those who felt less equipped were far more likely to report that no follow-up had taken place.

This raises questions about how schools support staff beyond the initial training. Learning may give educators a better understanding of trauma, but they also need opportunities to work through the situations they encounter when putting that understanding into practice.

Practical learning involves more than knowing strategies

Better-equipped respondents were more likely to have learned about strengths and protective relationships, maintaining expectations while adapting, role boundaries and safeguarding, and considering trauma alongside other influences.

These are all relevant when deciding how to respond to a child whose needs are unclear. Staff need to consider what might be influencing the child's difficulties, what is already helping, what can appropriately be adapted and when further advice is needed.

There was also a substantial difference in how useful respondents found learning that included opportunities to practise.

Among those whose learning included opportunities to practise or apply it, **81% rated it very or extremely useful for making lasting changes to their everyday practice,** compared with 47.5% of those who did not report these opportunities.

This reflects respondents' views of their learning rather than independently measured changes in practice. Even so, it gives schools reason to consider how much opportunity staff have to try applying what they are learning, rather than simply being introduced to new information.

Opportunities to practise are linked to more useful learning

Percentage rating learning very or extremely useful for making lasting changes to everyday practice

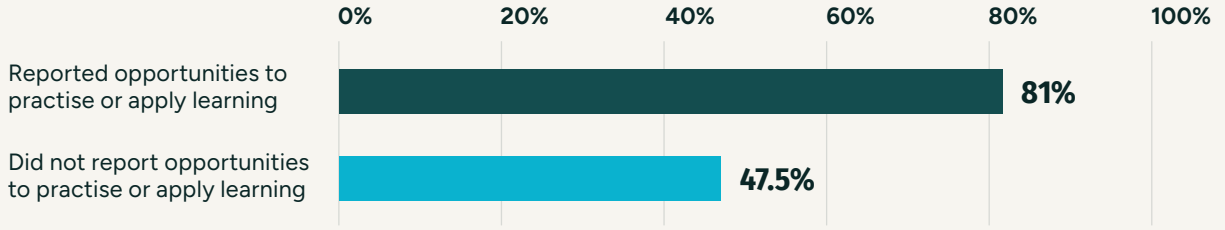


Figure 3. *Perceived usefulness of professional learning, by whether respondents reported opportunities to practise or apply it (98/121 versus 178/375; n=496). This is a rating of usefulness, not a measured change in practice.*

Practice and follow-up appear to matter

Only 22.5% of respondents said their most substantial learning had included opportunities to practise or apply it.

What happens after training also seems important.

Among respondents who felt well equipped to choose a practical first response, 55% had opportunities to discuss situations with colleagues afterwards. Among those who felt less equipped, the figure was just 8.2%.

The same pattern appeared across the other two measures of practical confidence.

Being able to discuss a difficult situation, reflect on what happened or consider what to try next may help educators make better use of their learning.

But staff also need to feel comfortable having those conversations.

While 69.3% said they would feel comfortable telling an appropriate colleague or leader that they were unsure how best to respond, 37.9% of the 124 respondents who answered a follow-up question about barriers to discussing uncertainty were concerned it could be seen as a lack of knowledge or competence.

Making time for discussion is important, but so is creating an environment where staff feel able to ask questions, share difficulties and seek advice without feeling judged.

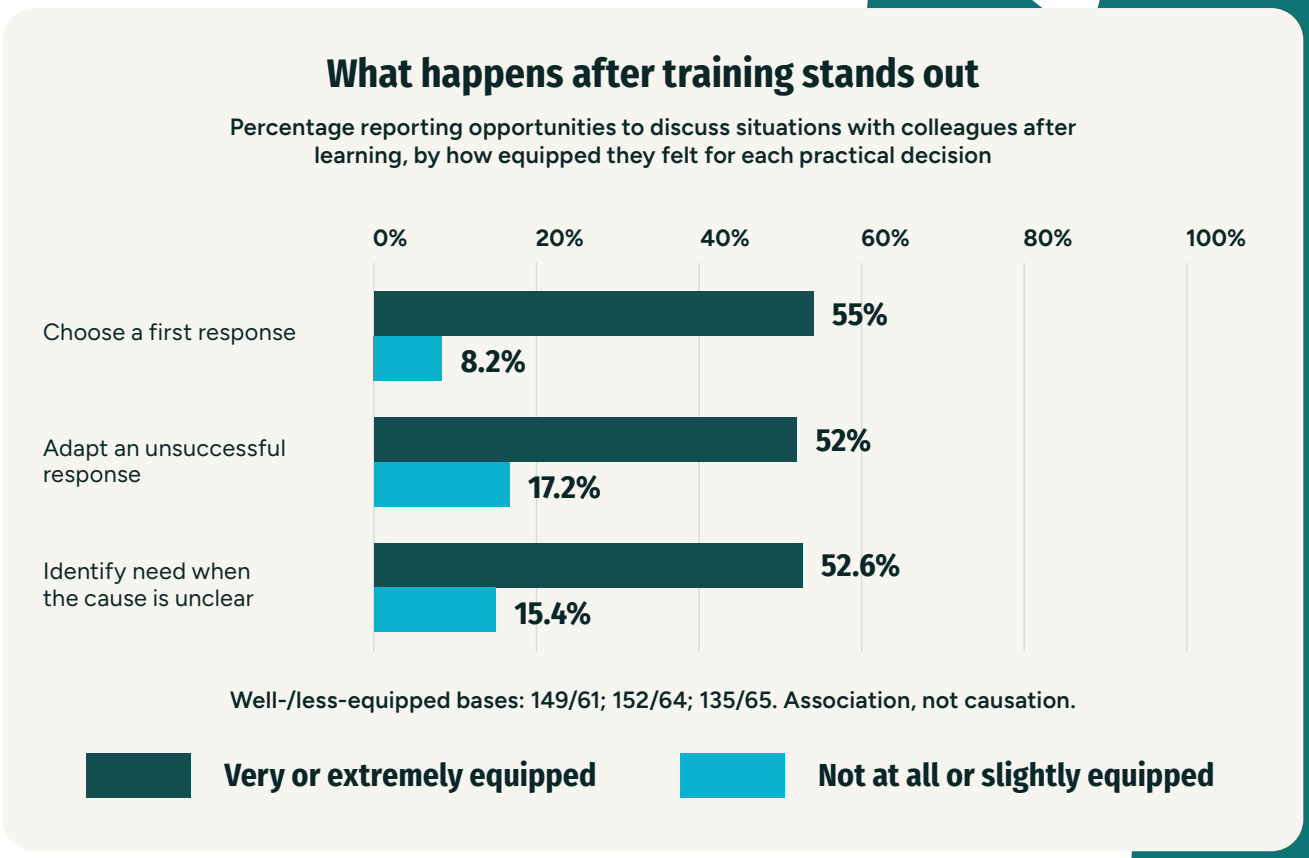


Figure 4. *Percentages reporting opportunities to discuss situations with colleagues after learning, within separate groups of respondents feeling more or less equipped for each named task. Moderately equipped respondents are not included in these comparisons; bases vary.*

What helps educators who are already under pressure?

Limited time or staffing capacity was the most commonly reported barrier to sustaining adapted responses. But educators who identified these pressures did not all feel equally equipped.

Among this group, those who reported ongoing coaching, opportunities to practise, discussion after learning and regular access to shared review processes were considerably more likely to feel confident adapting an approach that was not helping. Here, the percentages refer to how equipped respondents felt to adapt an unsuccessful response, not the percentage who received each type of support.

Practical confidence among educators reporting limited time or staffing capacity as a barrier

The largest differences were associated with coaching, discussion after learning and shared review processes. Self-directed learning showed a much smaller difference.

Time and staffing pressures clearly affect educators' ability to respond to individual need. However, these findings suggest that the learning and support available to staff may also make a difference to how equipped they feel, even when those pressures are present.

This does not mean respondents faced identical demands, or that professional development can make up for inadequate staffing. It does suggest that schools should consider the opportunities staff have to apply, discuss and review their learning alongside the time and resources available to them.

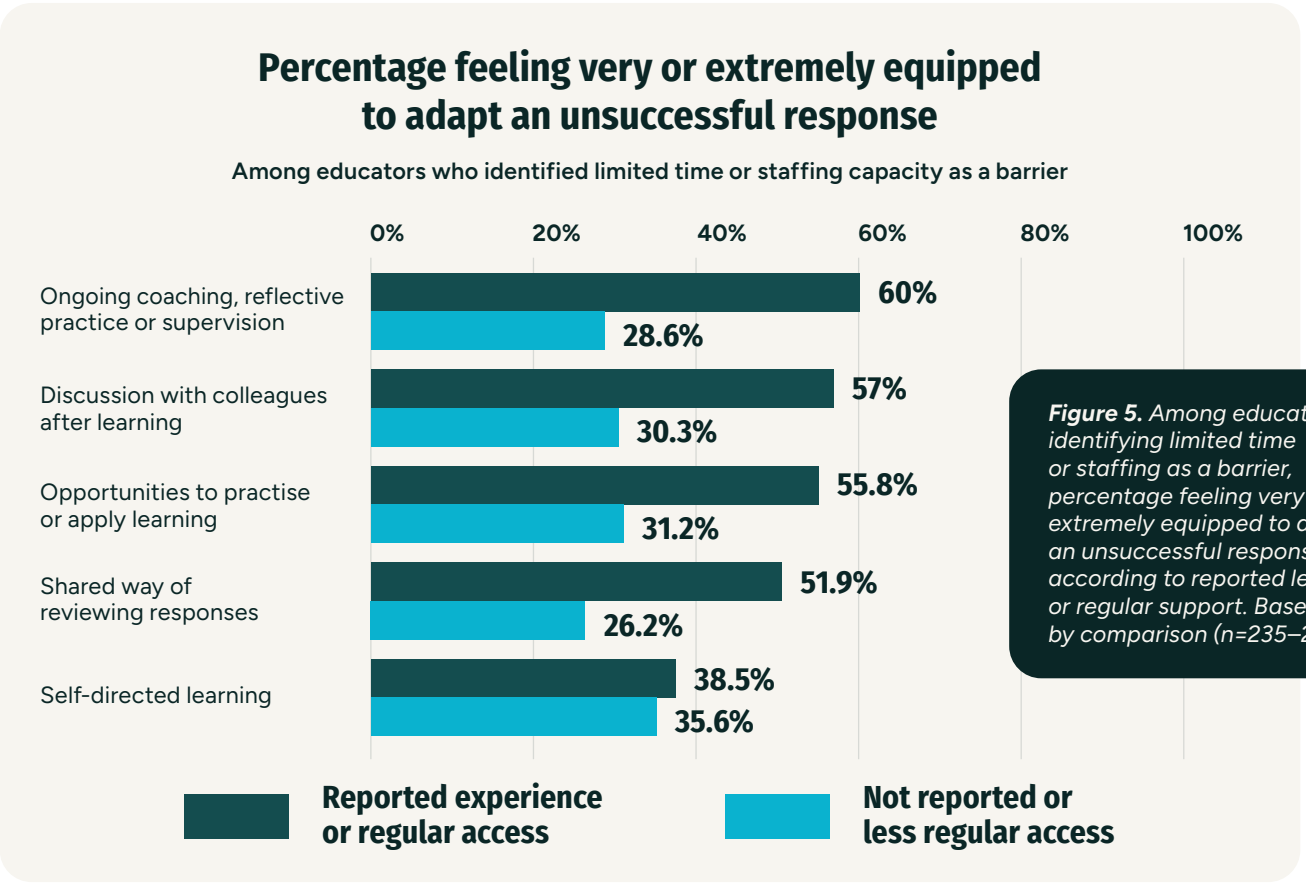


Figure 5. *Among educators identifying limited time or staffing as a barrier, percentage feeling very or extremely equipped to adapt an unsuccessful response, according to reported learning or regular support. Bases vary by comparison (n=235–295).*

4. What helps to embed practice within a setting

The research also looked at how consistently responding to individual need had become part of everyday practice across schools and settings.

Just under half of respondents (48.7%) said it was part of everyday teaching and relationships across most of their setting. A further 26.7% said it was well established in some teams but not consistently across the setting, while 12.9% said it was mainly led by SEND, pastoral, safeguarding or other specialist staff.

There were differences between phases. Primary respondents were more likely than secondary respondents to describe practice as embedded across most of their setting (51.1% compared with 38.5%). Secondary respondents were more likely to describe practice as mainly specialist-led (22.2% compared with 8.3%).

The survey does not tell us why these differences exist, but they highlight the challenge of establishing a consistent approach across different teams and roles.

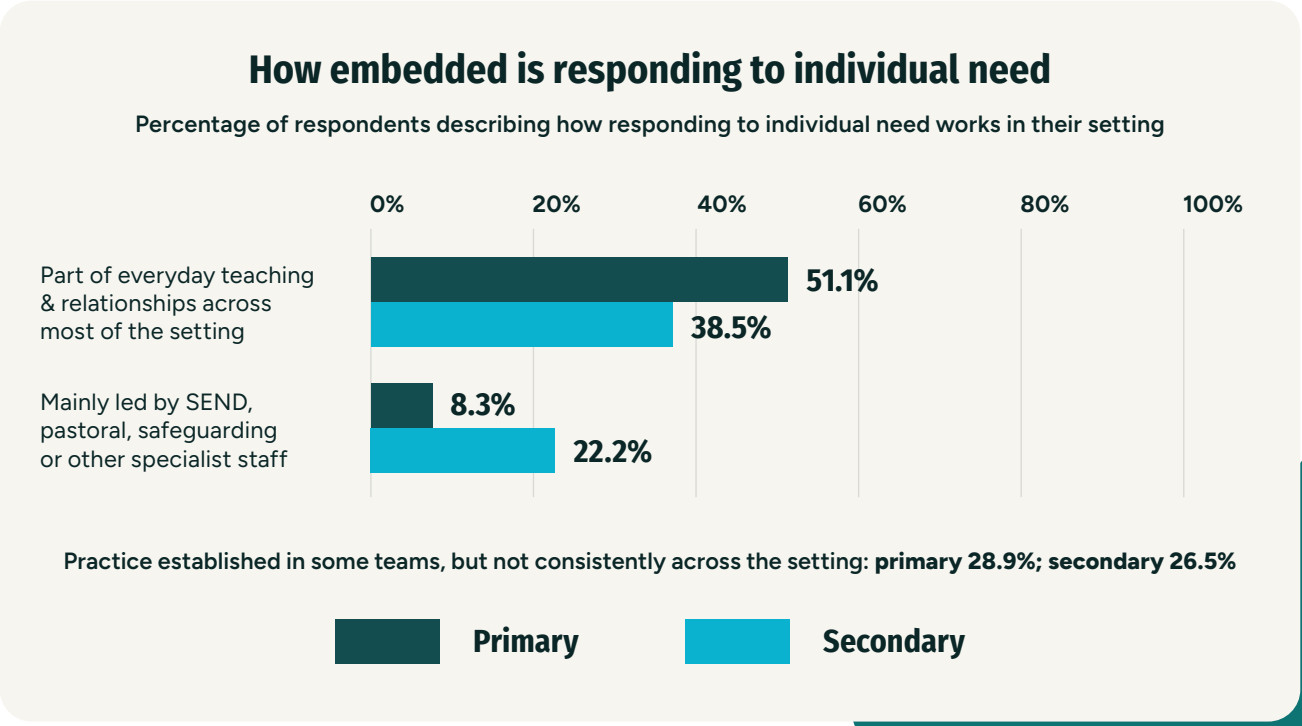


Figure 6. *Respondents describing practice as embedded across most of the setting or mainly specialist-led, by phase (primary n=180; secondary n=117). These are descriptive differences; the survey does not establish their causes.*

Do leaders and frontline staff experience the same support?

While specialist teams provide important expertise, staff across the setting need access to guidance and advice to respond appropriately to individual needs.

There were differences in how regularly respondents reported this support was available.

73.8% of senior leaders said practical guidance and tools were often or consistently available, compared with 51.2% of teachers and 54.8% of teaching assistants or learning support staff.

A similar difference appeared for access to skilled advice, reported as regularly available by 72.1% of senior leaders, compared with 53.7% of teachers and 45.2% of teaching assistants or learning support staff.

These comparisons should be treated cautiously. The frontline groups were relatively small, and respondents were not necessarily describing the same schools.

Nevertheless, it's worth considering whether the guidance and support available within a setting are reaching the staff who need them, particularly those making everyday decisions about how to respond.

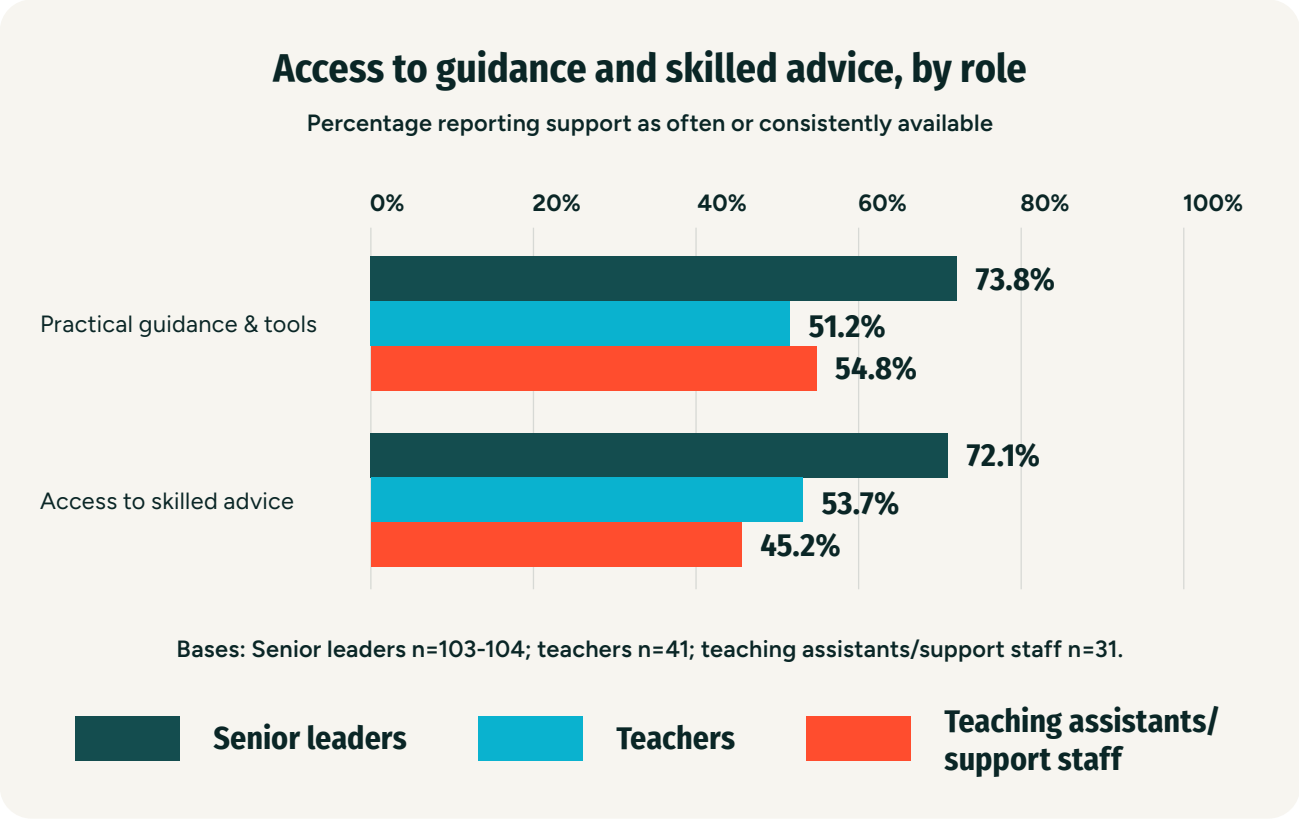


Figure 7. *Percentage reporting practical guidance or skilled advice as often or consistently available, by role. The role groups are relatively small and do not necessarily describe the same schools.*

What helps or hinders adaptation in everyday practice?

Respondents who described practice as embedded across most of their setting were also more likely to report access to practical guidance and skilled advice. They were more likely to experience leadership expectations and behaviour policy as supporting adaptation.

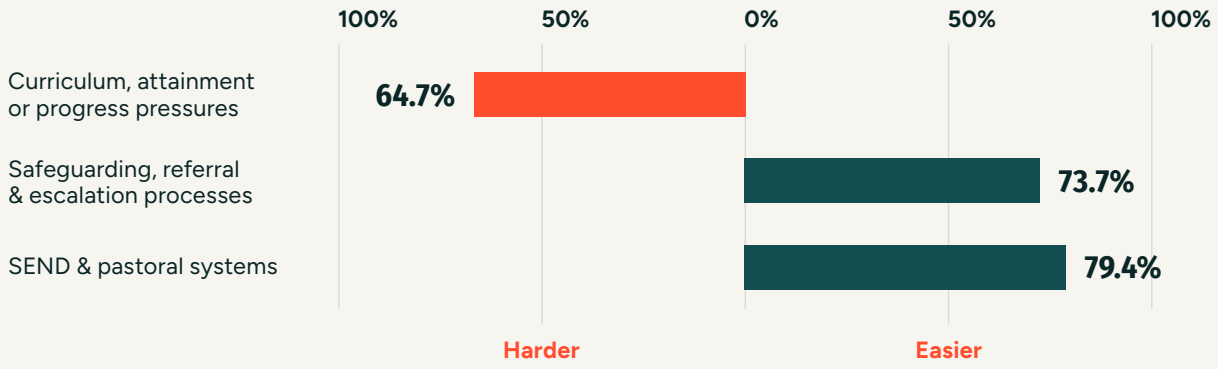
Across the wider survey, SEND and pastoral systems were among the factors most commonly reported as making adaptation easier (79.4%), alongside safeguarding, referral and escalation processes (73.7%).

However, 64.7% said pressure to meet curriculum, attainment or progress targets made adapting responses to individual need harder.

Opportunities to put learning into practice were less consistently available. Only 30.3% said opportunities to observe practical strategies being modelled were often or consistently available, while 37.9% said the same about having enough time to debrief, review and adapt a response.

What helps adaptation - and what gets in the way?

Percentage of respondents who said each factor made adapting responses to individual need easier or harder



30.3%

said opportunities to observe strategies being modelled were often or consistently available.

37.9%

said they had enough time to debrief, review and adapt a response often or consistently.

Figure 8. *Main bars show views on whether each organisational factor made adapting responses easier or harder (bases n=357–373). The two percentages beneath the bars measure availability of support in separate survey questions (bases n=383–388).*

Leadership expectations and adapting under pressure

Leadership expectations were also linked to how staff reported responding under pressure.

Among respondents who said leadership messages and expectations made adaptation easier, 76.3% reported being able to use an adapted response often or almost always when workload or classroom pressure was high. This compared with 51.7% of those who said leadership messages and expectations made adaptation harder.

The survey cannot establish whether leadership messages directly influenced these responses. However, the difference is worth considering, particularly where professional learning encourages staff to adapt their approach but wider policies or expectations may make that difficult.

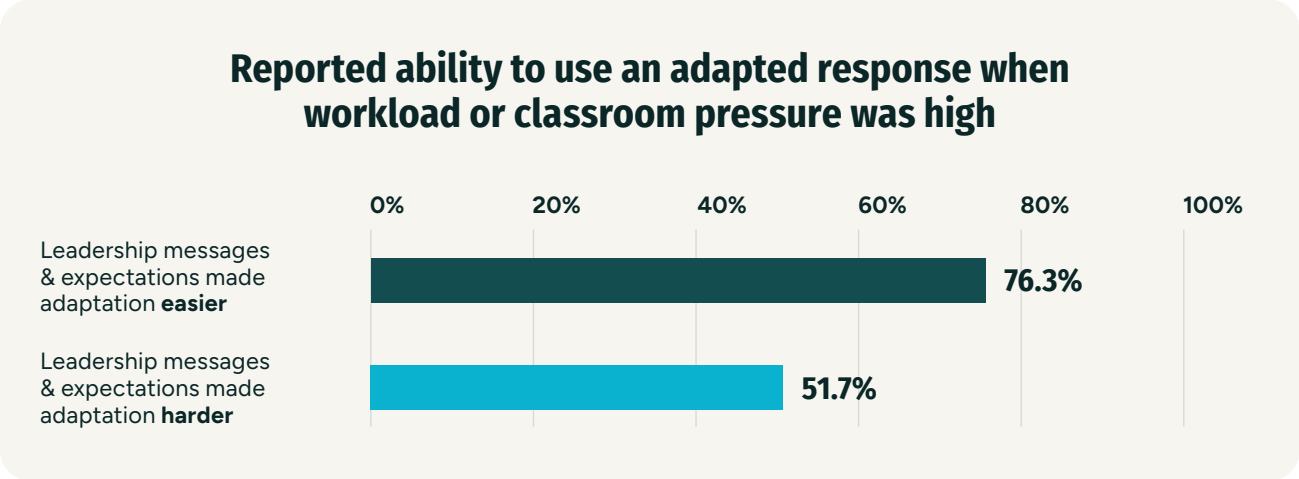


Figure 9. *Percentage reporting that they could use an adapted response often or almost always when workload or classroom pressure was high, by their views of leadership messages and expectations (n=268; neutral, unknown and inapplicable responses excluded).*

The value of seeing strategies in practice

Access to modelling showed a similar relationship with confidence and reported practice.

Among respondents who regularly had opportunities to observe practical strategies being modelled, 59.1% felt very or extremely equipped to adapt an unsuccessful response, compared with 31.5% where these opportunities were less regularly available.

Those with regular opportunities to observe strategies were also more likely to say they could adapt when workload or classroom pressure was high (86.1% compared with 57.5%).

Although we cannot conclude that modelling directly improves confidence or practice, the findings suggest that opportunities to see approaches used in real situations are worth considering alongside training and discussion.

Pressure remains common, even where practice is embedded

Limited time or staffing capacity was the most commonly reported barrier to sustaining adapted responses, selected by 74.7% of respondents.

Other barriers included competing teaching demands, inconsistent expectations across staff or teams, changes in staffing and the emotional demands placed on staff.

These pressures were also common in settings where practice was described as embedded. Among those respondents, 74.7% still identified limited time or staffing capacity as a barrier.

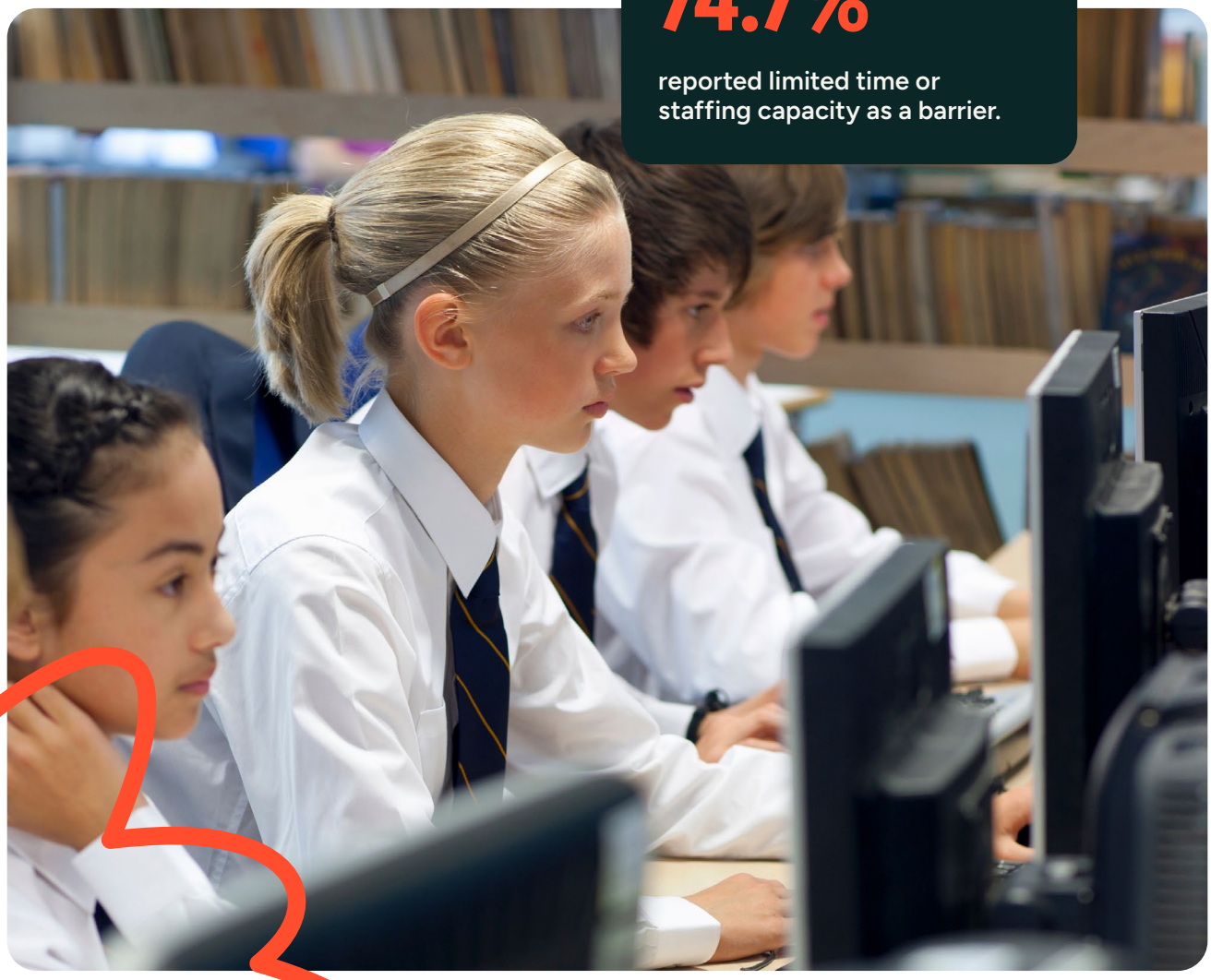
Schools cannot overcome inadequate staffing or excessive workloads through professional development alone. But the research suggests that the support available to staff also matters.

Clear expectations, accessible advice and opportunities to observe, discuss and review practice may help educators put their understanding into practice, even when time and resources are limited.

For leaders, the challenge is to make that support part of everyday working practices without adding unnecessary demands to an already pressured workforce.

74.7%

reported limited time or staffing capacity as a barrier.



5. What this means for leaders

The findings suggest that schools may not need another initiative so much as a closer look at how staff are supported to use what they know in practice.

Five areas stand out.

1 Move beyond awareness

Knowing about trauma, on its own, does not appear to be what most clearly distinguishes staff who feel more and less equipped.

Better-equipped respondents were more likely to have experienced learning that covered practical strategies, considering different influences on a child's needs, maintaining expectations while adapting, understanding the boundaries of their role and knowing what to do when the answer was not obvious.

Professional development needs to do more than explain trauma or introduce a list of strategies. Staff also need opportunities to work through the decisions they face in everyday practice.

QUESTION FOR LEADERS:

> **How much of our professional learning mainly gives staff information, and how much builds the confidence and judgement to make difficult decisions in the moment? What do we need to improve?**

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2 Treat follow-up as part of the learning, not an optional extra

One of the biggest differences between respondents who felt more and less equipped was what happened after their learning.

Among those who felt well equipped to choose a practical first response, 55% reported opportunities to discuss situations with colleagues afterwards, compared with just 8.2% of those who felt less equipped. The same pattern appeared across the other measures of practical confidence.

This doesn't mean every school needs another formal programme or supervision structure.

But asking staff to attend training and then apply it on their own may leave too much of the difficult work to the individual. Case discussions, coaching, modelling, reflection and access to advice can help staff work through the situations they encounter afterwards.

Staff also need to feel comfortable saying when they're unsure. While 69.3% said they would feel comfortable discussing uncertainty with an appropriate colleague or leader, 37.9% of those who answered a follow-up question about barriers were concerned that this could be seen as a lack of knowledge or competence.

QUESTION FOR LEADERS:

> **How do we protect time for staff to consider different situations over time, learn from experiences in our setting and build the skills to respond confidently to children's needs?**

3 Make it clear that adaptation and high expectations can coexist

Learning about maintaining expectations and boundaries while adapting responses was much more common among better-equipped respondents.

Among those who felt well equipped to choose a practical first response, 47.2% had covered this in their learning, compared with 12.2% of those who felt less equipped.

This matters because staff can face a real tension between responding to individual need and applying behaviour or classroom expectations consistently.

Leaders can help by making expectations clearer.

Consistency doesn't have to mean responding to every child in exactly the same way. It can mean having shared principles, clear boundaries and an agreed approach to making appropriate adjustments.

QUESTION FOR LEADERS:

> **Do staff know what should stay consistent, what can appropriately change, and why?**

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4 Build capability across the setting, supported by specialists

SEND, pastoral and safeguarding expertise is essential.

But having specialist support in place doesn't necessarily mean staff across the setting feel confident responding to individual need.

The research found differences between settings where this was described as part of everyday teaching and those where it was mainly specialist-led. Senior leaders and frontline staff also reported different levels of access to practical guidance and skilled advice.

This isn't about expecting every member of staff to become a specialist. It's about making sure they have the guidance and confidence to respond appropriately within their role, and know when to seek additional help.

QUESTION FOR LEADERS:

> **How confident do staff feel responding to a child's needs without immediately referring to SEND or pastoral leads? Does this differ by role or experience?**

5 Make reflection and review part of the response

Staff are already adapting their approaches.

When an initial response hadn't helped as hoped, 66.4% reported adjusting their interaction, teaching or environment.

But only 36.2% explicitly reported checking later whether the revised response was helping.

That doesn't necessarily mean others weren't reviewing what happened. But it does raise questions about how consistently staff check whether an adjustment has helped and use that information to decide what to do next.

Without some form of review, staff can end up trying different approaches without knowing which are making a difference.

Review doesn't need to mean more paperwork. It could be a simple conversation: What did we try? What happened? What have we learned? What should we do next?

QUESTION FOR LEADERS:

> **Do we have a simple process for sharing learning from incidents, issues and situations so that reflection and review happen consistently as part of everyday practice?**

Leadership in a pressured system

These recommendations need to be considered alongside the pressures schools are facing.

74.7% of respondents identified limited time or staffing capacity as a barrier to sustaining adapted responses. Even among those who described practice as embedded across their setting, 74.7% identified the same barrier.

Better leadership or professional development cannot make up for inadequate staffing or excessive workloads.

But time and staffing aren't the only things affecting how well equipped staff feel.

Leaders may not be able to remove every pressure, but they can make it easier for staff to use their professional judgement. That means being clear about expectations, making practical advice accessible, ensuring policies support appropriate adjustments and giving staff realistic opportunities to reflect and learn together.



74.7%

identified limited time or staffing capacity as a barrier to sustaining adapted responses.

What this research can and cannot tell us

This research describes educators' reported experiences.

It does not tell us whether respondents who feel more equipped necessarily demonstrate higher-quality practice, or whether children in their settings experience better outcomes.

The analysis also cannot show that particular professional learning caused greater confidence. People who already feel confident may be more likely to seek development opportunities, and different roles may give staff different access to learning and support.

Some comparisons are descriptive, while selected relationships were examined through additional statistical analysis. These checks help us understand the patterns but cannot establish cause and effect.

The sample also included a relatively high proportion of respondents working in SEND, pastoral, safeguarding and wellbeing roles. The findings should therefore not be treated as representative of the wider education workforce.

The findings are best understood as a set of consistent patterns worth paying attention to, rather than proof that any one approach will produce better outcomes.



Conclusion

Most educators in this survey already see responding to individual need as part of their role.

The evidence does not point simply to a lack of awareness about trauma. Many respondents have experienced learning about its possible effects and feel reasonably confident in their understanding.

The gap appears when that understanding has to be used.

Confidence is lower when staff are asked to work out what a child may need when the cause is unclear, choose a first response or adapt when something is not working. Professional learning follows much the same pattern: it is far more likely to cover the impact of trauma than the practical decisions staff have to make afterwards.

The deeper analysis gives a clearer picture of what may help.

Staff who feel better equipped are more likely to report structured professional development, learning that deals with practical judgement as well as theory, opportunities to practise, a clearer understanding of role boundaries and support after the initial learning. Opportunities to discuss real situations with colleagues stand out across all three measures of practical confidence.

There is a whole-setting dimension too.

Strong specialist expertise remains important, but it does not automatically translate into shared practice across classrooms and teams. Where responding to individual need is reported as more embedded, staff also report stronger practical guidance, better access to advice and wider conditions that make adaptation easier.

Workload and staffing pressures set real limits on what schools can do, and the findings should not be used to minimise that. But there are still aspects of practice that leaders can influence: whether professional development goes beyond awareness, whether staff have access to advice and reflection, whether expectations are clear and joined up, and whether teams routinely look back at what they have tried and what happened.

For school and trust leaders, the question is therefore not simply whether staff have received training about trauma.

It is whether that learning leaves them feeling better equipped to make sound decisions for the child in front of them, and whether the setting gives them the support to do that consistently.

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