

**National  
Literacy  
Trust**

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# **Teachers and whole-school literacy in 2023**

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# Introduction

Teachers and schools across the UK have an immense responsibility for ensuring young people leave school with the literacy skills they need to succeed in life. This is an ongoing challenge, with burnout rates high (Teacher Tapp, 2023) and retention rates low (French, 2023). Post-COVID, where much of the work done to narrow the disadvantage gap was lost, this challenge is tougher than ever. At the same time – and sharing common roots – disadvantage continues to increase for children and young people in the UK. Teachers have the power to effect change when they are empowered to do so.

We are committed to inspiring and supporting teachers through our programmes, training and resources. In 2022, for the first time since 2015 (Clark and Teravainen-Goff, 2015), as part of our Annual Literacy Survey, we ran a survey for teachers and other school staff, asking about their attitudes to literacy as a whole, as well as reading, writing and speaking and listening.<sup>1</sup> We received responses from 1,535 teachers (see methodology below for more detail) from across primary, secondary and other settings. The survey was anonymous, and we asked teachers to tell us about the sorts of provision they had in their schools, and also about their own attitudes to literacy and what they saw their role to be. As outlined below, we were particularly interested in how this would differ across primary and secondary settings, as well as by different roles and levels of seniority.

The below findings outline how teachers feel about and interact with a range of literacy issues. The hope is that these findings will help inform literacy provision and practice, providing support and inspiration for teachers and other educators.

This report forms part of a series, alongside reading and writing, that outline our findings in relation to these specific areas.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/annual-literacy-survey/>

<sup>2</sup> See reading and writing reports: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/teachers-and-reading-writing-and-whole-school-literacy-in-2023>

# Key findings

## Whole-school literacy

Attitudes to school-wide literacy were broadly positive, with almost all teachers, regardless of subject specialism, saying that teaching and supporting literacy were important. However, some were unclear on the processes in place for supporting whole-school literacy, which seemed to be more pronounced in secondary schools. This is perhaps understandable because secondary schools tend to have a larger number of staff with more levels of management, but it is notable nevertheless.

### General attitudes

- 9 in 10 (92.1%) teachers across all subjects thought it was their job to teach literacy.
- Nearly all (95.2%) teachers felt that it was everybody's responsibility to teach and promote literacy.
- 1 in 4 (24.5%) teachers in secondary settings felt that teaching literacy reduced time for other things compared with just 1 in 6 (16.4%) in primary settings.

### Literacy and classroom practice

- More than 4 in 5 (84.6%) teachers said that literacy was embedded in their classroom practice, although this was higher for primary teachers (94.2%) than secondary (81.3%).
- Just over half (56.7%) of teachers in secondary settings said that they had received training in embedding literacy in their subject compared with nearly 7 in 10 (69.1%) of those in primary schools.
- Only 2 in 5 (41.3%) teaching assistants said they had received training in embedding literacy in their subject.
- Nearly 1 in 10 (8.4%) teachers disagreed that they were supported by their managers and leaders to support classroom literacy.

## Whole-school literacy provision

- 1 in 4 said that they did not have community links relating to literacy (26.2%) or subject-specific literacy CPD (26.7%), while 1 in 5 (19.4%) said that they did not have peer reading opportunities in place for pupils.
- 1 in 4 (24.5%) teachers said that they had a literacy link governor in place, compared with 3 in 5 (59.7%) who said that they didn't know and 1 in 6 (15.8%) who said they did not.<sup>3</sup>

At a time when teachers and other education staff are under more pressure than ever with limited resources, our priority is to offer support and inspiration for them to embed literacy wherever possible. These findings are broadly encouraging and, while literacy strategies are less explicit in some cases, the commitment to and passion for literacy across the board suggests a hopeful future.

**“It’s everybody’s job.  
This is literacy not  
English the subject.”**

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<sup>3</sup> A link governor is assigned to oversee a particular area of school improvement, such as literacy, and will have specific responsibilities and links in that space. For more information see <https://governorsforschools.org.uk/link-governor-roles-and-committees/>

# Methodology

We surveyed 1,535 teachers from across different settings, with the majority being from primary and secondary schools.<sup>4</sup> The data set comprised classroom and subject teachers, teaching assistants, heads of department and librarians, with several others.<sup>5</sup> We use ‘teachers’ here as a shorthand to cover any professional working in a school, including librarians and teaching assistants as well as technical and administrative support staff.

## Findings in detail

### Whole-school literacy

#### Attitudes to literacy in schools

We asked teachers how they felt about the importance of literacy as a school-wide priority. The results were overwhelmingly positive: 98.1% agreed that teaching literacy within the curriculum was important. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 1, 95.2% agreed that it was the responsibility of all staff to teach and promote literacy, and 92.1% thought it was their job to teach literacy. The beliefs that all staff were responsible for teaching literacy and that literacy within the curriculum

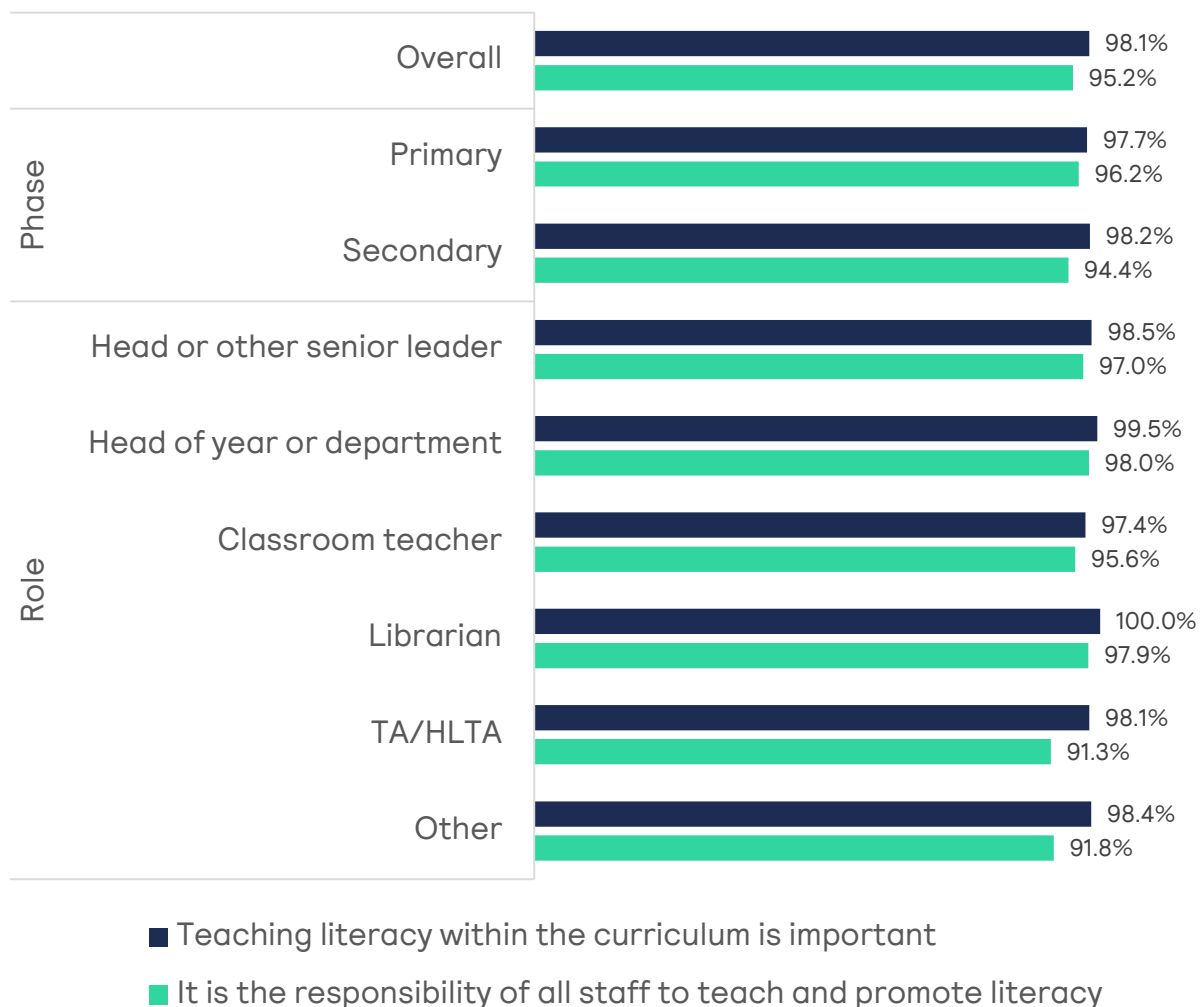
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<sup>4</sup> First school/infants school n = 49, Primary school/junior school n = 443, Middle school n = 3, Secondary school/high school/upper school n = 931, Sixth form or other post-16 setting n = 16, All-through school n = 34, Other/not answered n = 59.

<sup>5</sup> Supply teachers and cover teachers are counted as classroom teachers. Subject co-ordinators are counted as heads of department. Head of phase counts as head of year. Where someone has said they are a trainee, they are counted in the role they are training for. Assistant heads are counted as heads. Librarian includes library assistants.

was important were consistent across phases and roles.<sup>6</sup> No fewer than 97% of teachers in any group believed that teaching literacy within the curriculum was important and, in most cases (including all teaching staff and librarians), more than 95% believed it was the responsibility of all staff to teach and promote literacy. Even for those who were in non-teaching roles, over 9 in 10 believed this.

**Figure 1: Agreement with statements about teaching literacy across phase and role**



<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of comparison across phase, we have focused on primary/junior schools (n = 443) and secondary/high/upper schools (n = 931), but the total data set also includes first/infant schools (n = 49), middle schools (n = 3), sixth form and other post-16 settings (n = 16), all-through schools (n = 34) and unassigned (n = 59).

Open-ended comments reinforced this:

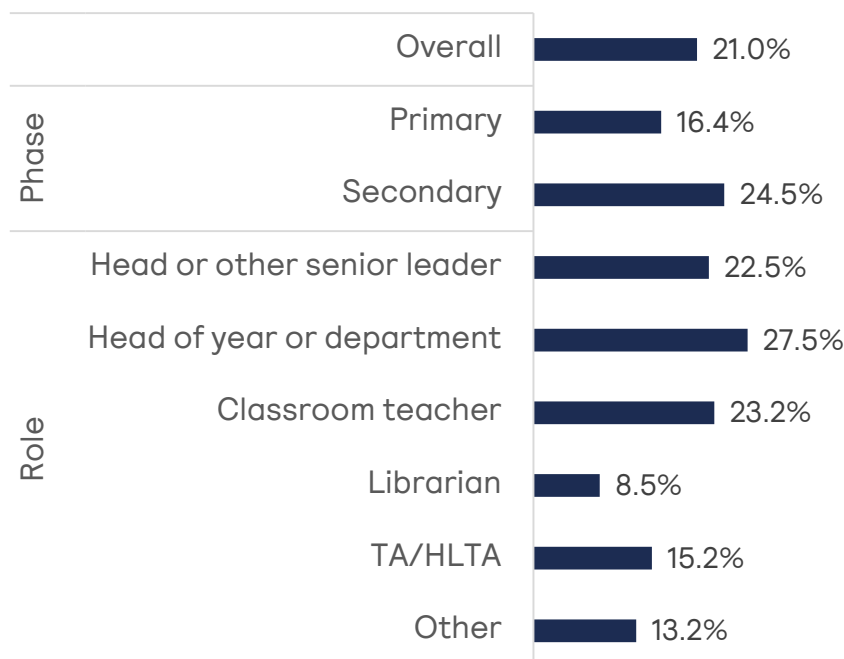
“It’s everybody’s job. This is literacy not English the subject.”

“Yes and no. As a teacher of maths I teach students to be able to read and understand the questions given to them, which may involve a real life or complex scenario and or use of academic language.”

## Impact on other areas of prioritising literacy

We were also conscious, however, that with increasing workloads, some teachers may feel that prioritising literacy could detract from other key topics. 1 in 5 felt this overall. As shown in Figure 2 this was more frequently a concern for classroom teachers and more senior members of staff, but less so for librarians, teaching assistants and other supporting roles. It was also more frequently a concern in secondary settings, where 1 in 4 agreed compared with just 1 in 6 in primary settings.

**Figure 2: Percentage of teachers who agree that teaching literacy reduces time to teach subject content by phase and role**



Some teachers highlighted this concern in their comments:

“We teach topic specific vocabulary (tier 2/3 words) although the content in our subject is so large and we have relatively few lessons compared to other core subjects that it is not practical to go into depth on literacy in our lessons.”

“Science has a lot of curriculum content, if literacy is taught without context of science in lesson this can eat into curriculum time. However, when science-relevant literacy tasks are embedded into learning this can improve understanding further.”

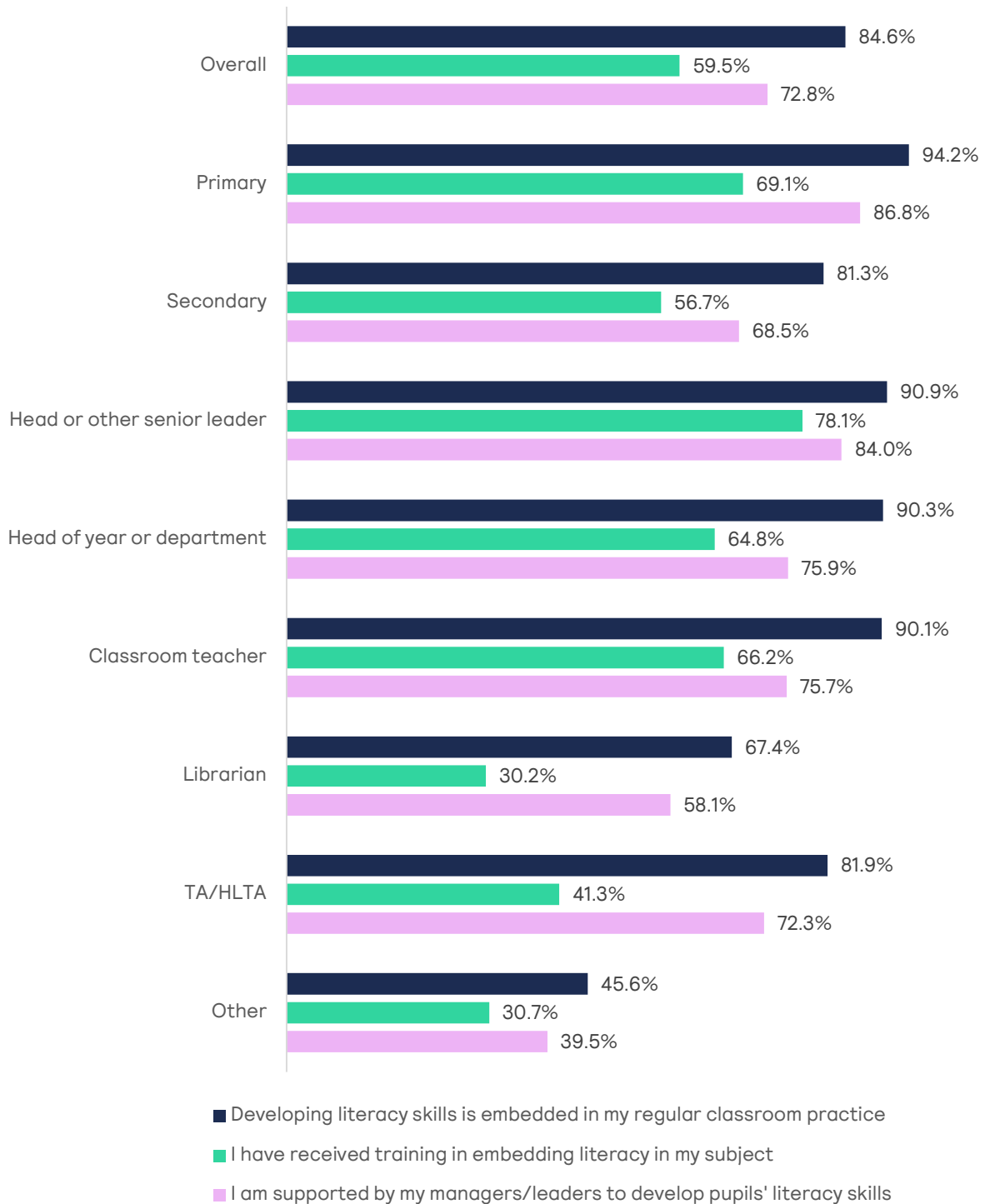
## Approaches to literacy in teachers' own practice

We asked teachers if they felt literacy was embedded in their practice and how supported they felt in this respect. As shown in Figure 3, around 4 in 5 agreed that developing literacy skills was embedded in their regular classroom practice. Nearly all primary school teachers felt this, and 4 in 5 secondary teachers agreed. However, there was some difference between levels of seniority: around 9 in 10 of those in teaching or leadership roles believed that developing literacy was embedded in their practice, while 4 in 5 Teaching Assistants (TAs) and Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs) agreed.

Overall, just under three quarters of teachers said that they were supported by managers and leaders in developing their pupils' literacy practice. There was a more marked primary/secondary split when it came to training and support in this regard: nearly 9 in 10 primary teachers said they felt supported by managers and leaders in developing their pupils' literacy compared with less than 7 in 10 of those in secondary schools, while just over half of those in secondary schools said they had received training. While Figure 3 shows the percentages of teachers who agreed, it is important to note that 'neither agree nor disagree', 'don't know' and 'not applicable' were also options in addition to 'disagree'. Nearly 1 in 5 (18.3%) either ticked 'neither agree nor disagree' or 'not applicable' on the statement regarding support, while just under 1 in 10 (8.4%) selected 'disagree'.



**Figure 3: Teachers' agreement with statements about embedding literacy in their subject and classroom practice**

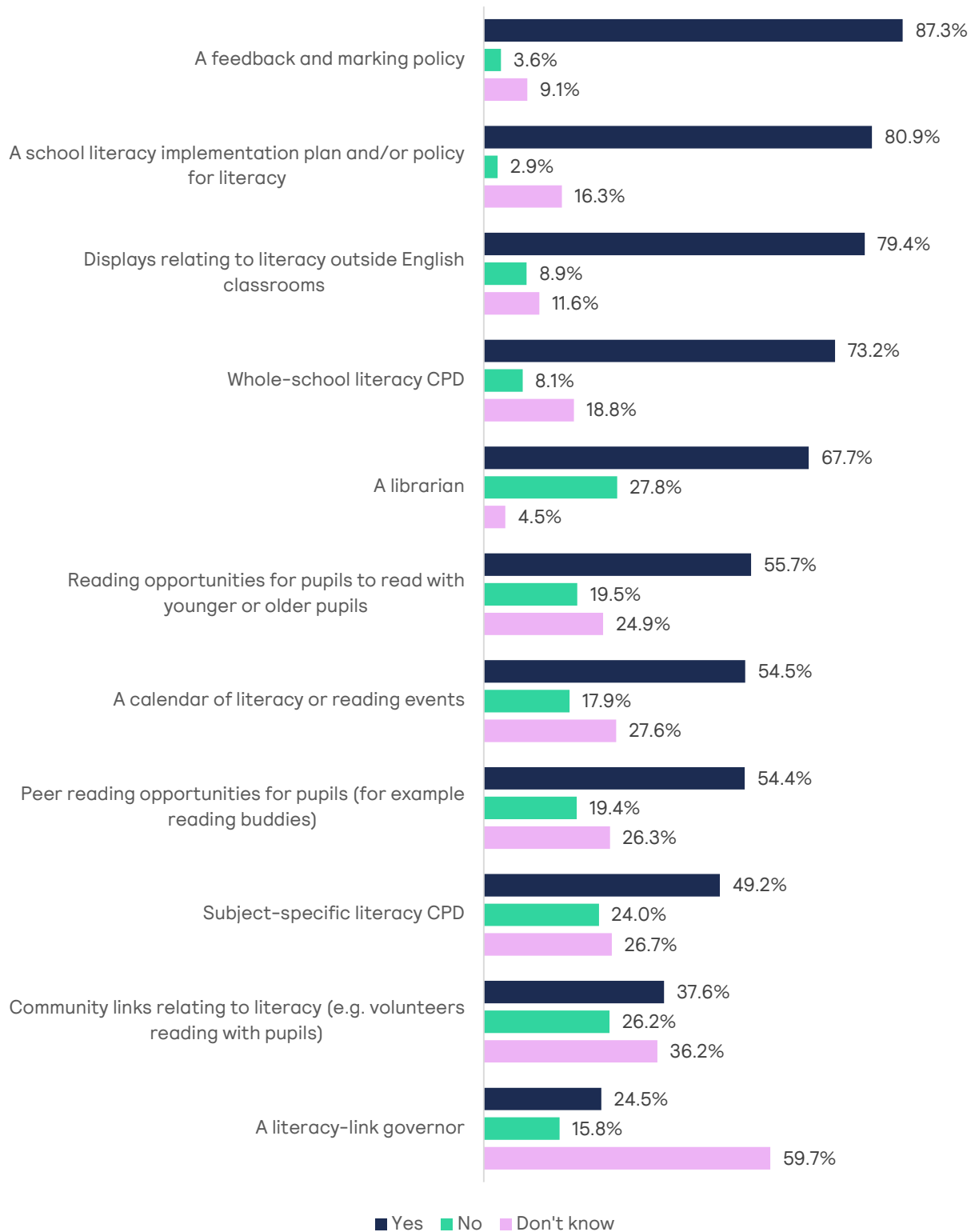




## Schools' overall literacy provision

We asked teachers whether their schools had a range of different provisions for whole-school literacy, as outlined in Figure 4. Most (9 in 10) teachers reported having a feedback and marking policy, and around 8 in 10 had a school literacy implementation plan. Many (7 in 10) also said they had displays relating to literacy outside of English classrooms. There were a surprising number of 'don't know' responses, however. Most notably, 3 in 5 teachers did not know if their school had a dedicated literacy-link governor in place. Furthermore, many teachers didn't know if their school had policies in place around subject-specific literacy CPD (1 in 5 weren't sure), community links (1 in 3), peer reading (1 in 4) or whether the school had a calendar of reading events (1 in 4). It is possible that these initiatives may have been in place but not communicated effectively. Lastly, 1 in 4 said that they did not have community links relating to literacy or subject-specific literacy CPD, while 1 in 5 said that they did not have peer reading opportunities in place for pupils.

**Figure 4: Whole-school literacy provision**



# Conclusion

In summary, it seems that teachers across phases and roles see the importance of literacy and that in one way or another it falls to all staff to promote and embed. Some literacy and reading strategies, such as celebratory days and whole-school policies, are widespread, and it is encouraging to see that most teachers think their schools have a good or excellent approach to reading for pleasure. Conversely, it is more concerning that many do not have, or do not know if they have, a literacy-link governor or subject-specific literacy CPD in place.

This is echoed by the fact that many teachers, particularly those in secondary settings and those in less senior roles, say that they have not received training in literacy in their subject. The attitude statements demonstrate an enthusiasm and buy-in for whole-school literacy suggesting that, where possible, teachers would be receptive to more strategic and focused provision being implemented. The percentage of teachers – particularly in secondary settings – who say they do not know about other strategies being in place may be attributable to more fragmented communication. Making this information available to more staff could be helpful.

At a time when teachers and other education staff are under more pressure than ever with limited resources, our priority is to offer support and inspiration for them to embed literacy wherever possible. These findings are broadly encouraging and, while literacy strategies are less explicit in some cases, the commitment to and passion for literacy across the board suggests a hopeful future.

# References

Clark, C. and Teravainen-Goff, A. (2015), Teachers and Literacy: Their perceptions, understanding, confidence and awareness. London: National Literacy Trust.

French, Jenni (2023), Teacher Recruitment and Retention in 2023, Gatsby, <https://www.gatsby.org.uk/education/latest/teacher-recruitment-and-retention-in-2023>

Teacher Tapp (2023), Burnout Up – Ofsted out?, <https://teachertapp.co.uk/articles/teachers-behaving-badly-burnout-and-switching-off/>

## About the National Literacy Trust

Our charity is dedicated to improving the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of those who need it most, giving them the best possible chance of success in school, work and life. We run Literacy Hubs and campaigns in communities where low levels of literacy and social mobility are seriously impacting people's lives. We support schools and early years settings to deliver outstanding literacy provision, and we campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians, businesses and parents. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy and drive our interventions.

Literacy is a vital element of action against poverty and our work changes life stories.

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