Teaching the Curriculum for Wales

September 2025

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- nursery schools and settings that are maintained by, or receive funding from, local authorities
- primary schools
- secondary schools
- all-age schools
- maintained special schools
- pupil referral units
- independent schools
- further education
- independent specialist colleges
- adult learning in the community
- local government education services
- Welsh language immersion arrangements in local authorities
- youth work services
- initial teacher education
- Welsh for adults
- apprenticeships
- learning in the justice sector

Estyn also:

- reports to Senedd Cymru and provides advice on quality and standards in education and training in Wales to the Welsh Government and others
- makes public good practice based on inspection evidence

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Executive summary

This thematic report focuses on how effectively schools are developing and embedding approaches to teaching within the Curriculum for Wales. Drawing on inspection evidence, visits to school settings (14 primary schools, 10 secondary schools and one all age school) and stakeholder feedback, it identifies key characteristics of successful practice and areas requiring further development. Evidence was collected only for the age range currently working within the Curriculum for Wales, which at the time of this report is up to Year 9 in secondary schools. The report highlights the pivotal role of teaching in realising the aims of the Curriculum for Wales and in securing improved outcomes for pupils. It emphasises the importance of placing pedagogy at the centre of educational improvement, calling on schools, local authorities and national partners to maintain a strong focus on high-quality teaching.

1. In many of the schools we visited, leaders have developed and communicated a **clear, whole-school vision for teaching**, closely aligned with their curriculum purposes. These schools have established shared frameworks for pedagogy and where these are implemented well, staff often display a consistent understanding of what effective teaching looks like. This supports teachers to apply these principles confidently, adapting them expertly across subjects and phases. However, a minority of schools have yet to develop or embed clear expectations for the quality of teaching. In these cases, classroom practice remains too variable, as teachers lack a secure understanding of what effective teaching looks like or understand its impact on pupils' learning well enough.

2. Strong teaching is underpinned by **purposeful curriculum planning**. In the most effective schools, teachers ensure that learning is sequenced thoughtfully to ensure progression in knowledge, skills and understanding. They revisit key concepts, and design tasks that enable pupils to apply learning in purposeful, engaging contexts. These schools ensure that medium-term plans are developed collaboratively, across year groups or departments, with sufficient structure to guide learning and enough flexibility to respond to pupils' needs. Where planning is less effective, pupils experience disjointed learning or have insufficient opportunities to develop and consolidate skills over time and across the curriculum.

3. In many schools, high quality teaching is characterised by clear intentions for learning, well-established routines, and a strong focus on formative assessment. Effective teachers explain learning intentions clearly, use questioning purposefully, and adapt teaching in response to pupils' progress and

misconceptions. The strongest schools adopt **formative feedback strategies** that encourage pupils to reflect on their learning and take meaningful next steps. In these schools, pupils are active participants in their learning and demonstrate increasing independence. This helps create a culture where both staff and pupils are clear about what success looks like and how to improve.

4. Many schools we visited, particularly in the primary sector, use **authentic and relevant learning** contexts and the local community to deepen engagement and make learning more meaningful. These approaches support pupils to see the relevance of their learning, promote critical thinking and strengthen their sense of identity and belonging. In the most effective practice, teaching fosters curiosity about Wales and the wider world, enabling pupils to make connections across areas of their learning in ways that support pupils' development towards the four purposes.

5. However, in a few schools, staff assess pupils' progress directly against the four purposes rather than focussing on the knowledge and skills that pupils need to develop over time. This leads to a superficial approach to assessment and the inappropriate use of the four purposes in individual lessons. As a result, valuable teaching time is taken up with activities that do not contribute meaningfully to pupils' learning.

6. Where **high-quality professional learning** has the greatest impact, it is sustained, collaborative and focused directly on improving teaching. In the best schools, staff work together to explore evidence-informed practices, reflect on pedagogy, and refine approaches in the light of classroom experience. Leaders create protected time for professional learning and ensure it aligns with whole-school goals and individual development needs. Peer coaching, enquiry groups and structured support for subject or phase-specific pedagogy are used effectively to build capacity and share responsibility for improvement.

7. However, time and budgetary constraints often limit the provision and impact of professional learning in some schools. In these cases, staff report a lack of opportunity to focus on pedagogy, with training often dominated by compliance or statutory content. This presents particular challenges for staff who would benefit from ongoing, phase or subject-specific professional learning, which is not always consistently available as part of their regular professional development.

8. Across the system, schools are increasingly recognising the value of high-quality peer collaboration in driving improvement. Effective schools embed peer support, coaching, and enquiry as part of their professional culture. Staff use these methods to explore practice, trial strategies, and reflect on impact. These approaches not

only support professional growth but also promote a **collaborative professional culture** and a shared responsibility for improving the quality of teaching across the school.

9.   In the most effective schools we visited, leaders integrate teaching and learning priorities into their self-evaluation and improvement planning processes. Staff in these schools routinely gather a wide range of evidence to evaluate the quality of teaching and its **impact on pupil progress**. Professional dialogue is embedded across the school, and reflective conversations are used **continually** to identify strengths and refine practice. Importantly, self-evaluation in these schools is focused not only on the implementation of strategies, but also on their impact on learning.

10. Where self-evaluation is less effective, it tends to focus on superficial compliance with a set range of pedagogical techniques rather than an evaluation of the approaches that have the greatest impact on pupils' learning. In these cases, teaching strategies are used inconsistently and often without careful consideration, while feedback on classroom practice tends to reinforce a narrow, formulaic approach to teaching.

Executive Summary Overview

Clear Vision for Teaching

Schools with the most consistent teaching quality have developed a whole-school vision for pedagogy that is clearly aligned with their curriculum aims. This vision is understood by all staff and is embedded into professional dialogue, planning, and evaluation.

Purposeful Curriculum Planning

Effective teaching is supported by medium- and long-term planning that sequences learning thoughtfully over time. Teachers revisit key knowledge and skills regularly and align their planning to national progression frameworks, ensuring coherent development of understanding.

Reflective Self-Evaluation

In the most effective schools, self-evaluation is focused on the impact of teaching on pupil progress. Leaders and teachers use a wide range of evidence to evaluate how well teaching is working, leading to informed adjustments and ongoing refinement of practice.

Authentic and Relevant Learning Contexts

Teachers design tasks that connect with pupils' real-world experiences, communities, and interests. Learning is made meaningful through purposeful contexts, helping pupils to develop critical thinking, apply and deepen learning, and understand its relevance to their lives and futures.

Collaborative Professional Culture

A hallmark of effective practice is a culture of professional trust, openness, and ongoing dialogue focused on teaching. Staff regularly observe one another's lessons, share strategies, and collaborate to improve their practice. Enquiry groups and in-school networks provide structured opportunities to trial, refine, and embed improvements.

Formative Assessment and Feedback

Teachers in effective schools make regular use of formative assessment to identify misconceptions and adapt teaching in real time. Feedback—verbal and written—is specific, timely, and actionable, supporting pupils to reflect, refine and improve their learning.

High-Quality Professional Learning

Where teaching is strongest, professional learning is sustained, collaborative, and focused on improving pedagogy. It also deepens teachers' understanding of how to integrate research evidence with their own professional experience, enabling them to make informed, context-sensitive decisions in the classroom.

Introduction

This thematic report is written in response to a request for advice from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and the Welsh language in his remit letter to Estyn for 2023-2024. This is the second thematic review on teaching and builds on our findings from the first thematic review, Improving Teaching (Estyn, 2018).

This report focuses on how well primary, secondary and all-age schools that participated in the review were implementing and embedding effective approaches to teaching in the context of the Curriculum for Wales. As the curriculum continues to evolve, this report highlights best practices, challenges, and areas for further development to ensure high-quality teaching that supports effective learning.

The report is based on evidence from various sources, including visits to providers, discussions with a wide range of stakeholders, an online survey, and an examination of documents and ongoing inspections, all of which are detailed in the appendix.

The intended audience for this report is the Welsh Government, headteachers and staff in schools and settings, local authorities, and school improvement services. It may also be of interest to parents and relevant partners. We hope that the report will contribute to professional discussions on both the strengths and areas for development identified.

Background

Successful Futures and the Curriculum for Wales

The Successful Futures report (Donaldson, 2015) outlined proposals for a new curriculum and approaches to teaching in Wales, by building on its current strengths and highlighting ways forward. Whilst giving a range of recommendations around the structure and purposes of the curriculum, it also clearly identified the requirement that effective teaching was the key driver to its future success.

> *"Successful embedding of the Review's proposals on the purposes and structure of the curriculum will depend ultimately on what happens in classrooms. There is an increasingly powerful body of evidence about the central importance of good teaching to effective learning. Taking full account of the implications for pedagogy, therefore, will be vital if the recommendations of this Review are to have the intended positive impact on learning and achievement."* *(Donaldson, 2015, p. 63)*

The report highlighted the risk that 'changes to curriculum structure can be interpreted as implying particular pedagogical approaches' (p. 63). Donaldson reminds us that an excellent teacher will combine theoretical and practical knowledge alongside their professional judgement to make their teaching effective for the needs of the pupils in front of them. As a result, the report highlighted 12 pedagogical principles (p. 63-70) that teachers should apply to support the delivery of the Curriculum for Wales and move pupils towards the four purposes. The report noted that teachers would require a 'sound understanding' of the pedagogies that best supported pupils in moving towards curriculum goals, in particular the 'why' and the 'how' of teaching, not just the 'what' (p. 71).

Following the recommendations in Successful Futures, the Welsh Government has provided further guidance to support schools in implementing the new curriculum. 'The Journey to 2022' (Welsh Government, 2020) outlined expectations for schools to develop their understanding of curriculum design and pedagogy, building on the principles set out in 2015. This is more recently supported by 'Curriculum for Wales: continuing the journey' (Welsh Government 2022)

As the timing of this rollout was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, additional guidance was published to further support practitioners in understanding the role of pedagogy when designing their curricula. This included key questions for settings and schools to consider:

1. How will we create a culture which encourages practitioners to develop a deep understanding of **pedagogy and the skill to select the most appropriate pedagogical approach?**
2. How will we ensure the pedagogy of the Foundation Phase is developed and built on?
3. How will our vision for learning reflect the twelve pedagogical principles?
4. What learning environment do we need to create to fully support our vision for learning? (Welsh Government 2023, *Designing your Curriculum*)

Estyn

Estyn has conducted several thematic reviews related to teaching and curriculum implementation. These reports highlight the factors that contribute to effective teaching, the role of professional learning, and how schools are supported in delivering high-quality learning experiences.

Estyn published its thematic on Improving Teaching in 2018, three years after the publication of Successful Futures. It identified that successful schools had a clear policy to help teachers understand effective approaches to teaching and that they used research evidence to inform their practice. It also highlighted how effective teachers

were professionally curious and 'thought critically about pedagogy, read broadly about teaching and learning and discussed their work with other teachers' (Estyn, 2018, p. 5).

In March 2022, Estyn published its thematic entitled 'The Curriculum for Wales: How are regional consortia and local authorities supporting schools?'. It included reference to the support available to improve the quality of teaching as the key enabler to curriculum reform. It noted that, while variable, schools have found this support useful as it has 'supported them to develop a more consistent understanding of effective teaching and to improve collaboration between teachers and across schools' (Estyn 2022a, p. 22). It also highlighted that schools are less effective when they 'design and develop their curriculum without thinking carefully enough about how they will improve the quality of teaching' (Estyn 2022a, p.14).

Later in 2022 Estyn published a thematic report looking at 'Effective approaches to assessment that improve teaching and learning' (Estyn, 2022b). This reinforced the important links between assessment and effective teaching and highlighted examples of approaches to teaching that moved learning forwards effectively and provided teachers with the information they need to adapt and refine their practice to best support pupils. It noted that in the best schools, leaders 'encourage staff to reflect regularly on their day-to-day teaching and make sure that it responds to the needs of pupils' (Estyn 2022b, p.1).

In September 2024, Estyn considered how well schools worked together to develop their curricula and approaches to teaching to support pupils as they moved from primary to secondary schools (Estyn 2024a, *Transition and Pupil Progress*). It found that only a minority of schools ensured that teachers across these phases collaborated to develop a shared understanding of progression. Furthermore, it was rare for these schools to share and enhance their approaches to effective teaching at this critical transition point.

'In only a few cases had clusters of schools shared approaches to teaching or considered how they could ensure that teaching strategies supported pupils to make effective and continuous progress from primary into secondary school.' *(Estyn, 2024a)*

'In too many cases, the quality of teaching and assessment is not high enough. For example, in just under a half of schools and PRUs, there are shortcomings in teaching that directly impacts learners' progress.' *(HMCI, Annual report, 2025)*

In January 2025, Estyn published its annual report, summarising an analysis of over 400 inspections that took place over the 2023-2024 period. The report identified that where the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales was most effective, 'leaders have kept an unrelenting focus on improving the quality of teaching as fundamental to helping teachers understand how to effectively develop and deliver their curriculum.' (Estyn, 2025). It also highlighted several key features of the most successful schools, including the establishment of a culture of 'high expectations where all staff enjoy discussing

teaching, where professional development is planned strategically and research used sensibly to inform the decisions and strategy for their school'. However, it identified that, in a minority of schools, teaching is not effective enough and is often a recommendation for improvement. In addition, 'professional learning, particularly to improve teachers' understanding of effective teaching, were underdeveloped.' (Estyn, 2025).

OECD

In 2020, the OECD published a report commissioned by the Welsh Government to assess the implementation of the new Curriculum for Wales, evaluate Wales' readiness for its rollout, and provide recommendations for the next steps. The report highlights the importance of practitioners in Wales staying informed about 'ongoing research and innovation in pedagogical practices' and identifies 'cognitive activation' as an example of a high-leverage pedagogy that positively impacts pupils' learning (OECD, 2020, p. 44).

Cognitive activation in education refers to teaching strategies that challenge students to think deeply, reason, and actively process information. It involves tasks that require students to analyse, evaluate, and apply knowledge within the context of problem solving rather than simply memorise facts.

"Research suggests that cognitive activation enhances learning outcomes for example in mathematics achievement."(NFER 2015, Cognitive Activation in Maths)

Furthermore, the report highlighted the importance of professional collaboration in enhancing teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction. However, it also acknowledged the logistical challenges schools face, particularly the time required to engage in professional learning. The OECD stresses that *'the way this professional learning approach is implemented will be key to the success of the Curriculum across all schools in Wales.' (p. 46)*.

A follow-up publication noted that there was limited evaluation of the impact of professional learning on teaching practice and pupil outcomes. It emphasised that professional learning should be an ongoing process, integrating continuous evaluation of teaching strategies and pupil progress (OECD, 2021, *Teachers' Professional Learning in Wales*).

Most recently, the OECD's *Unlocking High-Quality Teaching* (2025) highlighted the complexity of teaching as a blend of science, art and craft, and identified five key goals—cognitive engagement, quality subject content, social-emotional support, classroom interaction, and formative assessment—supported by 20 evidence-informed practices (p.18, Fig 1.3). Drawing on insights from over 150 schools in 40 countries, the report emphasises that effective teaching relies on professional judgement, adaptability, and sustained collaboration. It calls for greater integration of research and practice and

underscores the importance of school environments and leadership in enabling high-quality teaching across diverse contexts.

> *"Greater attention is needed not only on what has an impact but also on how, fostering a dynamic process where professional experience and scientific knowledge enrich one another."*
>
> *(OECD 2025, p.157)*

Structure of this report

This thematic report examines how effectively schools are developing their approaches to teaching within the context of the Curriculum for Wales. Building on the key factors discussed above, the report is structured into three main sections, each focusing on a critical aspect of improving teaching and learning.

- Section 1 examines the extent to which school leaders have established a clear vision and a whole-school approach to teaching alongside the curriculum, how well this vision is understood by teachers, and how effectively it is applied in the classroom.
- Section 2 explores the impact of professional learning on enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, as well as how effectively school leaders foster collaboration and cultivate a culture of professional learning within their schools.
- Section 3 considers the role of self-evaluation in fostering a culture of reflection and collective teacher efficacy to enhance teaching and recognise its impact on pupils' learning.

Recommendations

Schools should:

- Develop and communicate a clear, whole-school vision for effective teaching that is understood and applied **thoughtfully** by all staff
- Ensure that curriculum planning is sequenced, coherent, and allows pupils to revisit and apply clearly identified knowledge and skills in context-rich experiences over time
- Prioritise sustained, collaborative professional learning that focuses on **improving pedagogy** and is grounded in classroom practice and its impact on learning
- Ensure that self-evaluation processes focus sharply on the quality of teaching evaluated by its **impact on pupil progress**
- Embed ongoing and structured peer support and coaching to promote professional dialogue, reflection, and shared improvement

Local authorities and Partnerships should:

- Strengthen approaches to **subject** and **phase specific** professional learning that prioritise high-quality teaching and are tailored to schools' curriculum and pedagogical needs
- Strengthen support for the leadership of self-evaluation in schools to ensure it focuses sharply on improving teaching and its impact on pupil progress

The Welsh Government should:

- Ensure that national professional learning opportunities are grounded in high quality educational research, practically applicable in the classroom, and designed to build teachers' pedagogical expertise over time
- Consider strategies to enhance the time and flexibility available to schools for high-quality professional learning that directly supports improvements in teaching
- Strengthen opportunities for local authorities, partnerships and schools to work together to share effective practice, refine pedagogy, and understand its impact on pupils' progress
- Strengthen curriculum planning resources to ensure that teachers have a clearer understanding of progression, particularly in literacy and numeracy, and to prioritise the development of more effective and meaningful formative assessment practices.

Vision into Practice

Developing whole-school approaches to pedagogy

The majority of schools inspected during 2023-2024 have made suitable progress in implementing the Curriculum for Wales successfully. While progress varies across different settings, with secondary and all-age schools generally at an earlier stage of implementation than primary schools, most schools have collaborated with their staff and local communities to shape a curriculum vision aligned with the purposes and aims of the Curriculum for Wales. For instance, they have worked together to define a shared vision of their educational goals based on the four purposes and often identify the key attributes they want their learners to develop during their time in school.

However, while many schools have carefully considered the purpose behind their curriculum (the why) and are beginning to strengthen their understanding of progression across Areas of Learning and Experience (the what), a minority of schools in Wales have yet to establish clear and consistent expectations for the quality of teaching across the school (the how). As a result, these schools often receive recommendations to improve the quality of teaching as they frequently lack sufficiently high expectations or a shared understanding of what constitutes effective teaching. In the majority of secondary schools, "shortcomings in teaching were seen frequently" (Estyn, 2025).

In the most effective schools, including many of the schools we visited as part of this thematic, leaders and staff have worked purposefully together to ensure their curriculum vision was supported by clear pedagogical frameworks. In these schools, leaders and staff set high expectations for consistent and skilful classroom practice. However, in a few of the schools we visited, leaders faced challenges in ensuring that all teaching staff across schools and departments fully understood and consistently applied the school's approaches.

This approach was particularly important in the schools we visited that had recently been removed from a statutory follow-up category. In these schools, leaders recognised that improving the quality of teaching was central to school improvement and prioritised the development of a consistent, shared approach to teaching across the school.

Gellifaelog Primary School – Teaching at the heart of school improvement

Gellifaelog Primary has undergone a significant transformation, moving out of a statutory follow up category by placing a strong emphasis on high-quality teaching. Rather than focusing solely on improving curriculum design, leaders prioritised improving classroom practice, ensuring that effective teaching approaches were consistently understood and applied across the school.

A key initiative in this transformation was the 'Gellifaelog Guarantees' (GGs) - a structured framework outlining core teaching expectations. These included questioning techniques, modelling, guided practice, and adaptive teaching strategies to better support pupil learning.

A pivotal driver of improvement was the school's coaching model, which encouraged a culture of professional reflection and collaboration. Through peer observations and coaching discussions, teachers refined their practice and embedded more effective teaching approaches. The school also placed a strong focus on subject-specific pedagogy, particularly in mathematics, literacy, and Welsh, to strengthen pupil progression.

As a result, teachers now have a clearer, more confident understanding of effective teaching strategies. The school's focus on high-quality teaching has not only improved pupil outcomes but also established a consistent and ambitious approach to classroom practice.

In many of the schools we visited, these teaching frameworks were grounded in a clear understanding of the pedagogical principles outlined in *Successful Futures* (Donaldson, 2015), complemented by insights from relevant educational research. In these schools, leaders and staff recognised the importance of exploring these principles in greater depth, using research to inform and enhance teaching approaches, and developing a clearer understanding of their practical application in the classroom.

Fitzalan High School – Research informed teaching

Fitzalan has developed a research-informed approach to teaching and learning, ensuring that all staff apply evidence-based strategies consistently across the school. At the heart of this approach is the "Fitzalan Fundamentals of Good Teaching" (FAF) framework, which provides a clear structure for effective pedagogy while allowing flexibility for subject-specific adaptations.

A key feature of Fitzalan's approach is the use of Rosenshine's Principles of Instruction (2012), which emphasise aspects including scaffolding, questioning, and regular retrieval

practice to support pupil learning. For example, in science lessons, teachers structure learning using "I do, we do, you do", ensuring that pupils first observe concepts being modelled, then practise with guidance, and finally apply learning independently. In modern foreign languages, staff have embedded spaced retrieval activities, such as low-stakes quizzes and interleaving of vocabulary, to strengthen long-term memory.

Teachers also prioritise formative assessment to adjust teaching in real time. The use of mini whiteboards, cold calling, and whole-class feedback strategies ensures that all pupils are actively engaged, and misconceptions are addressed promptly.

By embedding research-informed techniques across subjects, Fitzalan has fostered a culture of high expectations, where pupils develop deep understanding and independent learning skills. This structured yet adaptable approach has helped to raise attainment while maintaining a focus on inclusive and engaging teaching practices.

A key factor in the success of the schools we visited was teachers' ability to apply a range of techniques flexibly in response to pupils' needs. The most effective teachers did not rigidly follow instructional frameworks; instead, they adapted them thoughtfully and skilfully as lessons unfolded. They demonstrated a clear understanding of why specific approaches were effective and applied them with precision throughout their teaching. For example, in the majority of observed lessons, teachers identified pupil misconceptions, explored the reasons behind them, and used this insight to model the next steps in pupils' learning.

"Research works best when it is a tool, not a mandate – adapted and applied by professionals to achieve a specific goal and then assessed to determine whether and how it helps them meet that goal" *(Lemov, 2015, pg. 7)*

Planning for Learning

Effective planning for learning is central to supporting pupils to make strong progress over time. Both international and national guidance emphasise the importance of coherent, purposeful curriculum design. Successful Futures advocates for a purpose-led, inclusive curriculum that enables teachers to plan learning that is engaging, challenging and integrated across Areas of Learning and Experience. The OECD's Future of Education and Skills Education 2030 (OECD, 2018) highlights the need for alignment between curriculum purposes, teaching approaches and assessment, and stresses the value of helping pupils make meaningful connections across subjects. Both frameworks recognise that coherent planning, within and across Areas of Learning, is essential to support progression, deepen understanding and enable pupils to apply their skills in increasingly complex contexts.

'The curriculum purposes will provide consistent points of reference for decisions about how learning might best be organised and assessed. Together with the proposals on structure and assessment, they signal the importance of sustaining challenge and depth in learning and of applying what is being learned across the curriculum. Teaching and learning approaches will be less constrained by detailed prescription and narrow performance measures.'

(Donaldson, 2015, pg.90)

Where planning is most effective, teachers design learning activities thoughtfully, both within individual lessons and across longer sequences of learning, so that pupils build knowledge and skills progressively. However, Estyn's recent findings (2025) show that only a majority of primary schools and a minority of secondary schools successfully balanced the systematic development of pupils' knowledge and understanding with opportunities to apply what they have learned across the curriculum. As a result, around one third of primary schools and two thirds of secondary schools were given recommendations involving the strengthening of curriculum planning to ensure that pupils' skills are developed progressively and applied with increasing independence and confidence. In addition, in a minority of schools, there remains a misconception around how to incorporate the four purposes effectively into curriculum planning and teaching. For example, teachers' lesson planning was focused on 'meeting' the four purposes rather than developing the key knowledge and skills they want pupils to develop (Estyn 2025).

"Knowledge organisers help us get curious about a topic before we start, so when we get onto it, we already know a little bit. At the start of new topics, it's like 'woah, how am I supposed to know all this?' But by the end, I can look back and see how much progress I've made."

(Year 6 Pupil)

Leaders and staff in many of the schools we visited for this thematic review have worked collaboratively to strengthen their understanding of effective progression across the curriculum. They have developed clear and detailed frameworks outlining the knowledge and skills they expect pupils to acquire over time. These frameworks often incorporated national literacy, numeracy, and digital competency frameworks and were being used to create medium-term plans that set out expected progress over a specific period, such as a term or half-term. In the best cases, schools have designed their curricula to build systematically on pupils' prior knowledge as well as give meaningful opportunities to apply these skills in multiple contexts.

Dewstow Primary – Teaching and Progression

Dewstow Primary School was placed in a follow-up category following its core inspection in May 2022. In addition to recommendations for improving the quality of teaching, the school was advised to enhance its curriculum planning to ensure that pupils' skills were developed more systematically. In response, school leaders recognised the need for a consistent approach to both curriculum planning and teaching.

Through bespoke professional learning opportunities, staff collaborated to develop a clear Strategic Vision for Teaching and Learning, tailored to meet the needs of all learners. A key element of this transformation was the establishment of clear expectations for progression. Staff created a whole-school progression of skills framework across the Areas of Learning and Experience, which now underpins the planning and delivery of high-quality learning experiences.

For example, in literacy, a structured approach to writing was developed in partnership with consortia improvement officers. This now provides teachers with a framework for planning cohesively and progressively for the teaching of writing. In addition, school leaders recognised and valued the importance of Early Years pedagogy, which now forms the foundation of curriculum design across the entire school. There is a clearly mapped progression of skills from Nursery through to Year 6 in areas such as block play, clay modelling, sewing, and art. These progression documents support staff in planning engaging and developmentally appropriate learning experiences that foster high levels of independence and have contributed to improved behaviours for learning.

Teachers are developing their formative assessment strategies and include regular pupil observations to ensure that their planning remains responsive and learner-centred. Staff and leaders now use a range of assessment information including book scrutiny outcomes, pupil progress meetings, test data, and targeted monitoring of groups such as those with additional learning needs, to deepen their understanding of pupil progress and adapt teaching accordingly.

As a result of this focused and sustained work, the school was recognised as having made sufficient progress and was successfully removed from follow-up in April 2024.

In the majority of the schools we visited, staff worked together to design medium-term plans, recognising the importance of revisiting key concepts and skills to reinforce understanding and deepen learning. Where planning was less effective, the curriculum advanced too quickly, limiting opportunities for pupils to develop mastery of topics, deepen their understanding or apply their skills meaningfully across different areas of learning. While departments in a minority of the secondary schools we visited were beginning to work together to design more integrated approaches to curriculum

planning, in many cases, planning still occurred in isolation within subject areas. This limits opportunities for pupils to make connections across their learning and apply skills in broader, more meaningful contexts.

The Maelor School – Progression in Digital Competency

At The Maelor, a structured approach to digital competency (DCF) progression has been embedded across the curriculum to ensure that pupils develop increasing sophistication in data and information literacy. The Digital Coordinator, who is also the Head of ICT, has played a key role in establishing progression ladders that support skill development from basic digital literacy to advanced problem-solving and modelling.

Collaboration across regional consortia and primary colleagues within the cluster has strengthened this approach, ensuring that pupils build digital competency in a logical and progressive manner. Within the secondary school, the Digital Coordinator has worked closely with subject leads to develop purposeful and authentic opportunities for embedding digital skills into the curriculum.

An example is the collaboration with the Head of Art, where digital editing and image manipulation software has been introduced to support pupils in developing digital portfolios. This initiative has enhanced students' understanding of developing digital art, allowing them to refine their skills in a creative, real-world context.

In addition, The Maelor ensures that pupils develop problem-solving and modelling skills progressively, equipping them with transferable digital skills that prepare them for further education and future careers.

Many of the schools we visited were creating meaningful opportunities for pupils to deepen their learning by embedding real-world applications into their topics. For example, at Stanwell Secondary School in the Vale of Glamorgan, teachers combined high-quality resources with authentic problems that required pupils to apply their geographical skills. Teachers had expert subject knowledge and high expectations of their pupils to use critical thinking to develop a 'defence analysis', evaluating various options for coastal defence in a specific area of Wales.

In the primary schools we visited, teachers often used their local area to enhance their learning and develop an understanding of 'Cynefin'.

Ysgol Gynradd Llanllechid – Using the Local Area to Enrich Learning

Llanllechid has developed a rich, place-based curriculum to ensure that pupils make meaningful connections between their education and their local heritage. By embedding local history, geography, and culture into learning, the school provides authentic opportunities for pupils to develop essential skills while deepening their understanding of the world around them.

A prime example of this approach is the study of John Petts, a local 19th-century artist who raised money for a black community in Alabama following a disaster linked to slavery. Pupils explored historical injustices by researching the lives of slate workers at Penrhyn Quarry during the Victorian era and comparing their experiences with slaves in Jamaica at the same time. Through this project, pupils developed their reading skills by analysing historical texts, then enhanced their writing and communication skills by drafting and presenting a report to their peers.

Beyond history, Llanllechid also integrates local themes such as common land farming and the history of agriculture. By studying traditional farming practices, pupils apply their learning to real-world contexts, ensuring that everything taught has a clear purpose. This approach strengthens engagement, deepens knowledge, and fosters a sense of identity within the local and global community.

In a few of the schools we visited, staff and leaders developed good opportunities for pupils to broaden their horizons and deepen their understanding of multicultural Wales. Through a range of purposeful activities, these schools were beginning to embed learning experiences that celebrate diversity and promote inclusion. These approaches helped pupils to appreciate the rich cultural fabric of Wales and to develop positive attitudes towards people from different backgrounds. In the best examples, this work was becoming an integral part of the school's teaching, curriculum and wider ethos.

Ysgol Gymraeg Llwyncelyn – Dispelling Boundaries

Ysgol Gymraeg Llwyncelyn places a strong emphasis on real-life experiences to support pupils' understanding of multicultural Wales. This is exemplified in their thematic work, Chwalu Ffiniau (Dispelling Boundaries), which aims to break down barriers by encouraging pupils to broaden their horizons and gain insight into the lives of others.

The school has established a valuable partnership with Mount Stuart Primary School and regularly welcomes guest speakers who share their personal experiences of living in a diverse society. There is a clear and consistent focus on exploring different religions, histories, cultures, languages, and the backgrounds of people from across Wales and beyond. Through this work, pupils are developing as informed, respectful individuals who are well-prepared to play a positive role in a multicultural society.

Classroom practice

Effective planning provides the foundation for high-quality teaching. When teachers are clear about what they want pupils to learn, they are better able to select the most appropriate teaching approaches to help pupils make progress. They question more effectively, and they focus more thoughtfully on formative assessment that enables pupils to make progress. Where schools developed well-considered curriculum plans, teachers were more likely to develop the confidence to focus on how best to deliver learning, drawing on a range of strategies to meet pupils' needs and build on prior knowledge.

St Andrew's Primary School – Planning and Pedagogy

Staff across the school, work together to create detailed medium-term plans and learning journeys that set out what pupils need to know and be able to do over time. These plans help teachers to focus on the most important learning and ensure that it builds in a logical and purposeful way. To support this, the school has developed simple, practical tools—such as teaching 'placemats'—that remind staff of the key principles for effective teaching and learning. Regular team planning sessions and professional learning events give teachers the time and support they need to reflect on what works well and to adapt their teaching to meet the needs of their pupils. Teachers also use ongoing assessment to check how well pupils are learning and to make timely adjustments to their lessons. This shared approach to planning and teaching helps ensure that pupils experience consistent, engaging lessons that build on what they already know and help them to make good progress.

In many of the lessons we observed during our visits to schools for this thematic, teaching was effective and engaging. In these lessons, teachers established high expectations for pupil's learning behaviours and used a range of approaches to ensure that pupils maintained focus and engagement throughout lessons. In the best cases, embedded routines ensured that pupils had a clear understanding of their tasks and engaged quickly with learning activities. However, in a few instances, teachers' expectations for pupils' engagement in learning were not high enough, for example in ensuring meaningful participation in classroom discussions. In these lessons, pupils sometimes remained passive and only gave short or limited responses. In these cases, teachers did not always expect pupils to explain their thinking in detail, and they did not consistently model how to talk through ideas or reflect on learning clearly enough.

 "Teachers make sure that what we learn develops from one lesson to another. They recap previous learning and explain how it builds on what we already know." (Year 5 Pupil)

In the schools we visited, most teachers planned carefully for pupils' expected learning, setting clear and well-structured objectives that they shared and discussed with their

pupils. These teachers often explained the purpose of learning clearly and effectively linked it to prior knowledge to activate pupils' thinking and establish connections across the curriculum. In a few observed lessons, teachers used examples of pupils' work to highlight strong learning outcomes or identify common misconceptions before introducing the next steps in learning. This approach enabled pupils to establish an understanding of success criteria collaboratively and develop a stronger understanding of what a successful piece of work looks like.

"Teachers notice when we are not sure about something, and they change their teaching to reinforce things we are stuck on."
(Year 6 Pupil)

Where teachers were clear about the intended learning, they often planned for and used questioning effectively to deepen pupils' thinking and gather valuable feedback on their understanding. For example, mathematics teachers at Ysgol Bro Myrddin used structured questioning techniques to assess prior knowledge but also included incorrect answers to create cognitive conflict, challenging pupils to problem solve and rethink their approach.

In the best cases, teachers adapted their lessons in response to pupils' answers, identifying misconceptions or areas of challenge. For example, at Aberdare Community School, teachers checked pupils' understanding of vocabulary recall in French lessons, using mini whiteboards. This approach allows them to correct mistakes, model pronunciation, and provide additional practice, ensuring that pupils develop accuracy and confidence in their learning.

However, in a few instances, teachers did not consider their questioning thoughtfully enough to promote learning, and expectations for pupils' responses were too low. As a result, teachers often over-relied on simple recall questions, reducing opportunities for pupils to build on each other's responses, engage in collaborative discussions, or develop well-structured, extended answers to deepen their understanding. Additionally, in some lessons, teachers relied too heavily on 'volunteers' to answer questions, which restricted the engagement of other pupils and limited broader participation.

In a majority of the schools visited, teachers used formative assessment well to adjust their teaching. For example, teachers regularly reflected on the impact of their teaching on pupils' learning on a daily or weekly basis and used this to plan subsequent lessons. Often, teachers designed learning tasks at the start of topics to test pupils understanding of key concepts, analyse their responses and use this information to plan systematically for the development of their knowledge and skills. Teachers of younger pupils often used a 'planning in the moment' approach, where observations of pupils learning are used to adjust provision carefully to follow their interests or develop their understanding and

skills. In a very few instances, early years assessment focused too much on 'tick-box' tracking and the use of digital tools to record pupils' learning, rather than effectively shaping teaching in lessons or over time. In addition, while leaders and teachers, particularly in secondary schools, routinely gathered a wide range of assessment data, its use to adapt or modify approaches to teaching were often underdeveloped. For example, opportunities to use this information to help pupils secure and build their basic literacy and numeracy skills over time were often missed.

In many schools we visited, teachers used feedback suitably to support pupils to move their learning forwards. In the best cases, this feedback was timely and specific to the learning goals of the lesson, giving pupils a clear understanding of their next steps. In most lessons teachers used verbal feedback effectively. However, where teachers used written feedback to support learning it was more variable in quality and impact. In the best cases, it was used judiciously and encouraged pupils to revisit work, reflect upon the areas for improvement and apply this understanding quickly to enhance their learning. Where feedback was less effective, it was not specific enough to help pupils understand what they needed to do next, and expectations for pupils to act on this feedback were too low.

Teachers, particularly in the primary schools we visited, often incorporated useful opportunities for peer and self-assessment into lessons. Where this is most successful, teachers understand that for self- and peer assessment to be valuable, they need to teach pupils how to evaluate successfully. In the best cases, teachers ensured that pupils are taught to use clear success criteria to judge the quality of work, identify areas for improvement, and offer constructive feedback to their peers. Teachers modelled this process carefully, often using examples of pupils' work to explore what success looks like and what could be improved. As a result, in these cases pupils developed a stronger understanding of learning expectations and become more confident in reflecting on their own progress. However, where peer and self-assessment were less effective, they too often replaced high-quality teacher feedback, took up valuable lesson time, and had limited impact on pupils' learning. In these instances, pupils do not fully understand how to assess work accurately or use feedback to make meaningful improvements, leading to more superficial engagement with the learning process.

In the most effective practice, formative assessment placed pupils at the centre of the learning process by providing them with a clear and ongoing understanding of their progress. Through targeted feedback, self-assessment, and peer evaluation, pupils developed a strong sense of responsibility for their own learning, which enabled them to identify their strengths and areas for improvement. This approach supports deeper engagement ad increased motivation, and encourages positive attitudes towards learning.

Ysgol Bro Banw – Pupils at the heart of the learning process

Teaching in the school is designed to put pupils at the heart of their learning by fostering their independence and engagement with the learning process. Lessons are structured to ensure that pupils play an active role in their learning and these principles are well established throughout the school.

Teachers use well-established strategies such as thoughtfully designed 'cold' tasks in literacy and mathematics to assess pupils' starting points and plan lessons that meet their needs. Pupils' own work is regularly used to identify misconceptions, allowing teachers to address gaps in understanding and guide further learning. Feedback approaches encourage pupils to think critically, reflect on their learning, and take responsibility for their next steps.

By making their progress visible, pupils develop a strong sense of self-efficacy and a 'can-do' attitude, which empowers them to embrace challenges with confidence. Additionally, frequent opportunities to deepen learning through peer teaching—such as creating drama performances to explore themes of empathy or guiding pupils from other classes in growing, preparing, and cooking food for the community—reinforce their knowledge and skills while fostering collaboration and social responsibility.

In most of the primary schools we visited, teachers often thought carefully about how their learning environments could further support the quality and effectiveness of their teaching. For example, teachers of younger pupils often had a good understanding of child development and created learning environments that support strong foundation learning practice. These often encouraged pupils to explore, take risks, develop their creativity and apply their skills in a range of contexts.

Ysgol Parc y Llan – Developing outdoor learning environments

The school's vision is to create rich and stimulating learning environments that effectively engage pupils and purposefully support their skill development. Staff have planned all learning areas thoughtfully, offering a range of interesting and practical resources, including 'loose parts', which pupils use during role-play and when developing their thinking and creative skills. For example, the outdoor construction area includes real-life building materials such as pallets, crates, and a variety of recycled electrical items, including drills, wires, and cables. These resources effectively spark pupils' imagination and creativity, motivating them to thoughtfully plan and build structures, such as dens and houses, with careful attention to quality and detail.

In the best examples, teachers of younger pupils enabled learning skilfully, but also maintained high expectations of what pupils can achieve. For instance, staff at Penclawdd Primary School served as strong language role models, seamlessly integrating sophisticated vocabulary into their lessons and everyday interactions. As a result, pupils,

including the youngest learners, naturally understood and incorporated this rich language into their learning activities.

Children and young people should learn how to work collaboratively and creatively, taking greater responsibility for their own learning and seeing the relevance of what they are doing to their present and future needs. *(Donaldson, 2015. p. 110)*

A key aspect of effective teaching within the Curriculum for Wales is providing pupils with opportunities to make meaningful connections across their learning through authentic and relevant contexts. In many of the primary schools we visited, and a few secondary schools, staff were thinking carefully about the needs and experiences of their pupils. They were designing learning that is both purposeful and engaging, ensuring that teaching approaches and curriculum content resonated with pupils' lives. These schools created opportunities for learners to understand how their learning applies beyond the classroom, helping them see its relevance and potential impact on their own lives and futures.

Ysgol Emmanuel – Making learning relevant

Teachers enable rich, purposeful learning by designing engaging activities rooted in real-life contexts. In Year 3, for example, they lead Social Enterprise Projects, working alongside outside agencies to broaden pupils' awareness of local and global social issues. Through this project, pupils take part in a sponsored litter pick, partner with organisations like Surfers Against Sewage for beach clean-ups and raise money to support social causes such as growing produce in the school garden and helping the homeless in their community. These experiences help pupils develop a strong sense of 'Cynefin', particularly within a community affected by socio-economic deprivation.

Teachers also spark curiosity and imagination by introducing topics with creative 'hooks'. They pose real-life problems that require pupils to collaborate and solve classroom mysteries. These approaches not only make learning more engaging but also give it real meaning, helping pupils connect with their work and make learning purposeful.

Professional learning

Improving the quality of Teaching

Teacher professional learning is a critical factor in improving pupil learning outcomes. Research consistently shows that high-quality teaching has the greatest impact on student achievement (Hattie, 2009). Therefore, professional development for teachers and leaders should not be seen as an optional extra but as a fundamental component of an effective education system (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). As Dylan Wiliam asserts, *'Every teacher needs to improve, not because they are not good enough, but because they can be even better'.* This commitment to continuous improvement is most effective when professional learning is sustained, collaborative, and grounded in evidence. Schools that prioritise teacher development create environments where educators are empowered to refine their practice, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes and overall school effectiveness. As Fullan (2014) emphasises,

> *"when the school is organised to focus on a small number of shared goals, and when professional learning is targeted to those goals and is a collective enterprise, the evidence is overwhelming that teachers can do dramatically better by way of student achievement"* (pg 83).

Embedding professional learning into the culture of schools is therefore essential for long-term educational success.

'Increasing the availability of high-quality CPD has been shown to improve retention problems, particularly for early-career teachers'

(Education Policy Institute 2020)

A recent Education Workforce Council (2024) report highlights concerning teacher retention rates in Wales, with nearly a quarter leaving within five years and around 40% within ten. Discussions during this thematic with teaching unions identified workload, pupil behaviour, a sense of purpose and feeling valued as key factors influencing this trend. Research indicates that high-quality professional development plays a key role in improving teacher job satisfaction and retention (Education Policy Institute, 2020). It may also help to address the current decline in applications for senior leadership roles in Wales (NAEL, 2024). This may be particularly important for early-career teachers or where training is focused on subject specific approaches such as secondary science (Education Datalab, 2017). However, only around a third of teachers in Wales engage in more than 30 hours of professional learning annually. When compared to the reported average workload of 56 hours per week, this equates to roughly half an hour of professional learning per week (2021 National Education Workforce Survey Report, pg 74).

The information provided by schools that we visited for this thematic indicated that professional learning typically falls into four categories: curriculum development, improving teaching, pupil well-being/ALN, and health and safety/safeguarding. Overall, primary schools generally distributed time evenly across these areas and secondary schools prioritised curriculum development. Notably, many schools were placing greater emphasis on ALN and well-being, with professional learning days increasingly used to upskill staff in areas such as neurodiversity, mental health, and trauma-informed practice. This, alongside regular statutory professional learning requirements such as safeguarding, significantly limits the time available for professional learning focused on curriculum development and improving the quality of teaching. Paradoxically, research shows that professional learning focused on high-quality teaching has particular benefits for disadvantaged pupils. Strategies such as explicit instruction, scaffolding, and metacognitive approaches are especially effective for pupils with additional learning needs and, when implemented well, can reduce the need for additional support (EEF, 2021a).

As pointed out in a recent thematic report on the additional learning needs system in Wales, in the best schools, efforts to enhance provision for pupils with ALN were part of a whole-school drive to improve teaching and learning for all pupils (Estyn, 2024b, p. 9).

"…we define teacher professional development as structured and facilitated activity for teachers intended to increase their teaching ability. The emphasis on 'teaching ability' is key"
(EEF, 2021b, Effective Professional Development)

Many of the schools we visited made careful use of this limited time to ensure that professional learning aligned closely with their vision for teaching and their whole-school strategic priorities. However, in a minority of the schools we visited, staff and leaders highlighted time and budget constraints as significant barriers to professional learning, particularly for 'non-statutory' areas such as maintaining a direct focus on teaching. In these schools, a key challenge was the lack of opportunity for staff to reflect on their impact in the classroom, making it difficult to recognise and embed effective practices. Where professional learning was less effective, schools had too many areas of focus, leading to fragmented learning that staff struggled to sustain and embed in everyday practice.

Conversely, where professional learning had the strongest impact, it often involved a shared commitment from leaders and staff to improve an aspect of teaching over time. In these cases, leaders worked collaboratively with staff to identify an aspect of teaching that needed strengthening. They created professional learning opportunities that encouraged staff to work together to refine their practice and reflect on its impact on pupils learning at regular intervals.

Monkton Primary School – Targeting Professional Learning

Leaders identified oracy as a fundamental skill for pupils' success across the curriculum, particularly after the negative impact of COVID-19. To address this, the headteacher investigated different approaches used by other schools and selected a research-informed, structured model for developing oracy.

Strategies were introduced gradually, three per term, with all staff receiving training. This approach was reinforced through staff meetings, where teachers reflected on the impact of these approaches in their classrooms. A few members of staff modelled techniques and coached others, supporting consistency across the school.

The initiative extended beyond lessons, becoming embedded in all aspects of school life, including assemblies and break times. Pupil tracking data showed that oracy had improved, leading to gains in literacy and enhancing engagement in other curriculum areas, particularly those involving problem solving and group work.

Following a year of implementation, staff agreed that the approach was working well and strengthened it further by incorporating explicit vocabulary instruction to improve pupils' functional language. Staff noted that explicit vocabulary instruction was essential to the success of their oracy work, to ensure that pupils had a sufficient range of vocabulary to engage effectively with the school curriculum. As a result, pupils across the school are better supported to articulate their ideas clearly and develop their own thinking with increasing confidence.

Many of the schools we visited were incorporating useful opportunities for staff to improve their understanding of educational research during their professional learning activities.

A few of the staff we talked to have engaged in the 'National Professional Enquiry Project' (NPEP), which in a few instances have impacted directly on the quality of teaching. Other schools have set up their own approach to research informed enquiry-based learning.

St Alban's RC High School – Strategic Learning Groups

Strategic Learning Groups (SLGs) at St Alban's RC provide a structured, research-informed approach to professional learning, enabling staff to explore, trial, and share evidence-based teaching strategies. Each SLG focuses on a specific pedagogical area, with teachers conducting small-scale action research projects to evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches. Findings are then shared in a marketplace format, allowing all staff to engage with and apply successful strategies in their own teaching. This collaborative model ensures that professional learning is reflective, research-driven, and practically applicable, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and innovation.

Schools often benefit from strong professional links with universities through their involvement in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. At their best, these

partnerships support practitioners to develop both their mentoring and coaching skills and their understanding of how 'close-to-practice' research can improve teaching.

Cardiff Partnership of Initial Teacher Education – The Role of Research Champions

The Cardiff Partnership for ITE, working with Oxford University, has introduced Research Champions (RCs) in its lead schools to help bridge the gap between educational research and classroom practice. These RCs support student teachers with their school-based research projects and encourage wider staff involvement in using research to improve teaching. This approach has helped student teachers better understand how to improve teaching and learning in real classrooms and has influenced school decisions. The partnership shares this work through simple visual summaries, events, and online content to spread good ideas across schools. As a result, student teachers show a clearer understanding of improving teaching and well-being, while school staff benefit from developing their own research skills. In some cases, student research has informed school decisions, such as improving outdoor learning based on evidence from a well-being study.

In the most effective cases, professional learning was both research-based and practical, helping teachers understand how to apply this knowledge in the classroom. Successful schools ensured that research-driven teaching practices were consistently applied across departments and the school. However, when professional learning is too focused on theory without practical application, it often leads to a disconnect between research and effective classroom practice. The most effective teaching we observed demonstrated a thoughtful balance between research and practical application, ensuring that both leaders and staff integrated these elements effectively.

St Peter's RC Primary School – Research to Practice

Following an inspection by Estyn in October 2018, St Peter's School was placed in special measures. The inspection report identified several areas for improvement, including a recommendation to strengthen the quality of teaching and assessment throughout the school.

When the current headteacher joined the school in 2020 he worked alongside staff to establish a relentless focus on high quality teaching. As a result, leaders have successfully translated educational research into practical classroom strategies, ensuring that staff not only understand key pedagogical principles but also implement them effectively. A research-driven culture underpins all aspects of teaching and learning, with professional learning sessions focused on exploring why particular strategies work before teachers trial them in their classrooms.

A structured approach to professional development ensures that new techniques are modelled, practiced, and refined through coaching and collaborative discussions. Staff engage in triads, lesson observations, and peer coaching to share best practices and troubleshoot challenges. This process has been particularly effective in embedding high-impact teaching strategies, such as effective questioning, 'planning for error' and fostering high expectations of pupils to evidence their understanding. These techniques have been developed cautiously over time and given opportunity to embed and mastered by teachers, and as a result have led to more engaged and articulate pupils.

Teachers also apply cognitive science principles, such as retrieval practice and spaced learning to their curriculum design, and assessment data and pupil feedback further inform refinements to teaching strategies, making learning responsive and adaptive.

By aligning theory with practical application, St Peter's has cultivated a professional culture where research is not just understood but lived in the classroom, leading to improved pupil outcomes and greater teacher confidence in their pedagogy.

"We now have a culture of openness across the schools and while the non-negotiable is that it has to be research based, we are encouraged to look at things with a critical eye and find our own way…I am still myself as a teacher'
(Class Teacher)

A minority of schools that we visited had identified the need for more subject specific approaches to improving pedagogy to ensure teaching was effective, particularly in building pupils' skills in literacy and numeracy. In these cases, staff often engaged in targeted professional learning, such as improving the quality of mathematics teaching or writing, supported by mentoring from external specialists such as school improvement partners from the local consortia.

This professional development often focused on how effective teaching strategies, such as modelling and guided practice, could be applied through 'the lens of a particular subject', helping staff apply these approaches effectively in the classroom. For example, leaders at Hawarden High School are developing departmental pedagogy sessions, which provide structured time for subject teams to refine teaching strategies tailored to the demands of their discipline. In these schools, leaders and staff reported that the quality of teaching in key curriculum areas improved significantly. However, staff also noted that it was sometimes difficult to access effective subject specific support from external agencies unless the school was already placed into an 'Estyn Category'. In addition, secondary school teachers are sometimes required to teach outside their area of specialism, even when they have limited subject knowledge or understanding of subject-specific pedagogy.

This ongoing support is even more vital considering that in some instances in the ITE partnerships inspected, student teachers have insufficient opportunities during their programmes to develop their subject- and phase-specific pedagogies (Estyn, 2022c). This is especially true of PGCE programmes where time is limited. In a few cases, ITE partnerships have not planned well enough for the integration of the school and university elements of the programme to ensure that student teachers effectively build their understanding of the different ways that pupils learn in various subject areas.

Bishopston Comprehensive School – Sustained and Impactful Professional Learning

High-quality teaching at Bishopston Comprehensive School is driven by sustained, subject-specific professional learning that is firmly embedded in the school's culture and strategic planning. A carefully structured professional learning plan ensures that all staff engage in meaningful subject development, closely aligned with robust processes for self-evaluation, improvement planning, and performance management.

Professional learning is not seen as a one-off event but as a continuous, reflective process. It strengthens teachers' subject knowledge and pedagogy, for example through a focus on developing subject-specific vocabulary and improving oracy across the curriculum. It has also sharpened teachers' questioning techniques, enabling them to check understanding and extend pupils' thinking within subject contexts. Peer observations, shared planning, and departmental collaboration further support consistency and refinement across subject areas.

Subject teams play a central role in enhancing both disciplinary learning and the progressive development of pupils' literacy, numeracy, and digital skills. Targeted professional learning and partnerships with external agencies—such as creative skills training—have boosted pupils' confidence, resilience, and creative thinking across subjects.

This culture of purposeful, subject-focused professional learning drives improvement at individual, departmental, and whole-school levels. It fosters high expectations, mutual respect, and academic curiosity—creating classrooms where challenge is welcomed, learning is valued, and pupils genuinely believe it's 'cool to do well'.

Collaboration

Many of the schools we visited have developed effective staff networks within their own settings, encouraging collaboration to improve teaching quality. These networks frequently offered opportunities for teachers to share their own research and best practices.

Y Bont-Faen Primary School – Enhancing Teaching through Collective Teacher Efficacy

At Y Bont-Faen, collective teacher efficacy is a cornerstone of the school's professional learning culture, leading to meaningful improvements in teaching and learning. Leaders have embedded a structured approach where staff engage in professional inquiry, peer collaboration, and reflective practice to ensure consistent and high-quality pedagogy across the school.

A key example of this is the school's use of professional enquiry groups, where all staff work in small teams to explore and trial new teaching strategies. For instance, research on effective questioning led to a whole-school focus on refining teacher-pupil interactions. Teachers now challenge pupils to expand their responses, improving their ability to articulate reasoning, particularly in literacy and mathematics. Similarly, the school's development of 'Teaching Placemats', summarising key pedagogical principles, has provided a shared reference point, ensuring consistency across classrooms.

As a result, these schools were beginning to develop a professional learning model that is less 'top down', encouraging greater engagement and shared ownership between staff and leaders. For example, the Greenhill School in Pembrokeshire, has implemented 'Monday Mastery' sessions, to provide staff with a dedicated space to identify, discuss, and share best teaching practices. However, some staff in secondary schools report that limited time for cross-department collaboration often reduces opportunities for teachers to learn from one other, which in turn makes professional development less effective.

"When a team of educators shares the belief that through their collective action, they can positively influence student outcomes, it has an immense impact on student learning."
(Hattie, 2018, 10 Mindframes for Visible Learning)

The majority of schools we visited were strengthening their links with cluster colleagues, with the most effective collaborations focusing on sharing best practices and jointly developing teaching approaches. In a few instances, schools collaborated on specific initiatives. For instance, Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Llangynwyd in Bridgend has started working with other Welsh-medium schools to identify the key characteristics of effective mathematics teaching. However, a minority of schools noted that cross-school collaboration, including cluster work, was not yet well established. Working with colleagues beyond their own school is often time-consuming and sometimes lacks the necessary structure to ensure it is focused and sustained, and has a meaningful impact on teachers' professional development.

"It was great to see very experienced lecturers admit mistakes in their teaching, openly reflect and be self-critical before us. I found this very reassuring that there is no perfect

lesson but what matters is openness, a willingness to reflect and act on this." *(Student Teacher, Swansea partnership)*

While such collaboration remains difficult to establish across schools, the foundations for effective professional dialogue and reflective practice can be laid much earlier. In the best cases, ITE providers ensure that student teachers enter the profession equipped with the skills to reflect critically on their own practice and engage meaningfully with the practice of others. In a minority of the providers we have inspected, student teachers benefit from structured opportunities for reflection that enable them to work collaboratively with peers, school-based mentors and university tutors. These opportunities help student teachers to develop the confidence to analyse their teaching decisions in relation to pupil progress.

Swansea University Schools' Partnership – Developing research-informed, reflective practitioners

In 2022, leaders within the Swansea University Schools' Partnership created two purpose-built observation classrooms to support their vision of developing research-informed, reflective practitioners. These specialist spaces play a central role in the PGCE primary programme.

Teacher educators use the classrooms to model key pedagogical approaches, such as using storytelling to enhance communication or conducting hands-on scientific investigations to promote enquiry. Sessions are often video-recorded, allowing for detailed review. Educators provide self-critical voiceovers to explain their choices, helping student teachers understand the value of theory, prior knowledge, and reflection-in-action

Student teachers also work in small groups to plan, deliver, and evaluate micro-lessons with visiting primary pupils. These sessions build confidence ahead of placements and promote collaborative reflection on different teaching strategies, learner engagement, and classroom management.

The classrooms also serve as a site for developing research skills. Student teachers observe adult–child interactions, track the frequency of pupil responses, and begin to reflect on their own assumptions and teaching biases—often leading to further self-directed enquiry.

Finally, the observation spaces benefit the wider teaching team. Joint observations and focused post-lesson discussions, for example on teaching literacy across the curriculum, support professional dialogue and raise teaching quality across the programme. New university tutors also report richer induction experiences and greater confidence in leading adult learning.

"For me, the emphasis on the impact of teaching was the key takeaway from these observation sessions. I think I need to focus more on what the children learn, what they are finding hard and how I know this. Assessment in learning!" *(Student teacher)*

Many of the schools we visited have strong links with outside agencies that support them in professional learning that directly impacts on the quality of teaching. These include links with local universities, partner schools and private providers. Many of the schools we visited felt they had received useful support from consortia and local authorities, particularly when it was focussed on improving the quality of teaching. Discussions with representatives from consortia and local authorities indicated that over recent years there has been a renewed emphasis on professional learning that focuses more directly on structured approaches to research-informed, quality teaching, alongside the role of leadership for developing teaching. Staff in the schools we visited also mentioned the positive role of school improvement partners in improving collaboration between schools by identifying and sharing good practice. In a few cases, leaders and teachers noted the variability in subject specific support and expressed concerns around the availability of services in the future due to funding and structural changes.

A few of the schools we visited benefited from engaging with professional learning opportunities provided through Welsh Government resources. For example, they had accessed online training modules, engaged in the National Enquiry Project, or joined national network conversations to discuss approaches to teaching and learning. While these opportunities enabled staff to share ideas and develop their thinking around effective teaching, staff and leaders reported that time and financial constraints were significant challenges. They also noted the need for more efficient professional learning that clearly translates into practical classroom outcomes.

Self-Evaluation

In December 2024, the Welsh Government updated its guidance for school improvement and self-evaluation (Welsh Government, 2024). This document clearly identifies the need for self-evaluation to prioritise the progress of 'all learners and the systems that support them'. It suggests that to ensure improvement schools should:

> *'use the widest and richest possible range of evidence available to inform self-evaluation and processes for improvement within their own context, while retaining a constant focus on learner progress'.*

It points practitioners towards a further document 'Supporting learner progress: assessment guidance', which gives further advice for schools in how to articulate progress for its pupils which can then feed directly into the school self-evaluation processes. In addition, it published the 'The Evaluation and improvement resource (NR:EI)' in 2022 to provide schools with a practical guide to support their self-evaluation.

Despite the availability of these resources, their impact on the education system remains limited and inspection findings have frequently identified weaknesses in schools' self-evaluation processes. During the 2023-2024 inspection cycle, approximately 18%[1] of primary schools received a recommendation to improve the effectiveness of self-evaluation, often with a particular emphasis on sharpening the focus on teaching quality and its **impact on learning** (Estyn, 2025). In secondary schools, this figure was substantially higher, with 68% receiving a similar recommendation. Of these, around half were specifically advised to focus on improving teaching and understanding its **impact on pupil progress** (Estyn, 2025)[2].

A common finding in the most effective schools across Wales was the 'unrelenting focus on improving the quality of teaching as fundamental to helping teachers understand how to effectively develop and deliver their curriculum' (Estyn 2025).

In these schools, leaders place high value on teaching as the primary driver of pupil progress. However, in too many cases, self-evaluation processes do not make explicit the link between high-quality teaching and its impact on learning. Improvement planning can become overly task-driven and weighed down by content, rather than used as a strategic tool for fostering a culture of professional dialogue. In the best schools, leaders ensure that regular, evidence-informed professional conversations take place across the school

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[1] Pg 6 - Overview of recommendations from inspections - Primary

[2] P6 8 – Overview of recommendations – Secondary

community. These discussions focus sharply on pedagogy and are central to a shared understanding of how teaching influences pupil progress.

In the first chapter of this report, we highlighted how many of the most effective schools we visited had developed a shared understanding of what constitutes effective teaching across the whole school and within departments. In these schools, leaders often prioritised self-evaluation processes to reinforce these key elements of teaching. They created regular and focused opportunities for leaders and teachers to reflect on their practice and strengthen its impact on learning.

Typically, leaders and staff focused on a specific aspect of effective teaching that was well embedded in the school's teaching ethos. Importantly, their evaluation extended beyond checking for implementation; it centred on how consistently and effectively this element was being applied in classrooms, and crucially, the tangible impact it was having on pupils' learning and progress.

Idris Davies School 3-18 – Evaluating a Vision for Teaching

Leaders at Idris Davies School have established a clear and purposeful approach to self-evaluation, rooted in their vision of *"inspiring, engaging, motivational practitioners guiding students towards a love of learning."* They have aligned their self-evaluation processes—such as lesson observations—with a set of agreed teaching approaches expected across the school. This alignment helps leaders and staff focus on the elements of teaching that have the greatest potential to improve learning outcomes.

For instance, they evaluate how effectively questioning deepens pupils' learning and identify areas requiring further development, such as the need to plan clear learning objectives that ensure appropriate pace and challenge. Regular opportunities for staff to engage in professional dialogue with leaders are built into the self-evaluation cycle. These discussions inform individual action plans, which are linked to Professional Development Reviews and highlight areas of teaching in need of improvement.

Teachers are further supported through a peer support model. This includes working collaboratively on targeted areas for improvement, sharing effective practice, engaging in joint lesson observations, and holding regular professional discussions focused on the impact of teaching strategies on pupil progress.

"the most effective teachers are five times more effective than the least effective….it it is hard to envisage any effective way of improving the quality of educational outcomes for young people that does not involve a sustained effort to improve the quality of teaching" *(Wiliam, 2016, p.35)*

However, where the self-evaluation of teaching was less effective, leaders often focused too heavily on individual lesson observations that prioritised compliance with specific strategies, rather than evaluating their impact on learning. In some cases, leaders based their judgements on narrow views of what constitutes good teaching, without fully considering how these approaches affect pupils' progress. This limited opportunities for teachers to use their professional judgement to decide when and how best to apply strategies in different classroom contexts. As a result, teachers were less able to reflect meaningfully on the impact of their practice. In a few cases, particularly in secondary schools, teachers described self-evaluation as a top-down, tick-box exercise, where feedback is overly critical rather than developmental.

In contrast, the most effective schools cultivated a culture of continuous, reflective self-evaluation that involved all staff. Leaders in these settings promoted professional dialogue, peer collaboration, and a shared commitment to improving the quality of learning. A particular strength in a minority of schools we visited was the use of 'low-stakes' peer observations and support, closely linked to specific elements of teaching.

When teachers have structured opportunities to explore the nitty-gritty challenges of their practice through thoughtful exchanges with colleagues and in relation to relevant research, they rediscover the passion for learning and their own personal and professional growth that brought them into teaching in the first place.
(Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, The Fourth Way)

These opportunities encouraged practitioners to engage in meaningful, reflective discussions about pupils' learning, helping them to take ownership of their professional development. In these cases, teachers felt they still had the freedom to adapt their practice in ways that were responsive to their own classroom contexts. While there was often a specific teaching focus set by leaders, such as the effective use of pitstops to address misconceptions, the emphasis was on collaborative self-evaluation and professional learning. As a result, teachers often felt that these supportive, trust-based environments led to more genuine professional conversations between colleagues, focusing on the impact of teaching on pupils' learning rather than compliance and conformity.

Bwlchgwyn CP School – Strengthening Teaching Through Peer Collaboration and Reflective Practice

At Bwlchgwyn, peer collaboration is at the heart of improving teaching and strengthening self-evaluation. Staff regularly engage in lesson observations and provide peer feedback, using these opportunities to discuss effective strategies and identify areas for development. This collaborative model has helped foster a culture of trust and professional curiosity, where teachers support one another in refining their practice.

Leaders promote enquiry-based professional learning, encouraging staff to reflect critically on the purpose and impact of their teaching. Staff document action research within professional learning folders, which serve as a valuable resource for sharing effective practice and promoting consistency.

Peer dialogue is closely linked to improvement. For example, following training on formative assessment, teachers adapted questioning techniques collaboratively to better engage pupils and support progression. Learning walks, book scrutiny, and learner voice further inform this reflective process.

This joined-up approach ensures that peer working is not an isolated activity but a key driver in the school's improvement culture. Staff reflection is purposeful and grounded in real classroom experience, leading to sustained improvements in both teaching quality and the school's wider self-evaluation processes.

In many of the schools we visited, leaders routinely built opportunities for staff to evaluate the impact of teaching into weekly staff or departmental meetings. This regular practice helped embed self-reflection as a natural part of school life and contributes to an open, improvement-focused culture. It enabled staff to quickly identify when strategies were not having the desired effect and make timely, informed adjustments. For example, at Dewstow Primary School, staff introduced an approach aimed at fostering greater independence in pupils but quickly recognised that it was not having the intended impact. Through reflective discussion, they adapted the provision to ensure that it was more manageable and purposefully aligned with the specific skills and knowledge they wanted pupils to develop.

Cognitive psychology research suggests that when we are presented with a problem, we are more likely to explore options that involve adding new activities and less likely to consider the converse, that by subtracting we might achieve more. *(Hamilton, Hattie, & Wiliam, 2023, p. 29)*

In addition, where schools provided regular opportunities for staff to reflect on teaching, this helped to create a culture of professional curiosity and encouraged staff to seize opportunities to improve their current approaches to teaching as they arise.

Penclawdd Primary School – Embedding Professional Curiosity

At Penclawdd Primary, staff are encouraged to question, explore, and innovate through structured professional learning meetings, peer mentoring, and research-led inquiry. This culture of curiosity empowers teachers to continually refine their practice in response to evidence and emerging needs.

For example, to enhance pupils' language and reading development, staff have trialled and evaluated a range of strategies, including targeted phonics interventions, vocabulary-rich environments, and the use of working walls, to support progression.

Leaders actively foster a culture of professional curiosity by empowering teachers to respond to the needs they identify through their own evaluation of learners in their classes. For example, teachers of younger pupils raised concerns about aspects of physical development. In response, the school introduced multi-station physical literacy sessions to address this need. These sessions not only support physical skill development, but also promote peer learning, as older pupils mentor younger ones in developing these skills.

Staff across the school actively engage in professional networks, research projects, and cluster collaborations to stay informed about current educational thinking. For example, they share the outcomes of their National professional enquiry projects (NPEP) with colleagues across the cluster, ensuring that self-evaluation and improvements to teaching remain relevant, evidence-informed, and responsive to pupils' evolving needs.

Many of the schools we visited reported that engaging with external agencies such as regional consortia, local authority advisers, and partner schools often added significant value to their self-evaluation processes. In the best cases, these collaborations provided access to broader expertise, offered constructive challenge, and supported the development of evidence-informed improvements. However, while schools, consortia and local authorities recognised the benefits, they also noted that engaging with multiple external partners can be difficult to manage effectively due to time and budget constraints. In a very few cases, staff felt that additional input from external sources can add considerable pressure and reduce the effectiveness of self-evaluation. They reported that, when feedback from multiple agencies is not focused well enough on the impact of teaching on pupils' learning, or the school's specific priorities, it can become time-consuming, burdensome, and lead to mixed messages. Where external support, including from regional consortia, was most effective, it focused on strengthening self-evaluation processes linked to specific aspects, such as literacy and numeracy, and aligned closely with the school's identified areas for improvement.

In the most effective schools, performance development reviews (PDRs) were used as a valuable tool to support self-evaluation and drive improvement. Leaders ensured that the process was clearly linked to whole-school priorities and provided meaningful opportunities for staff to reflect on their own individual practice. Objectives were well focused and aligned with effective teaching and pupil progress and they further supported opportunities for professional dialogue.

Ysgol John Bright - Using Peer Support and Professional Development Reviews to Strengthen Reflective Practice

At this school, peer support is becoming the cornerstone of an effective, low-stakes self-evaluation culture. Leaders have created an open and trusting environment where staff feel safe discussing challenges without fear of judgement. Informal dialogue following learning walks has replaced formal feedback with constructive reflection, encouraging honest and supportive conversations.

For example, staff within the Humanities department use the Professional Development Review (PDR) process to engage in structured one-to-one reflections and optional coaching. Teachers have the autonomy to select their reflective partners, which helps to foster a collaborative rather than compliance-driven culture. This promotes a balance between whole-school priorities and individual development goals, ensuring that reflective practice leads to actionable improvements. Leaders are beginning to develop an online platform to support this approach further by providing a shared space for capturing self-evaluation outcomes, which feed directly into school and departmental development plans.

In a few instances, particularly in secondary schools, teacher performance management targets and whole-school improvement plans did not focus sharply enough on improving teaching and its impact on pupil learning. Similarly, self-evaluation frameworks were often overly broad and lacked the structure needed to promote critical reflection. This sometimes led to inconsistent practice across departments, for example by relying too heavily on summative data to judge progress rather than using it diagnostically to improve teaching. As a result, teachers did not have sufficient guidance and opportunities to reflect on their own impact and refine their practice to make improvements in pupil learning.

In the most effective schools we visited, self-evaluation was a well-established, cyclical process that underpinned a strong culture of continuous improvement. Leaders and staff worked together to reflect critically on the impact of their practice, using a range of evidence to identify priorities that feed directly into professional learning. This targeted approach ensured that professional development was relevant, purposeful, and aligned with whole-school and individual needs. As a result, professional learning led to tangible improvements in the quality of teaching and, ultimately, better outcomes for pupils. In these schools, reflective practice was not a standalone activity but part of an ongoing cycle that connects self-evaluation, professional growth, and high-quality teaching.

> "My role, as a teacher, is to evaluate the effect I have on my students. It is to 'know thy impact', it is to understand this impact, and it is to act on this knowing and understanding."
>
> (Hattie, 2012, pg.23)

Methods and evidence base

This thematic report draws on evidence from our inspection and follow-up findings, and visits to 14 primary schools, 10 secondary schools and one all-age school across Wales. These visits were selected to represent a wide geographical and socio-economic spread, and included English-medium, Welsh-medium and bilingual settings. The visits were undertaken in the spring term of 2025. The table below lists the schools and organisations involved.

Evidence was gathered through observations of teaching and learning, interviews with headteachers, senior and middle leaders, classroom teachers, and pupils. Inspectors also reviewed school documentation, including teaching frameworks, professional learning plans, curriculum maps, and samples of pupils' work.

In addition to school visits, Estyn gathered evidence from online staff surveys and meetings with national and regional bodies, including representatives from local authorities, regional consortia, and teaching unions. A copy of the questionnaire we used for this thematic review can be found on the publication page. Despite publicising the survey through a variety of channels, the response rate was very low (37 responses).

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School	Local Authority	Phase
Idris Davies School	Caerphilly	All Age
Aberdare Community School	RCT	Secondary
Bishopston Comprehensive School	Swansea	Secondary
Bwlchgwyn CP school	Wrexham	Primary
Cardiff Partnership of Initial Teacher Education	Cardiff	ITE
Dewstow Primary School	Monmouthshire	Primary
Fitzalan High School	Cardiff	Secondary
Gellifaelog Primary School	Merthyr	Primary
Hawarden High School	Flintshire	Secondary
Monkton Priory CP School	Pembrokeshire	Primary
Penclawdd Primary School	Swansea	Primary
St Alban's R.C. High School	Torfaen	Secondary
St Andrews Primary School	Newport	Primary
St Peters Primary School	Cardiff	Primary
Stanwell School	Vale	Secondary
Swansea University Schools' Partnership	Swansea	ITE
The Greenhill School Tenby	Pembrokeshire	Secondary
The Maelor School	Wrexham	Secondary
Y Bont-Faen Primary School	Vale	Primary

Ysgol Bro Banw	Carmarthenshire	Primary
Ysgol Emmanuel	Denbighshire	Primary
Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bro Myrddin	Carmarthenshire	Secondary
Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Llangynwyd	Bridgend	Secondary
Ysgol Gymraeg Dyffryn y Glowyr	Powys	Primary
Ysgol Gynradd Cymraeg Llwyncelyn	RCT	Primary
Ysgol Gynradd Llanllechid	Gwynedd	Primary
Ysgol John Bright	Conwy	Secondary
Ysgol Parc y Llan	Flintshire	Primary

Glossary

AOLE Areas of Learning and Experience – The six areas in the Curriculum for Wales: Expressive Arts; Health and Well-being; Humanities; Languages, Literacy and Communication; Mathematics and Numeracy; and Science and Technology

ALN Additional Learning Needs – A term used in Wales to describe learners who require extra support with learning due to a range of needs

CPD Continuing Professional Development – Ongoing training and development for staff to improve their skills and knowledge

DCF Digital Competence Framework – A framework outlining the digital skills pupils are expected to develop across the curriculum

ITE Initial Teacher Education – Programmes that prepare student teachers for qualified teacher status

Las Local Authorities – The regional government bodies responsible for education provision within their area

NPEP National Professional Enquiry Project – A national initiative supporting practitioner enquiry and action research in schools

NSERE National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry – A Welsh Government strategy to strengthen the role of research in education

PDR Professional Development Review – A process used in schools to support staff development and align individual goals with whole-school priorities

Pedagogical Principles	Twelve principles set out in *Successful Futures* (Donaldson, 2015) to guide effective teaching under the Curriculum for Wales
Formative Assessment	Assessment used by teachers during learning to gather information, provide feedback and adapt teaching to meet pupils' needs
Cognitive Activation	A pedagogical approach that encourages pupils to think deeply, make connections, and apply knowledge through reasoning and problem-solving

Numbers – quantities and proportions

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

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