

The impact of leadership on teaching

Executive summary

Effective leadership remained the most significant factor in improving the quality of teaching. In the most successful providers, leaders at all levels fostered a culture of high expectations and collective responsibility, where improvement in teaching was a shared priority. Strong self-evaluation processes, aligned with strategic professional learning, helped leaders to identify priorities, target support and monitor progress with accuracy. Many providers used distributed leadership successfully, enabling middle leaders to influence teaching and learning across the school.

Where leadership was less effective, self-evaluation lacked rigour, and professional learning did not focus sharply enough on improving pedagogy. In these cases, weaknesses in teaching remained unaddressed. A few providers still did not link performance management, staff development and whole-school priorities well enough. Where practice was strongest, governors and external partners contributed meaningfully to improvement. These features supported a coherent, evidence-informed approach to enhancing teaching and securing better outcomes for learners.

Introduction

Effective leadership is essential for school improvement, particularly for improving the quality of teaching. The role of strong, well-distributed leadership at all levels is critical in ensuring high quality pedagogical approaches that meet the needs of all learners.

In His Majesty's Chief Inspector's Annual Report 2023-2024, we noted that in the most effective providers,

... leaders worked with staff to set high expectations for the quality of teaching and fostered a strong culture of professional learning, where improving the planning and delivery of teaching was a high priority.

Throughout the 2024-2025 academic year, we continued to identify examples of leadership impacting positively on teaching, along with less successful practice that did not support improvement well enough. In this report, we review the findings from inspections across the year, share examples of effective practice and consider ways in which education providers across Wales should further develop the impact of leadership on teaching.

In the long term, effective leadership is the single most important factor in improving the quality of teaching. Across Wales, our inspections show that, where leadership is strong, shared, and clearly focused, teaching improves and pupils achieve better outcomes.

In the most successful providers, senior leaders implemented well-designed and impactful strategies

that directly contributed to improved teaching and, as a result, learners made good progress and secured positive outcomes. These strategies typically included:

- rigorous and accurate **self-evaluation**, enabling leaders to identify strengths and address areas for development
- timely, high-quality **professional learning** that equips staff with the skills and knowledge to enhance their practice
- thoughtfully planned and well-supported **distributed leadership** structures, fostering collective ownership and creative approaches to improvement

For example, at Nottage Primary School in Bridgend, leaders at all levels share responsibility for improvement. Their strong and successful distributed leadership has driven tangible improvements in teaching, including raising standards in reading.

By contrast, where leadership was weak, self-evaluation lacked rigour and accuracy, professional learning was unfocused, and leaders did not distribute leadership accountability widely enough amongst staff. In these cases, the quality of teaching and pupils' progress was often limited as a result.

Self-evaluation

In most non-maintained nursery settings, self-evaluation processes were sound, ensuring that staff had useful oversight of their setting's strengths and areas for improvement. Where practice was particularly strong, staff in these settings made swift and successful improvements to aspects of their practice. Two examples can be found here:

[Inspection report Mochdre Playgroup 2025](#)

[Inspection report Little Acorns Day Care Nursery Ltd 2025](#)

Where self-evaluation was less successful in non-maintained nursery settings, leaders missed important aspects of teaching that required improvement. These included the need to support pupils' next steps in learning and development through timely and accurate observations, provision for the Welsh language and developing pupils' understanding of culture and diversity.

In many primary schools and pupil referral units (PRUs), and in a majority of secondary schools, leaders established sharp, worthwhile approaches to self-evaluation that enabled them to accurately identify their strengths and areas for improvement. Leaders and staff in these providers drew on a beneficial range of evidence, gathered first-hand through activities such as learning walks, lesson observations and listening to learners. They made sensible, diagnostic use of assessment findings, helping them to create strategic and effective improvement plans, focused on the quality of teaching and its impact on learning.

In the most effective primary schools, self-evaluation was a collaborative and inclusive process. Leaders empowered nearly all staff, as well as governors, pupils and parents, to make valuable contributions, ensuring a shared and robust understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Unsurprisingly, where we saw this to be the case, there was greater consistency and less variation in the quality of teaching in these providers.

In a very few instances, primary schools carried out self-evaluation in creative ways to find innovative solutions to aspects of teaching requiring improvement. For instance, staff at Blackwood Primary School successfully developed pupils' resilience, initiative and creativity through an interesting range of practical learning activities. These were devised following a rigorous review of the school's provision to develop pupils' independent learning skills.

However, in a minority of both primary and secondary schools, self-evaluation was not robust, accurate or focused enough. Where this was the case:

- self-evaluation did not take place regularly enough and was too often an 'event' that teachers frequently found daunting, rather than a supportive and developmental ongoing process
- monitoring activities were too limited and did not focus well enough on the quality of teaching and how it affected pupils' learning
- observations of teaching and learning were not sharp enough, leading schools to overlook important areas for improvement such as variability in teaching and the development of pupils' independent learning skills
- leaders focused too much on whether staff followed school policies, rather than on whether teaching improved pupils' progress
- leaders' expectations for the quality of teaching and learning were not high enough
- too few members of the school community, including staff, were involved in the process, meaning that there was not a clear and shared understanding of the impact of teaching on pupils' learning
- self-evaluation did not enable leaders to securely identify the aspects of teaching and learning most in need of improvement
- the link between schools' self-evaluation and their school improvement priorities was weak

We considered the use and quality of self-evaluation in education providers across Wales in our 2023-2024 annual report: Self-evaluation and improvement planning – Adroddiad Blynnyddol | Annual Report

Professional learning

In many education providers, leaders established a beneficial culture of professional learning. They reconsidered the way that they approach staff development to ensure that pedagogy meets individual pupils' needs and aligns to whole-school improvement.

Across all education sectors, where professional learning was most effective, leaders:

- valued staff development, focusing on both immediate needs and long-term goals
- facilitated relevant, carefully planned opportunities for staff to collaborate with colleagues from their own, and other, schools through joint work such as professional dialogue, reciprocal observations of practice and coaching and mentoring
- sharply identified professional learning opportunities that addressed individual and/or whole-school needs through effective performance management practices
- made effective use of financial resources, making discerning choices and ensuring that staff had equitable opportunities to access valuable professional learning
- ensured they used the expertise of skilled staff to support others, making professional learning sustainable

- provided purposeful opportunities for staff to disseminate professional learning
- made clear links between professional learning and school improvement priorities
- used professional learning effectively to tackle underperformance
- monitored and evaluated the impact of professional learning on teaching and pupils' progress

Spotlight on practice: Bishopston Comprehensive School

The link between self-evaluation and professional learning

The school has effective systems for managing the performance of all staff. Professional development review objectives align closely with school priorities and the aspirations of individual members of staff. As part of this process, staff have beneficial opportunities to discuss their professional learning requirements.

The professional learning programme is well planned to meet the needs of individual members of staff as well as focusing closely on school priorities. Staff have valuable opportunities to share good practice. For example, the ALN team, including the staff in the specialist teaching facility, share their expertise during professional learning opportunities with teaching staff to ensure that pupils with ALN are supported well in mainstream lessons.

The school is a lead partner for initial teacher education. This partnership provides beneficial opportunities for leaders to work together and develop professional learning for all staff.

In nearly all PRUs and a majority of schools and non-maintained nurseries, leaders used professional development review (PDR, also known as performance management or appraisal) suitably to identify teachers' development needs and to facilitate relevant professional learning. In the best cases, leaders had a solid understanding of the professional learning staff needed. They included time for purposeful professional dialogue that helped them identify relevant professional learning opportunities and worked with individuals to evaluate the impact of any professional learning on the quality of teaching as part of the PDR process. However, where PDR was less effective the opposite was true, and as a result the process did not impact well enough on teaching and, consequently, learning.

In a few non-maintained nurseries and a minority of schools, leaders did not ensure that professional learning supported or drove necessary improvements to teaching. Often in these providers, the culture of professional learning was not well-established, and leaders did not align staff development strategically enough to school improvement. Where this was the case, leaders did not make strong enough links between professional learning and individual or whole-school needs, meaning that aspects of teaching that required immediate improvement were not addressed.

In further education, The College Merthyr Tydfil created a valuable system to help teachers improve their skills and enhance students' learning. Leaders successfully encouraged staff to take the lead in their own development, working on personal projects, receiving support from coaches, and sharing what they learn with others. There was a beneficial focus on staff learning from each other

and trying out new ideas in the classroom. This supported improvements in both learner satisfaction and outcomes. Improving teaching & learning through empowering professional learning – Estyn

Distributed leadership

In a majority of schools and PRUs, senior leaders distributed leadership responsibilities successfully. In these providers, leaders at all levels played a full and active role in evaluating the work of the school. Middle leaders' contributions were valued, with staff receiving helpful training, support and time to carry out their roles effectively. They addressed any areas of weakness in teaching and evaluated the impact of teaching on learning diligently. In these schools, all staff shared responsibility for improving the quality of teaching. Lines of communication were clear, helping to align staff with a shared purpose, supporting trust and openness and reducing misunderstanding. Together, these features ensured that there was a purposeful culture of collaboration and support that helped to secure the necessary improvements in classroom practice.

Spotlight on practice: Gwenfro Primary School

Effective distributed leadership

Arrangements to distribute leadership responsibilities are highly effective. Clear roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability match the challenging needs of the school exceptionally well. Leaders know their roles well and work together with the constant aim of providing all pupils with the best chance in life and the best educational experiences possible. Within designated areas of responsibility, leaders use monitoring and improvement processes well to ensure a good balance of focusing on improving teaching and learning and meeting pupils' well-being and nurture needs.

In a minority of schools and PRUs, distributed leadership was underdeveloped, which reduced its impact on the quality of teaching. The roles and responsibilities of leaders and staff were not always clear enough in relation to improvement work and too often middle leaders did not receive the training or opportunities to carry out their roles effectively. In general, where senior leaders carried out self-evaluation and created improvement plans without collaboration, the quality of teaching developed too slowly. In these schools, senior leaders did not ensure that there was a shared understanding of the quality of teaching; what is working well, what needs to improve and how they will make improvements.

In many schools, governors played an appropriately active role in school life. Particularly effective governing bodies were a visible presence in their schools, supporting leaders and staff to carry out a beneficial range of self-evaluation activities. This in turn helped these governors to develop a good first-hand understanding of the school's performance. Consequently, governors in these schools were better prepared to hold leaders to account for the quality and impact of their work, and to support leaders in addressing areas of concern such as underperformance in aspects of teaching and learning. However, in a few schools, governors' ability to challenge leaders was too limited as they lacked a solid enough understanding of strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning.

Providers requiring follow-up

During the 2024-2025 academic year, a few providers required follow-up. In nearly all cases, the shortcomings we identified reflected themes highlighted earlier in this report, particularly weaknesses in self-evaluation, underdeveloped leadership structures and the lack of impactful professional learning.

Positively, Risca Comprehensive School demonstrated how improved leadership and teaching can drive progress. Strengthened leadership and sharper self-evaluation gave leaders a clearer sense of priorities, aided by better quality assurance, coaching and targeted professional learning. This led to more effective planning and improved teaching, with a greater frequency of well-structured lessons. Stronger PDR arrangements allowed leaders to identify teaching issues more swiftly and accurately and provide focused support. [Monitoring report Risca Community Comprehensive School 2025](#)

His Majesty's Chief Inspector's Annual Report 2021-2022 highlights the positive impact of leadership in supporting schools to be removed from follow-up categories. The report details further examples of how leaders addressed recommendations to enable effective progress in improving the accuracy of evaluation, and the quality of teaching and learning: [Providers that have made rapid improvement – Adroddiad Blynnyddol | Annual Report](#)

Questions for reflection

- How do we ensure that leadership has a direct and positive impact on the quality of teaching in our school?
- As leaders, how secure and accurate is our knowledge and understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement relating to teaching in our school?
- Does our school have a strong and inclusive culture of self-evaluation that impacts positively on teaching?
- When carrying out self-evaluation, do we focus sufficiently on teaching and its impact on pupils' learning?
- How well do we engage staff, governors, pupils and parents in self-evaluation to support improvements in teaching?
- How well do we ensure that all staff have access to relevant professional learning that supports them to improve teaching?
- How well do we link professional learning to whole-school improvement, ensuring that all improvements to provision are wide-spread, impactful and sustained?
- How do we know whether our professional learning offer is having the desired impact on teaching across our school?
- How well do we work in partnership with external agencies and other schools to support the development of teaching across our school?
- How well do we use the skills and expertise of our own staff to support and enhance the practice of others within the school?
- How rigorous is our approach to professional development review (PDR – also known as performance management or appraisal,) and does it lead to improvements in teaching?
- How effective is the support we provide for teachers to improve their practice?
- Do we encourage and empower teachers to innovate in the classroom well enough?

- How well do we support and encourage teachers to carry out research on aspects of teaching that interest them or are relevant to their personal development or to pupils' learning needs?
- Are leadership roles and responsibilities clearly defined, understood and impactful in our school?
- Do we support other leaders well enough to fulfil their roles confidently and capably, enabling them to influence the quality of teaching in our school successfully?

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