

Navigating Ofsted: Ensuring Professional Learning is focused on Impact



Why focus on impact?



Professional learning that focuses on impact ensures that learning experiences for staff translate into meaningful improvements in teaching practice and, ultimately, better outcomes for pupils. When professional learning is planned with evaluation in mind from the outset, it creates a clear connection linking staff learning, changes in practice, and pupil progress.

Professional learning is impact-focused when it:

- Defines **clear intended outcomes** for both **pupils and staff** before professional development begins ([Guskey, 2016](#)).
- **Plans backwards from desired pupil outcomes** to determine staff learning needs and success measures ([Guskey, 2014](#)).
- Uses **multiple sources of evaluation data** beyond satisfaction surveys, including evidence of changes to staff practices and pupil learning ([Guskey, 2016](#)).
- Articulates a **clear causal relationship** between professional learning activities, organisational support, and intended results through a Theory of Change ([EEF, 2022](#)).

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‘By embedding evaluation at every stage, professional learning addresses the issues most crucial to evaluation as a natural part of the planning process, creating self-improving systems where each cycle informs the next.’ Teacher Development Trust, 2025.

The benefits of focusing on impact and evaluation have been associated with:

- **Improved pupil outcomes** because professional learning is aligned with intended changes to teaching practice and pupil learning [Coe, Rauch, Kime, and Singleton. 2020](#)
- **More meaningful use of time and resources** as evaluation data ensures professional learning addresses genuine priorities rather than what feels most urgent or familiar ([Guskey, 2016](#)).
- **Increased staff buy-in and motivation** when colleagues understand the clear purpose behind their learning and are involved in the co-creation of professional learning plans. [Cordingley, Higgins, Greany, and colleagues. 2015](#)

What problems are leaders trying to solve?

According to our work with schools and [national research](#) (2025)

Which of these scenarios resonate?

Leaders receive high satisfaction results from surveys after professional learning sessions, but struggle to provide evidence of impact on pupil outcomes.

▶ **54% of respondents report that CPD is evaluated using teacher feedback, while only 25% reported that it is evaluated through pupil feedback.**

Senior leaders observe that despite recent professional learning on a specific teaching approach, colleagues aren't applying it in their classrooms.

▶ **39% of respondents report that CPD has not clearly improved their ability to perform their job.**

A subject lead wants to improve outcomes for their pupils, but doesn't know how to plan backwards from intended outcomes or what evidence would show their plan is working.

▶ **Less than one in five (18%) respondents say CPD is not evaluated in their setting**

What practice are leaders working towards?

Based on the Ofsted Framework (2025)

These are the statements we've selected as having the strongest links with this area of professional learning.

▶ Leaders "take a strategic approach to improvement, in which they carefully identify the right priorities to ensure the best possible outcomes and experiences for pupils" p74

▶ "Leaders ensure that staff continually seek to improve their expertise, drawing on the best available evidence, including high-quality research, and the effective practice of others" p76

▶ Governors "hold leaders to account appropriately and effectively for the impact of the school's professional learning programme for staff" p74

Where might you start with impact-focused evaluation?

These reflection questions will support your assessment of how professional learning is currently planned and evaluated in your setting. You might answer them alone or with colleagues.

- Are clear intended outcomes for pupils defined before professional learning activities are planned?
- Does evaluation of professional learning go beyond satisfaction surveys to include evidence of changes in staff practice and pupil outcomes?
- Can leaders and staff articulate the connection between professional learning activities and the pupil outcomes they intend to achieve?
- Are professional learning plans developed by working backwards from intended pupil outcomes, rather than starting with activities?
- Do we use multiple sources of data (quantitative and qualitative) to evaluate the impact of professional learning?
- Is there a clear understanding of how professional learning will lead to changes in staff practice and ultimately impact pupils (a Theory of Change)?

Whilst each setting has its own circumstances and conditions, these two scenarios from school leaders we've worked with offer insights into planning impact-focused professional learning.

Building Evaluation from the start

Context: A newly opened primary school appointed a dedicated professional learning lead. The leadership team wanted to establish robust evaluation practices from the outset.

Challenge: The school adopted a trust-wide teaching framework, providing shared language and clear expectations. However, as the school grew, leaders needed a systematic way to ensure professional learning was having the intended impact whilst maintaining their strong culture.

Impact and Evaluation: The professional learning lead developed a Theory of Change articulating the problem, intended changes, and how success would be measured. The school implemented layered evaluation including learning walks, staff surveys, coaching logs, curriculum reviews with student voice, and digital monitoring. This approach meant evaluation became 'a natural part of the planning process', enabling leaders to identify impact, where support was needed, and how to refine their programme so each cycle informed the next

Evaluation at multiple levels

Context: A secondary school engaged with our Building Expert Schools Programme after their Diagnostic Review revealed that whilst staff satisfaction with professional learning was high, leaders struggled to articulate impact on teaching practice or pupil outcomes.

Challenge: The Assistant Principal had developed a programme with consistently positive post-session survey feedback. However, when asked what difference the investment was making to pupil outcomes, she could only point to satisfaction data. Learning walks showed that despite recent training on questioning techniques, classroom implementation was inconsistent.

Impact and Evaluation: Working with TDT, the leader used Guskey's five levels to plan backwards from intended pupil outcomes. For a focus on developing oracy skills, they:

- Level 5 - Pupils' learning outcomes: Identified specific outcomes (increased participation in discussion, improved verbal responses, greater confidence in speaking)
- Level 4 - Staff use of knowledge and skills: Defined teaching practices needed (talk protocols, think-pair-share routines, talk stems)
- Level 3 - Organisation support: Conditions for success: protected time, coaching pairs
- Level 2 - Staff learning: Specified what teachers needed to know and do
- Level 1 - Staff reactions: Maintained feedback surveys as one data point among many

Evidence was gathered at each level: pupil voice surveys, classroom observations using a shared rubric, department meeting notes, and analysis of pupils' verbal contributions. Within two terms, the leader could demonstrate clear connections between professional learning activities, changes in teaching practice, and improvements in pupil outcomes.

Where might you go next to learn more?



Instantly access our affordable, 90-minute online module, [Evaluation Informed Professional Development](#), to support you towards more impact-focused professional learning in your setting.



Complete our CPD self-audit to explore the coherence of your current provision and identify what you might focus on next to improve, or go into more depth with our Diagnostic Review of CPD and develop a change plan through our [Building Expert Schools Programme](#). Either the CPD self-audit or Diagnostic Review will help you present credible evidence of current focus, provision and improvement plans to Ofsted.



Not sure where to start? Book a free 1-1 coaching call on our [CPD Leadership Hub](#).