

# Renewed inspection framework: overview of research

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## Introduction

The [renewed education inspection framework](#) (EIF) is mainly based on existing requirements set out in statutory and non-statutory guidance and in professional standards. We have highlighted the main [guidance and standards](#) that we used to develop the framework.

It is also informed by evidence from research into effective practice, which we describe in this report. This makes sure that inspectors assess the things most closely associated with positive outcomes for children and learners. This document is designed to help inspectors and educational professionals to understand how the latest research about educational effectiveness can inform system-wide improvement.

Our approach is similar to the one we adopted for our earlier '[Education inspection framework: overview of research](#)', published in 2019, which summarised the evidence underpinning the development of the framework. Our overview of the evidence supporting the renewed EIF extends the position set out in that earlier work. We have focused on updating the evaluation areas considered in the previous overview with recent studies mostly published since 2019, alongside areas not covered as fully in the previous overview. For example, an important focus of the renewed EIF is on inclusion and meeting the needs of children and learners who are disadvantaged, have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), are known or previously known to children's social care, or who may face other barriers to learning and/or wellbeing.

The overview of research is not intended to be a systematic review and does not set out to comprehensively assess all the evidence available. It attempts to summarise the research evidence that directly relates to our toolkit criteria for each of the new evaluation areas. Education research is a contested field, and this overview helps to set out our position on areas related to the framework. We reviewed a wide range of literature and types of evidence to support different aspects of the framework and grading criteria. When defining effectiveness, we have prioritised systematic reviews and meta-analyses. Where the review describes the different approaches and practices to education, we have used qualitative studies, including our own research, to set out what is relevant to the renewed EIF.

It is important to note that this overview does not prescribe any activities or approaches that early years providers, schools or further education (FE) and skills providers must adopt. There are no easy solutions to achieving excellence. Contextual factors and poor implementation mean that some examples of educational effectiveness, even if they are supported by evidence, may not always work in practice in every setting. Our overview instead provides current credible research on effective education and care that are more likely to support the progress of children and learners.

It is not necessary to read this overview from start to finish. Instead, interested professionals may want to dip in and out of this and the '[Education inspection framework: overview of research](#)' and use it as a reference tool. Because the educational provision covered by the framework is so broad, we have used language and examples specific to each sector, and – where possible – details of where the examples came from. We have also tried to use terminology that is relevant to the remits, and to the phases of education and care covered by the renewed EIF. However, in order to be clear, we have used some terms consistently across the different remits and ages. For example, we use 'teachers', 'providers', 'children' and 'learners' to refer to all those who teach or learn across all types of settings, from childminder settings to prisons, and everything in between.

We hope this overview will help readers to understand how research has informed the evaluation areas in the renewed EIF. In our response to the '[Big Listen](#)', we committed to being more open and doing more to share our insights and data. Education research can be interpreted in different ways. This overview of research is no different. However, we hope that publishing this evidence base provides transparency about the evidence we have used. Feedback is welcome via email at [Research\\_Surveys@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:Research_Surveys@ofsted.gov.uk).

## Leadership and governance

### Strategic leadership

Our [overview of research for the EIF](#) identified leadership as the most important provider-level factor in most effectiveness studies. Although high-quality teaching is the single most important factor in improving individual learners' outcomes, effective leaders create the conditions in which teaching and learning can flourish.<sup>1</sup> Effective leaders indirectly influence attainment by focusing on, and investing in, the provider-level factors shown to underpin high-quality teaching and learning.<sup>2</sup>

Recent large-scale reviews and syntheses of research suggest it may be helpful to pay attention to the provider-level factors that need leadership coordination rather than to leadership styles and approaches, such as instructional, distributed and transformational leadership.<sup>3</sup> This is because the evidence on specific leadership styles is largely correlational and descriptive. Terms like 'instructional leadership' are

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<sup>1</sup> A Harris and M Jones, 'The importance of school leadership? What we know', in 'School Leadership & Management', Volume 43, Issue 5, 2023, pages 449 to 453; J A Grissom, A J Egalite and C A Lindsay, '[How principals affect students and schools: a systematic synthesis of two decades of research](#)', The Wallace Foundation, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> K Leithwood, A Harris and D Hopkins, 'Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited', in 'School Leadership & Management', Volume 40, Issue 1, 2020, pages 5 to 22.

<sup>3</sup> R Coe, S Kime and D Singleton, '[A model for school environment and leadership](#) (school environment and leadership: evidence review)', Evidence Based Education, 2022; J A Grissom, A J Egalite and C A Lindsay, '[How principals affect students and schools: a systematic synthesis of two decades of research](#)', The Wallace Foundation, 2021.

not specific or well defined. They do not clearly identify or agree on which leadership skills and expertise have an impact on student achievement.<sup>4</sup>

Several syntheses of research point to 4 important common factors that have been shown to support better pupil outcomes and require coordination and support by leaders.

- **instruction** – leaders implement practices that support high-quality teaching, including coaching, mentoring and evaluating teaching and classroom practice
- **climate** – leaders build a productive climate characterised by collaboration, trust and a culture of continuous learning and improvement
- **management** – leaders manage staff and allocate other resources that support learning at a strategic level
- **people** – leaders promote collaborative relationships with staff, parents and the wider community<sup>5</sup>

Research on high-quality early years provision and leadership considers both process quality and the structural features that underpin it.<sup>6</sup> Structural features of early years provision include adult-to-child ratios, staff qualifications, staff salaries or wages, and group sizes. These features indirectly affect quality and are partly determined by statutory requirements and regulatory frameworks.<sup>7</sup> Process quality refers to the features of provision that directly affect children's learning and development. It focuses on the quality of the learning environment, including interactions between staff and children, the classroom environment and activities. This is central to leadership for teaching and learning.<sup>8</sup>

There can be tensions between providing the leadership necessary for ensuring process quality and managing the structural features of early years provision.<sup>9</sup> Effective early years leaders strike a balance between the two.<sup>10</sup> The relationship between structural characteristics and process quality can vary according to setting type and the ages of children, but qualified staff and professional learning are always

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<sup>4</sup> R Coe, 'Methodological challenges in school leadership research', Evidence Based Education, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> J A Grissom, A J Egalite and C A Lindsay, 'How principals affect students and schools: a systematic synthesis of two decades of research', The Wallace Foundation, 2021; R Coe, S Kime and D Singleton, 'A model for school environment and leadership: evidence review', Evidence Based Education, 2022; K Leithwood, A Harris and D Hopkins, 'Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited', in 'School Leadership & Management', Volume 40, Issue 1, 2020, pages 5 to 22.

<sup>6</sup> S Bonetti and K Brown, 'Structural elements of quality early years provision: a review of the evidence', Education Policy Institute, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> P Slot, 'Structural characteristics and process quality in early childhood education and care: a literature review', OECD, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> I Siraj-Blatchford and L Manni, 'Effective leadership in the early years sector (ELEYS) study', University of London, Institute of Education, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> I Siraj-Blatchford and L Manni, 'Effective leadership in the early years sector (ELEYS) study', University of London, Institute of Education, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> W Fu, 'A critical examination of effective leadership in early childhood education', in 'Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies', Volume 7, 2023.

important for high-quality and improved outcomes for learners.<sup>11</sup> In this way, leadership adapts to the unique features of managing early years settings.

The limited amount of research evidence on leadership in the FE sector suggests that many of the factors that require leadership coordination in schools are relevant to FE leadership. These include establishing a supportive and trusting climate in which teachers are empowered to identify their own development needs and achieve them through collaboration and sharing practice.<sup>12</sup> Their effectiveness may depend on FE leaders' ability to adapt and respond to their context, particularly the linked challenges of funding and student enrolments.<sup>13</sup>

Leadership in FE and skills providers has become increasingly complex because of the need to balance education with business priorities. In FE colleges, the traditional role of the principal has changed considerably. The limited evidence there points to a greater focus on strategic planning for funding arrangements, alongside academic matters.<sup>14</sup> Middle leaders have, therefore, become more important in developing subject programme leadership to help learners achieve positive outcomes. These middle leaders are best placed to improve teaching and learning by identifying and targeting the professional needs of colleagues in their departments.<sup>15</sup>

What remains key in the leadership literature, as our overview of research for the EIF previously highlighted, is that the context, phase and unique characteristics of education providers mean there is no one size fits all approach to leading and managing providers.<sup>16</sup>

## Governance

Governing boards have 3 core responsibilities:<sup>17</sup>

- ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction
- holding senior leaders to account for the educational performance of the school and its pupils

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<sup>11</sup> S Bonetti and K Brown, 'Structural elements of quality early years provision: a review of the evidence', Education Policy Institute, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> [Teaching, leadership and governance in further education](#)', Department for Education, 2018; M O'Leary, R Smith, V Cui and F Dakka, 'The role of leadership in prioritising and improving teaching and learning in further education', Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> [Teaching, leadership and governance in further education](#)', Department for Education, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> [Teaching, leadership and governance in further education](#)', Department for Education, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> M O'Leary, R Smith, V Cui and F Dakka, 'The role of leadership in prioritising and improving teaching and learning in further education', Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> R Coe, S Kime and D Singleton, 'A model for school environment and leadership: evidence review', Evidence Based Education, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> In this review we use the terms 'governing board' and 'governors' for those with responsibility for holding schools to account, although in some circumstances they may have other titles, such as 'trustee'. In a maintained school, they constitute the governing board; in a stand-alone academy they are the trust; and in a multi-academy trust (MAT) they are the trust board and any other people who have been given delegated responsibilities by the board.

- overseeing the financial performance of the school and making sure that money is well spent<sup>18</sup>

The National Governance Association recognises 'ensuring that the voices of stakeholders are heard' as a fourth core function of governance.

Although governance structures can vary, governors have the same core functions in all settings. Whether they are governing in schools (including maintained nursery schools) or FE providers, governors are expected to provide accountability, objective oversight and strategic leadership to support and challenge leaders.

Governors are part of the leadership team, and effective governance can have an impact on improvement by reinforcing the quality of leadership and ensuring leaders' accountability for children's and learners' outcomes.<sup>19</sup> Research suggests that governors who are united and have a clear vision that is shared by staff can contribute to improvement.<sup>20</sup>

Effective governance relies on the relationship between the chair and the headteacher, the clarity of roles, a shared vision for the provider, and regular scrutiny of performance data and setting improvement plans.<sup>21</sup> Governors need to support and challenge leaders about performance and strategic direction and get clear responses.<sup>22</sup> They need to reassure themselves that what they are told about, for example, child and learner outcomes, curriculum quality or the quality of teaching is true. However, evidence suggests that governors tend to put too much trust in the information that leaders give them, which potentially hinders their ability to hold the leaders to account.<sup>23</sup>

The quality of governance is also related to the skills of the governing board. The growing professionalisation of governance has seen a shift from a model where governors are frequently stakeholders of the setting to one in which governors are appointed according to specific skills they have that are relevant to governance, such as financial or legal expertise.<sup>24</sup> Effective governing boards regularly evaluate their current and future needs and appoint governors to fill specific skills gaps. These needs might include governors with skills in community engagement and knowledge of the school community. There are other recurring issues likely to affect the quality of governance, for example access to high-quality support and training, and

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<sup>18</sup> 'School governance', Research briefing, House of Commons Library, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> S Ranson, C Farrell, N Peim and P Smith, 'Does governance matter for school improvement?', in 'School Effectiveness and School Improvement', Volume 16, Issue 3, 2005, pages 305 to 325.

<sup>20</sup> D Muijs, 'Quality in school trusts: a comparative study in four countries', in 'Education Sciences', Volume 14, Issue 7, 2024, page 752.

<sup>21</sup> T McCrone, C Southcott and N George, 'Governance models in schools', NFER, 2011; M Balarin, S Brammer, C James and M McCormack, 'The school governance study', Business in the Community, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> 'Growing good governance: exploring the legacy of the NLG programme', National Governance Association, June 2024.

<sup>23</sup> 'Improving school governance', Ofsted, 2016; 'School governors – Acting as critical friends and the impact of governor training', Estyn, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> A Wilkins, 'Professionalizing school governance: the disciplinary effects of school autonomy and inspection on the changing role of school governors', in 'Journal of Education Policy', Volume 30, Issue 2, pages 182 to 200.

recruitment and turnover of governors, which might be affected by their workload and lack of time.<sup>25</sup>

## Staff wellbeing and workload

The evidence that effective leaders develop a productive climate is particularly strong, as highlighted in our [overview of research for the EIF](#). Recent evidence has continued to highlight that a productive climate is positively associated with many other aspects of effectiveness. These include minimising the likelihood of exclusions and bullying, reducing absenteeism, promoting children and learners' resilience and wellbeing, and improving their academic achievement.<sup>26</sup>

Effective leaders who create a supportive climate focus not just on children and learners but also on their staff. They provide support for teaching and teaching resources, protect staff from outside pressures and involve them in decision-making.<sup>27</sup> Leaders who develop supportive and trusting relationships with staff can give them a greater sense of autonomy and the capacity to make informed decisions about how they do their jobs, the pace at which they work and the order in which they do things.<sup>28</sup>

Supportive leadership and staff relationships with colleagues and children and learners are factors that influence job satisfaction and retention.<sup>29</sup> A positive culture may be particularly beneficial for encouraging staff retention in schools in more challenging contexts.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, a recent study indicated that staff support for a leadership team's strategy and vision is more important than other factors, such as pay and workload, when they are deciding whether or not to stay at a school.<sup>31</sup>

Job satisfaction is strongly associated with working conditions.<sup>32</sup> Where there is a culture of excessive workload, staff tend to report higher stress and lower job

<sup>25</sup> ['Improving school governance'](#), Ofsted, 2016; ['Taking stock of governance workload'](#), National Governance Association, 2023.

<sup>26</sup> S M Daily, M L Smith, C L Lilly, D M Davidov, M J Mann and A L Kristjansson, 'Using school climate to improve attendance and grades: understanding the importance of school satisfaction among middle and high school students', in *Journal of School Health*, Volume 90, Issue 9, 2020, pages 683 to 693; J M Aldridge, K McChesney and E Afari, 'Associations between school climate and student life satisfaction: resilience and bullying as mediating factors', in *Learning Environments Research*, Volume 23, 2019, pages 129 to 150.

<sup>27</sup> B H See, S Gorard, M Ledger, K Maude, N El Soufi and R Morris, ['Effective leadership practices and teacher wellbeing: a review of international evidence'](#), in *Impact*, Issue 20, 2024.

<sup>28</sup> E Towers, S Gewirtz, M Maguire and E Neumann, 'A profession in crisis? Teachers' responses to England's high-stakes accountability reforms in secondary education', in *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Volume 117, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> S Johnson, M Kraft and J Papay, 'How context matters in high-need schools: the effects of teachers' working conditions on their professional satisfaction and their students' achievement', in *Teachers College Record*, Volume 114, Issue 10, 2012; D Nguyen, B H See, C Brown and D Kokotsaki, ['Reviewing the evidence base on school leadership, culture, climate and structure for teacher retention'](#), Education Endowment Foundation, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> L Arthur and S Bradley, 'Teacher retention in challenging schools: please don't say goodbye!', in *Teachers and Teaching*, Volume 29, Issues 7 to 8, 2023, pages 753 to 771.

<sup>31</sup> J Jerrim, 'The link between teacher buy-in and intentions to continue working in their current school', in *British Educational Research Journal*, Volume 50, 2024, pages 1,084 to 1,105.

<sup>32</sup> A Toropova, E Myrberg and S Johansson, 'Teacher job satisfaction: the importance of school working conditions and teacher characteristics', in *Education Review*, Volume 73, Issue 1, 2021, pages 71 to 97; N

satisfaction and are less likely to stay in the sector.<sup>33</sup> Our inspection evidence on [workforce challenges](#) in early years provision describes the impact that significant staff shortages have on the emotional wellbeing of staff. When early years settings regularly have to hire temporary staff, an additional burden falls on existing staff.

Recent evidence indicates that the time spent on lesson planning and marking work are the main causes of workload stress across settings in English-speaking countries, whereas time spent teaching or attending professional learning has little negative effect on teacher stress.<sup>34</sup> This is consistent with the finding in our [overview of research for the EIF](#) that overuse of assessment can contribute to high workload. This occurs particularly when leaders and teachers misunderstand when ‘deep’ marking is necessary and when verbal feedback would be enough. Further, recent research has challenged the assumption that the use of digital data can reduce teachers’ workload. Collecting and analysing digital data to monitor and record progress and attainment can increase workload and stress.<sup>35</sup> Teachers and trainers have indicated that they can come under pressure from leaders to carry out tasks such as excessive planning and marking to comply with accountability systems and education reforms. Evidence suggests that leaders take different approaches in response to their own pressure to perform. Some protect staff from added demands, but others transfer this pressure to staff.<sup>36</sup>

Although workload has typically been viewed as the main cause of work-related stress among teachers, our report on [teacher wellbeing](#), and recent surveys of teachers, indicate that the behaviour of children and parents plays a considerable role in teachers’ overall wellbeing.<sup>37</sup> This supports prior research which showed that teachers’ job satisfaction is associated with their perceptions of the school’s disciplinary climate. Frequent classroom disruptions and misbehaviour of children and learners are linked with increased emotional exhaustion in teachers.<sup>38</sup> Children and

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Eryilmaz, A Kennedy, R Strietholt and S Johansson, ‘Teacher job satisfaction: international evidence on the role of school working conditions and teacher characteristics’, in ‘Studies in Educational Evaluation’, Volume 86, 2025; K McChesney and J Cross, ‘How school culture affects teachers’ classroom implementation of learning from professional development’, in ‘Learning Environments Research’, Volume 26, 2023, pages 785 to 801.

<sup>33</sup> S Creagh, G Thompson, N Mockler, M Stacey and A Hogan, ‘Workload, work intensification and time poverty for teachers and school leaders: a systematic research synthesis’, in ‘Educational Review’, Volume 77, Issue 2, 2025, pages 661 to 680; D McLean and J Worth, ‘[Teacher labour market in England: annual report 2025](#)’, National Foundation for Educational Research, 2025; E M Skaalvik and S Skaalvik, ‘Job satisfaction, stress and coping strategies in the teaching profession – What do teachers say?’, in ‘International Education Studies’, Volume 8, Issue 3, 2015, pages 181 to 192.

<sup>34</sup> J Jerrim and S Sims, ‘When is high workload bad for teacher wellbeing? Accounting for the non-linear contribution of specific teaching tasks’, in ‘Teaching and Teacher Education’, Volume 105, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> S Timotheou, O Miliou, Y Dimitriadis, SV Sobrino, N Giannoutsou, and others, ‘Impacts of digital technologies on education and factors influencing schools’ digital capacity and transformation: a literature review’, in ‘Education and Information Technologies’, Volume 28, Issue 6, 2023, pages to ; K Michos, Schmitz and D Petko, ‘Learning analytics in schools: is digital data use influenced by teacher-level or school-level factors?’, in ‘Journal of Learning Analytics’, 2025, pages 1 to 15.

<sup>36</sup> E Towers, S Gewirtz, M Maguire and E Neumann, ‘A profession in crisis? Teachers’ responses to England’s high-stakes accountability reforms in secondary education’, in ‘Teaching and Teacher Education’, Volume 117, 2022.

<sup>37</sup> ‘[Teacher wellbeing index 2024](#)’, Education Support, 2024.

<sup>38</sup> S Sims, ‘Modelling the relationships between teacher working conditions, job satisfaction and workplace mobility’, in ‘British Educational Research Journal’, Volume 46, Issue 2, 2020, pages 301 to 320; M A Kraft, W H Marinell and D Shen-Wei Yee, ‘School organizational contexts, teacher turnover, and student achievement:

learners' lack of motivation can also lead to disaffected behaviours, such as habitual lateness and failure to submit coursework or remain on task.<sup>39</sup>

There has also been a marked increase in the proportion of staff who say that challenging behaviour from parents is having a negative impact on their morale and mental health.<sup>40</sup> Family–school partnerships and the way parents perceive teachers affect their behaviour towards teachers.<sup>41</sup> This has implications for how teachers engage with parents and the kind of relationships they build with them. Teachers tend to be more confident with traditional ways of engaging with parents in school and may be less aware of parental engagement activities shown to be more effective.<sup>42</sup> Moving beyond traditional parent–teacher meetings towards ongoing, two-way, relationship-based engagement improves trust and strengthens parent–teacher relationships.<sup>43</sup>

## Professional learning and expertise

Providing opportunities for teacher development is an important feature of effective leadership. As our '[Overview of research for the EIF](#)' highlights, there is clear evidence that the quantity and quality of professional learning are associated with provider effectiveness and improvement.<sup>44</sup> Professional learning may also reduce teacher turnover, particularly early career teachers.<sup>45</sup>

Recent research has explored the features of high-quality professional learning and asked whether there is strong evidence for a core set of effective approaches to it. The findings suggest that professional learning should move away from a generalisable set of features, such as collaborative learning, practice-based activities and the use of external expertise, and instead focus on more contextual approaches, supported by theory-driven research.<sup>46</sup> This suggests that professional learning that takes account of teachers' prior knowledge, current needs and the context in which they

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evidence from panel data', in 'American Educational Research Journal', Volume 53, Issue 5, 2016, pages 1,411 to 1,449.

<sup>39</sup> S Wallace, 'When you're smiling: exploring how teachers motivate and engage learners in the further education sector', in 'Journal of Further & Higher Education', Volume 38, Issue 3, 2014, pages 346 to 360.

<sup>40</sup> '[Teacher wellbeing index 2024](#)', Education Support, 2024.

<sup>41</sup> L Hannon and G M O'Donnell, 'Teachers, parents, and family-school partnerships: emotions, experiences, and advocacy', in 'Journal of Education for Teaching', Volume 48, Issue 2, 2022, pages 241 to 255.

<sup>42</sup> C Jones, V Sideropoulos and O Palikara, 'Do teachers have the knowledge and skills to facilitate effective parental engagement? Findings from a national survey in England', in 'Educational Review', pages 1 to 24.

<sup>43</sup> N Axford, V Berry, J Lloyd, D Moore, M Rogers, A Hurst, K Blockley, H Durkin and J Minton, '[How can schools support parents' engagement in their children's learning? Evidence from research and practice](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> We refer to teacher professional development as professional learning in our toolkits and have done so throughout this overview.

<sup>45</sup> H Fletcher-Wood and J Zucollo, '[Evidence review: the effects of high-quality professional development on teachers and students](#)', Education Policy Institute, 2020; D Mayer, 'Situated professional learning for retention and success in early career teaching', Impact Article, Chartered College of Teaching, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> C S C Asterhan and A Lefstein, 'The search for evidence-based features of effective teacher professional development: a critical analysis of the literature', in 'Professional Development in Education', Volume 50, Issue 1, 2024, pages 11 to 23; S Sims and H Fletcher-Wood, 'Identifying the characteristics of effective teacher professional development: a critical review', in 'School Effectiveness and School Improvement: An International Journal of Research, Policy and Practice', Volume 32, Issue 1, 2020, pages 47 to 63.

work is likely to be more effective.<sup>47</sup> Research has also highlighted that more impactful professional learning needs to be designed to embed real changes to practice, rather than simply covering surface-level features.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, evidence suggests that more effective staff learning is sustained rather than consisting of one-off workshops.<sup>49</sup> Professional learning that targets specific subject content also tends to have a more positive impact on children and learners' test scores than do programmes that focus on more general aspects of teaching.<sup>50</sup>

One model has identified 4 areas for effective professional learning and the key features of each that make them effective: teacher and staff development is effective when it **builds knowledge, motivates practitioners, develops teaching and embeds practice**.<sup>51</sup> These 4 areas are also associated with effective professional learning for early years practitioners.<sup>52</sup> While the evidence suggests there is no one size fits all approach to professional learning, the principles of this model are flexible to ensure that specific aspects of effective teaching, such as scaffolding, questioning and retrieval practice, can be broken down into their base components, taught and practised to develop a high level of proficiency.

Our recent review of [teachers' professional development](#) highlighted that professional learning can take different forms and does not have to follow the more traditional model of practitioners attending an external course. Effective professional learning can consist of coaching, mentoring, sharing ideas or observing the practice of other teachers and in other settings. This is by no means an exhaustive list but indicates the breadth of opportunities available. Most professional learning for teachers at the time of our review was being provided in-house by school staff. However, we found that the quality of training varied considerably. Many teachers said that they were generally not impressed with the relevance and quality of the professional learning that they had received.<sup>53</sup> Our review also revealed other common obstacles that can prevent staff from accessing important professional learning, such as strained budgets, heavy workloads and the cost and availability of

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<sup>47</sup> R Coe, C J Rauch, S Kime and D Singleton, '[Great teaching toolkit: evidence review](#)', Evidence Based Education in partnership with Cambridge Assessment International Education, June 2020.

<sup>48</sup> S Sims, H Fletcher-Wood, A O'Mara-Eves, S Cottingham, C Stansfield, J Goodrich, J Van Herwegen and J Anders, 'Effective teacher professional development: new theory and a meta-analytic test', in 'Review of Educational Research', Volume 95, Issue 2, 2025, pages 213 to 254; L Darling-Hammond, M Hyler and M Gardner, '[Effective teacher professional development](#)', Learning Policy Institute, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> L Darling-Hammond, M Hyler and M Gardner, '[Effective teacher professional development](#)', Learning Policy Institute, 2017.

<sup>50</sup> P Cordingley, T Greany, B Crisp, S Seleznyov, M Bradbury and T Perry, 'Developing great subject teaching: rapid evidence review of subject-specific continuing professional development in the UK', Wellcome Trust, 2018; R Coe, '[The case for subject-specific CPD](#)', Institute of Physics, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> S Sims, H Fletcher-Wood, A O'Mara-Evers, S Cottingham, C Stansfield, J Van Herwegen and J Anders, '[What are the characteristics of effective teacher professional development? A systematic review and meta-analysis](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, October 2021.

<sup>52</sup> '[Guide to effective professional development in the early years](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, 2023.

<sup>53</sup> E Perry, M Boylan and J Booth, '[Quality assurance of teachers' continuing professional development: rapid evidence review](#)', Wellcome Trust and Education Endowment Foundation, 2019.

staff cover. Even when teachers have received good-quality training, they do not always have the time to embed what they have learned into practice.<sup>54</sup>

Evidence from FE colleges indicates that leaders are essential for creating and protecting time for trainers to share practice and learn from each other. They need the time and space to try out new ideas, skills and interventions and then reflect on and discuss their effectiveness. Ongoing informal subject- and course-specific discussions between staff are more valuable than single professional learning events scattered across the year. They allow staff to regularly share and reflect on their practice with colleagues.<sup>55</sup>

Our [‘Best start in life’](#) report showed that the quality of professional learning in the early years is often patchy and depends on the approach taken by individual providers and local areas. There are challenges for early years practitioners who want to access high-quality professional learning. In addition to a lack of evidence-based professional learning programmes, the need to maintain staff-to-child ratios and find cover for staff presents additional challenges to their development.<sup>56</sup> Childminders, who frequently work alone and struggle to attend courses during the working day, find it difficult to access professional learning. They have said they are at risk of being left behind, as there are few professional learning programmes designed with them in mind.<sup>57</sup> They may benefit from discussion and sharing ideas with other childminders.

## Engagement with parents, professionals and the community

There is a strong link between parents’ engagement in learning, and children and learners’ outcomes.<sup>58</sup> <sup>59</sup> Research shows that when providers build strong partnerships between parents and practitioners and encourage parents to interact with their children at home, this indirectly affects the children’s learning and development.<sup>60</sup> Parents’ engagement can help children to make up to 4 months’ additional progress in learning and behavioural outcomes in early years settings and

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<sup>54</sup> S Sims, H Fletcher-Wood, A O’Mara-Eves, S Cottingham, , C Stansfield, J Van Herwegen and J Anders, [‘Effective Professional Development’](#), Education Endowment Foundation, 2021; S Patfield, J Gore and J Harris, ‘Shifting the focus of research on effective professional development: insights from a case study of implementation’ in *‘Journal of Educational Change’*, Volume 24, 2023, pages 345 to 363.

<sup>55</sup> M O’Leary, R Smith, V Cui and F Dakka, [‘The role of leadership in prioritising and improving teaching and learning in further education’](#), Further Education Trust for Leadership, 2019.

<sup>56</sup> J Grenier, [‘How understanding high-quality professional development transforms early years education’](#), Education Endowment Foundation, 2025.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Mapping professional development and support programmes in the early years sector’, Education Endowment Foundation, May 2025.

<sup>58</sup> Mentions of parents across the overview includes carers too. We refer to parents for ease of reading.

<sup>59</sup> N Axford, V Berry, J Lloyd, D Moore, M Rogers, A Hurst, K Blockley, H Durkin and J Minton, [‘How can schools support parents’ engagement in their children’s learning? Evidence from research and practice’](#), Education Endowment Foundation, 2019; J Goodall, ‘A toolkit for parental engagement: from project to success’, in *‘School Leadership and Management’*, Volume 38, Issue 2, 2018, pages 222 to 238.

<sup>60</sup> A Otero-Mayer, A González-Benito, B Gutiérrez-de-Rozas and E Expósito-Casas, ‘Family involvement in early childhood education: a systematic review of its measurement’, in *‘Early Childhood Education Journal’*, 2025; N Axford, V Berry, J Lloyd, D Moore, M Rogers, A Hurst, K Blockley, H Durkin and J Minton, [‘How can schools support parents’ engagement in their children’s learning? Evidence from research and practice’](#), Education Endowment Foundation, 2019.

primary school.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, parents' involvement in their children's learning greatly helps children succeed, no matter their background.<sup>62</sup> Evidence also suggests that increasing parents' engagement is linked with better attendance.<sup>63</sup>

However, parental engagement is an umbrella term and covers a wide range of activities in and out of school. Recent evidence suggests it is the relationships that it builds between parents and teachers that are important.<sup>64</sup> Effective parent–provider partnerships can involve different types of engagement. Examples include two-way communication about a child's progress, parents supporting the provider through volunteering or fundraising, or the provider giving parents information about learning at home and involving them in decision-making.<sup>65</sup> These relationships create the environment in which teachers feel confident to help parents develop specific actions to support learning. However, evidence suggests that teachers tend to focus more on less effective activities, such as engaging parents with homework or increasing their involvement in meetings. Although communicating with parents and inviting them into school improve parental engagement, they do not consistently improve children's outcomes.<sup>66</sup> Successful parental engagement builds relationships and allows parents to engage directly with learning rather than more general school-based activities. These types of activities can help to enhance parents' expectations of success and develop their understanding of education and how to support their child at home, which can contribute to their child's success.

Working collaboratively with parents and establishing positive links between families and practitioners is especially important in the early years. These partnerships can enhance young children's development and improve school readiness and education outcomes.<sup>67</sup> The early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework sets out that providers must make sure that each child has a key person with whom they can build an attachment. This provides stability and consistency, and helps the child to feel secure and ready to learn.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, a child's key person is essential for building strong, trusting relationships with families and for understanding individual children's learning and development needs.

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<sup>61</sup> '[Parental engagement](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, May 2025.

<sup>62</sup> J Goodall and C Montgomery, 'Parental involvement in education: a review of research', in 'Educational Review', Volume 66, Issue 3, 2014, pages 333 to 344.

<sup>63</sup> B M McConnell and R M Kubina Jr, 'Connecting with families to improve students' school attendance: a review of the literature', in 'Preventing School Failure', Volume 58, Issue 4, 2014, pages 249 to 256; N Axford, V Berry, J Lloyd, D Moore, M Rogers, A Hurst, K Blockley, H Durkin and J Minton, '[How can schools support parents' engagement in their children's learning? Evidence from research and practice](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, 2019.

<sup>64</sup> C Jones, V Sideropoulos and O Palikara, 'Do teachers have the knowledge and skills to facilitate effective parental engagement? Findings from a national survey in England', in 'Educational Review', Online Early Article, 2025, pages 1 to 24.

<sup>65</sup> N Axford, V Berry, J Lloyd, D Moore, M Rogers, A Hurst, K Blockley, H Durkin and J Minton, '[How can schools support parents' engagement in their children's learning? Evidence from research and practice](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, 2019.

<sup>66</sup> C Jones, V Sideropoulos and O Palikara, 'Do teachers have the knowledge and skills to facilitate effective parental engagement? Findings from a national survey in', in 'Educational Review', Online Early Article, 2025, pages 1 to 24.

<sup>67</sup> A Otero-Mayer, A González-Benito, B Gutiérrez-de-Rozas and E Expósito-Casas, 'Family involvement in early childhood education: a systematic review of its measurement', in 'Early Childhood Education Journal', 2025.

<sup>68</sup> '[Attachment and the role of the key person](#)', Birth to 5 Matters, Early Years Coalition, no date.

Across all provision types, it can take time to develop good ways of working together. Teachers need to understand the challenges that families face, and address issues that might stop parents from engaging.<sup>69</sup> Barriers to effective partnerships can include social attitudes towards different groups and communication barriers like language differences or lack of access to information.<sup>70</sup> Most parents want to play an active role in their child's education, but limited time, their own experience of education, lack of confidence, and not being sure what they can offer often prevent this.<sup>71</sup>

While strategies to engage parents are important, practitioners need to be aware that there is a risk that they may increase the attainment gap if the only parents who access them are from affluent backgrounds. This highlights the importance of getting to know children and learners and their families, communicating effectively with parents and, crucially, adapting support to meet individual and contextual needs.<sup>72</sup>

## Safeguarding

Education and care providers play a vital role in keeping children and learners safe from neglect, maltreatment and harm. Statutory guidance in ['Keeping children safe in education'](#) and the [EYFS statutory framework](#) sets out the safeguarding requirements for early years provision, schools and colleges. Evidence suggests that experience of neglect and/or abuse can have long-term effects on children's social and emotional development and on their health, mental wellbeing and educational progress.<sup>73</sup>

Protecting children and learners inside and outside the home, as well as online, is everyone's responsibility. Effective leadership of safeguarding involves establishing an open culture where everyone can raise and discuss safeguarding issues, including concerns about poor safeguarding practices. Our [review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#) highlights how effective leaders create an environment where children and learners are confident to ask for help and support and where staff listen to pupils and students.

Providers need to work closely with multiple agencies and share information from several sources so they can develop an in-depth understanding of children and learners' lives and the factors associated with increased risk of neglect and abuse.

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<sup>69</sup> M Kambouri-Danos, J Liu, M Pieridou and S F Quinn, 'Exploring the partnerships between parents and practitioners in the early years', University of Reading, 2018.

<sup>70</sup> M Kambouri, T Wilson, M Pieridou, S F Quinn and J Liu, 'Making partnerships work: proposing a model to support parent-practitioner partnerships in the early years', in 'Early Childhood Education Journal', Volume 50, 2022, pages 639 to 661.

<sup>71</sup> 'The national parent survey 2024', Parentkind, 2024; N Axford, V Berry, J Lloyd, D Moore, M Rogers, A Hurst, K Blockley, H Durkin and J Minton, ['How can schools support parents' engagement in their children's learning? Evidence from research and practice'](#), Education Endowment Foundation, 2019.

<sup>72</sup> ['Working with parents to support children's learning'](#), Education Endowment Foundation, 2018; J Goodall and C Montgomery, 'Parental involvement in education: A review of research', in 'Educational Review', Volume 66, Issue 3, 2014, pages 333 to 344.

<sup>73</sup> J Wilkinson and S Bowyer, 'The impacts of abuse and neglect on children; and comparison of different placement options: evidence review', Department for Education, 2017.

Staff in settings see children and learners daily and may be the first to spot signs of neglect and/or abuse.<sup>74</sup>

Safeguarding children and learners is a shared duty. '[Working together to safeguard children](#)' highlights the importance of multi-agency working and the responsibility of education and care providers to contribute to a child- and learner-centred approach. Evidence suggests that such an approach is particularly important for children and learners with SEND.<sup>75</sup> Providers should not assume that safeguarding issues linked to behaviour and/or injuries are always related to educational or physical needs.<sup>76</sup>

## Inclusion

In high-quality inclusive practice, leaders and staff understand that children and learners have different starting points and may have changing circumstances. These factors can lead to barriers that affect their academic and personal development and their wellbeing. Leaders also have quick and effective ways of identifying children and learners with barriers to their learning and/or wellbeing. This means they can address these barriers so that high-quality teaching and, where necessary, appropriate adaptations have a positive impact on their outcomes.

Our commissioned research on [conceptualising vulnerability](#) has informed how we think about inclusion in the renewed EIF. We know that many factors contribute to vulnerability, and these may overlap and interact. These factors include poverty and prejudice, where children and learners live, their family and social relationships, and their individual characteristics, such as age, gender and special educational needs (SEN).<sup>77</sup> Vulnerability is not a static state. It can change over time, and children and learners may move in and out of being vulnerable, and experience and respond to it in many different ways.

Leaders and practitioners need to understand all the ways that children and learners experience barriers and how these intersect, so that they can provide a more inclusive learning environment that reduces these barriers to help meet individual needs.<sup>78</sup> For example, a child with an education, health and care (EHC) plan may also be a care leaver and be eligible for free school meals. Each of these identity markers may exacerbate the barriers to their learning and wellbeing. Providers should design support systems that respond to multiple needs simultaneously, such

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<sup>74</sup> 'Child protection evidence systematic review on school aged neglect', Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2022.

<sup>75</sup> 'Triennial analysis of serious case reviews (SCRs) 2022. Learning for the future: messages for education and early/family help from SCRs conducted 2017–19', Research in Practice, University of East Anglia and University of Birmingham, 2022.

<sup>76</sup> A Lazenbatt, 'The impact of abuse and neglect on the health and mental health of children and young people', NSPCC, 2010.

<sup>77</sup> '[From trait to state: how Ofsted might consider conceptualising vulnerability for inspection and regulation](#)', National Children's Bureau, 2025.

<sup>78</sup> L Outhwaite, 'Understanding early inequalities: Multiple dimensions of children's developmental contexts predict age 3 outcomes', in 'British Journal of Development Psychology', 2025.

as language support combined with mental health resources for refugee students. Interventions should address combined barriers rather than isolated ones.<sup>79</sup>

This broader understanding of inclusion also includes children and learners who do not fall into predefined SEND categories, but whose vulnerabilities mean they experience the same impact on their attendance, behaviour, resilience, motivation, attitudes to learning, and, ultimately, achievement and wellbeing as children who do.<sup>80</sup> For instance, the responsibilities of young carers can be barriers to their attendance at school. Young carers are also more likely to live in single-parent or workless households. Wider research on adolescents shows that family structure and parental employment can influence life satisfaction and wellbeing. These intersecting circumstances may, therefore, intensify the challenges that young carers experience.<sup>81</sup>

Studies have indicated that the impact of adverse circumstances on children's development accumulates over time. As a result, the attainment gap between economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged children tends to increase as children get older, especially during secondary education.<sup>82</sup> Children who are economically disadvantaged are more likely to experience a decline in wellbeing during the transition to secondary school, especially when they are moving to a school where the socio-economic status of children and learners in their year is higher than it was in their primary school.<sup>83</sup> Those who are economically disadvantaged are also more likely to engage in different types of risky behaviour and have worse health outcomes when they attend schools where other children are

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<sup>79</sup> E Bešić, 'Intersectionality: A pathway towards inclusive education?', *Prospects*, Volume 49, 2020, pages 111 to 122.

<sup>80</sup> M A Jay and L McGrath-Lone, 'Educational outcomes of children in contact with social care in England: a systematic review', in 'Systematic Reviews', Volume 8, 2019; D Berridge, N Luke, J Sebba, S Strand, M Cartwright, E Staples, L McGrath-Lone, J Ward and A O'Higgins, '[Children in need and children in care: educational attainment and progress](#)', Nuffield Foundation, 2020; M Cullen, G Lindsay, R Hastings, L Denne and C Stanford, '[Special educational needs in mainstream schools: evidence review](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, 2020; S Gorard, 'Who is eligible for free school meals? Characterising free school meals as a measure of disadvantage in England', in 'British Educational Research Journal', Volume 38, Issue 6, 2011, pages 1,003 to 1,017.

<sup>81</sup> A Letelier, A McMunn, A McGowan, B Neale and R Lacey, 'Understanding young caring in the UK pre- and post-COVID-19: prevalence, correlates, and insights from three UK longitudinal surveys', in 'Children and Youth Services Review', Volume 166, 2024; R E Lacey, A Letelier, B Xue and A McMunn, 'Changes in life satisfaction, self-esteem, and self-rated health before, during, and after becoming a young carer in the UK: a longitudinal, propensity score analysis', in 'The Lancet Regional Health – Europe', Volume 50, 2025; A Meireles, S Marques, S Faria, J C Lopes, A R Teixeira, and others, 'Being a young carer in Portugal: the impact of caring on adolescents' life satisfaction', in 'International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health', Volume 20, Issue 21, 2023; C Mariano, C Henking, D Gondek and L Bernardi, 'The effects of parental unemployment on children's wellbeing – results from Switzerland and the United Kingdom', in 'Social Science and Medicine', Volume 385, 2025.

<sup>82</sup> C Crawford, L Macmillan and A Vignoles, 'When and why do initially high-achieving poor children fall behind?', in 'Oxford Review of Education', Volume 43, Issue 1, 2017, pages 88 to 108; '[Young people's mental and emotional health: trajectories and drivers in childhood and adolescence](#)', Education Policy Institute, 2021; J Jerrim and M P Carvajal, 'What happens to bright 5-year-olds from poor backgrounds? Longitudinal evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study', in 'Research in Social Stratification and Mobility', Volume 97, June 2025.

<sup>83</sup> G Moore, R Anthony, J Hawkins, J Van Godwin, S Murphy, G Hewitt, G J Melendez-Torres, 'Socioeconomic status, mental wellbeing and transition to secondary school: analysis of the school health research network/health behaviour in school-aged children survey in Wales', in 'British Education Research Journal', Volume 46, Issue 5, 2020, pages 1,111 to 1,130.

generally more economically advantaged.<sup>84</sup> The wellbeing needs of learners in care can also peak during the transition to FE college, particularly as they navigate increased independence or leaving care. Effective ways of supporting the wellbeing of these learners include helping them to develop a sense of belonging, engaging early with carers, involving care-experienced children and learners in deciding the support they need, and improving collaboration between educational settings.<sup>85</sup>

This research suggests that providing more support for children and learners with barriers to their learning or well-being during transition between different phases of education is especially important for maintaining progress in their learning and development. However, our research on [careers guidance](#) and [preparation for adulthood](#) indicates that information-sharing between schools and colleges about economically disadvantaged children and learners, to help with continued identification and assessment of their needs, is often poor.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, our review of the [experiences of care leavers](#) found that many feel unprepared and unsupported when transitioning out of care. For many, the transition felt abrupt, as they had not developed the necessary skills for independent living. Their experiences highlight the need for earlier, more consistent support, clearer communication about the support available and their rights, and greater involvement of care leavers in decisions that affect their lives.

Even when a child or learner has an identified barrier that could impact on their learning and/or wellbeing, this does not necessarily mean that it will. Leaders, teachers and practitioners need to be cautious in their approaches to assessing them. Research has highlighted that teachers' expectations are not always based purely on a child or learner's needs but can be influenced by characteristics that may have been socially or culturally ascribed to that child or learner, and that evoke preconceptions or stereotypes.<sup>87</sup> Evidence has also shown that teachers' unconscious biases and beliefs about similarly achieving children and learners can lead to lower expectations of those from economically disadvantaged or ethnic minority backgrounds. Such biases can create self-fulfilling prophecies.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> N Shackleton, E Allen, L Bevilacqua, R Viner and C Bonell, 'Associations between socio-economic status (including school- and pupil-level interactions) and student perceptions of school environment and health in English secondary schools' in 'British Education Research Journal', Volume 44, Issue 5, 2018, pages 748 to 762.

<sup>85</sup> S MacDonald, G Hewitt, S Jones, S Rees, R Brown, R Anthony and R Evans, 'Mental wellbeing needs and support for care-experienced children and young people in secondary school and during the transition to further education college', in 'Children & Society', Volume 39, Number 4, 2025, pages 807 to 824.

<sup>86</sup> C Donaldson, G Moore and J Hawkins, 'A systematic review of school transition interventions to improve mental health and wellbeing outcomes in children and young people', in 'School Mental Health', Volume 15, Issue 1, 2023, pages 19 to 35.

<sup>87</sup> F Demie, 'Tackling teachers' low expectations of Black Caribbean students in English schools', in 'Equity in Education and Society', Volume 1, Issue 1, 2022; H-Y Sebastian Cherng, 'If they think I can: teacher bias and youth of color expectations and achievement', in 'Social Science Research', Volume 66, 2017, pages 170 to 186.

<sup>88</sup> L Doyle, M Easterbrook and P Harris, 'Roles of socioeconomic status, ethnicity and teacher beliefs in academic grading' in 'British Journal of Educational Psychology', Volume 93, issue 1, 2023, pages 91 to 112; D Muijs, L Kyriakides, G van der Werf, B Creemers, H Timperley and L Earl, 'State of the art – teacher effectiveness and professional learning', in 'School Effectiveness and School Improvement', Volume 25, Issue 2, 2014, pages 231 to 256.

Investing in the early years can reduce later inequalities.<sup>89</sup> Early education helps children to develop essential habits for learning, their language and communication, personal, social and emotional skills, physical development, greater confidence and more independence. Our '[Best start in life](#)' research indicates that practitioners who know children's starting points, and have high expectations for all children is associated with effective practice and curriculum planning in the early years.

High-quality interactions between practitioners and children are central to effective early years education and are especially beneficial for children who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are known to children's social care or have SEND.<sup>90</sup> However, the latest figures from the Department for Education (DfE) indicate that parents of economically disadvantaged children are less likely to take up their full entitlement to funded early years provision than their more economically advantaged peers.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, although it is well recognised that high-quality early years provision relies on the knowledge, expertise and skills of early childhood leaders and practitioners, the lack of professional learning and training in supporting early years children with SEND is a barrier to ensuring inclusion.<sup>92</sup>

Evidence suggests that a sense of belonging is strongly associated with wellbeing and mental health outcomes. Belonging includes feeling welcomed, accepted, included and supported by others in a social environment.<sup>93</sup> Although a direct link between belonging and academic achievement is not well evidenced, there is evidence to show how belonging can indirectly affect attainment through its impact on other things that have been shown to affect attainment, such as attendance, motivation, and social and emotional learning.

Having a sense of belonging can shape children and learners' social, emotional and mental health.<sup>94</sup> For children and learners with learning difficulties, a sense of belonging has been shown to provide the space for improved social relations, leading to increased peer interactions and the development of friendships. This can lead to

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<sup>89</sup> R Schmutz, 'Is universal early childhood education and care an equalizer? A systematic review and meta-analysis of evidence', in 'Research in Social Stratification and Mobility', Volume 89, 2024.

<sup>90</sup> G Garon-Carrier, C Mavungu-Blouin, M J Letarte, J Gobeil-Bourdeau and C Fitzpatrick, 'School readiness among vulnerable children: a systematic review of studies using a person-centered approach', in 'Psychology: Research & Review', Volume 37, 2024.

<sup>91</sup> '[Funded early education and childcare](#)', Department for Education, July 2025.

<sup>92</sup> E Soukakou, C Dionne and O Palikara, '[Promoting quality inclusion in early childhood care and education: inclusive practices for each and every child](#)', UNESCO: World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, 2024.

<sup>93</sup> K A Allen, C D Slaten, G Arslan, S Roffey, H Craig and D Vella-Brodrick, 'School belonging: the importance of student and teacher relationships', in M L Kern and M L Wehmeyer (Eds), 'The Palgrave handbook of positive education', Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pages 525 to 550; P J Kuttner, 'The right to belong in school: a critical, transdisciplinary conceptualization of school belonging', in 'AERA Open', Volume 9, 2023; P K Smith and C Culbert, 'School belonging: a literature review', National Children's Bureau, March 2024.

<sup>94</sup> P K Smith and C Culbert, 'School belonging: a literature review', National Children's Bureau, 2024; H Korpershoek, E T Canrinus, M Fokkens-Bruinsma and H de Boer, 'The relationships between school belonging and students' motivational, social-emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes in secondary education: a meta-analytic review' in 'Research Papers in Education', Volume 35, Issue 6, 2020, pages 641 to 680.

improved social and communication skills.<sup>95</sup> A sense of belonging has also been shown to help economically disadvantaged children and learners develop resilience and to improve the mental wellbeing of those who are looked after.<sup>96</sup>

Relationships with teachers and peers and parental involvement have been linked with creating a sense of belonging.<sup>97</sup> Studies have shown that positive teacher–student relationships help to create a sense of belonging, and that this is associated with improved engagement, motivation and academic self-efficacy (that is, the student’s belief that they can successfully perform academic tasks) and academic attainment. It has also been linked with reduced absenteeism, risk-taking behaviour and mental health issues.<sup>98</sup> Supportive friendships have been shown to help mitigate the effects of negative peer issues like bullying.<sup>99</sup>

Children and learners can actively increase their sense of belonging by joining clubs and participating in activities within their school community. Regardless of age, parents significantly affect how children and learners feel towards their school. Several studies have shown a link between support from parents and a sense of belonging at school.<sup>100</sup> In particular, when parents support and encourage their child’s education, this can help the child to feel connected to their school community.<sup>101</sup> Another important factor is the school working with parents to help them access external support services.<sup>102</sup> In this way, positive relationships with teachers, peers and parents can help to improve access to education for children and learners who are economically disadvantaged, have SEND, are known to children’s social care or may face other barriers to learning and/or wellbeing.

Our ‘[Best start in life](#)’ report highlights that younger children develop a sense of belonging through familiarity with adults, the physical environment, and having and understanding routines. Additionally, young children have described ‘belonging’ in terms of feeling happy, safe, included and cared for, which are feelings often rooted in predictable routines, positive interactions and opportunities for shared play and

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<sup>95</sup> E Dimitrellou and J Hurry, ‘School belonging among young adolescents with SEMH and MLD; the link with their social relations and school inclusivity’, in ‘European Journal of Special Educational Needs’, Volume 34, Issue 3, 2019, pages 312 to 326.

<sup>96</sup> A Cohman, D Golm and C Sargeant, ‘The association between school belonging and wellbeing in looked after adolescents: a pilot study’, in ‘Adoption & Fostering’, Volume 48, Issue 3 to 4, 2024, pages 371 to 397; Z Li and Q Li, ‘How social support affects resilience in disadvantaged students: the chain-mediating roles of school belonging and emotional experience’, in ‘Behavioral Sciences’, Volume 14, Issue 2, 2024, pages 114.

<sup>97</sup> P K Smith and C Culbert, ‘School belonging: a literature review’, National Children’s Bureau, 2024.

<sup>98</sup> J Ingram, J Stiff, S Cadwallader, G Lee and H Kayton, ‘PISA 2022: national report for England’, Department for Education, 2023; G Di Lisio, A Milá Roa, A Halty, A Berástegui, A Couso Losada, and others, ‘Nurturing bonds that empower learning: a systematic review of the significance of teacher-student relationship in education’, in ‘Frontiers in Education’, Volume 10, 2025; Education Review Office, ‘[Back to class: how are attitudes to attendance changing?](#)’, Education Review Office, 2025.

<sup>99</sup> K Osterman, ‘Students’ need for belonging in the school community’, in ‘Review of Educational Research’, Volume 70, Issue 3, 2000, pages 322 to 367.

<sup>100</sup> P K Smith and C Culbert, ‘School belonging: a literature review’, National Children’s Bureau, March 2024.

<sup>101</sup> K Allen, M Kern, D Vella-Brodrick, L Hattie, J. and Waters. ‘What schools need to know about fostering school belonging: A meta-analysis’, in ‘Educational Psychology Review’, Volume 301, Issue 1, 2010, pages 1 to 34.

<sup>102</sup> T Greany, J Pennacchia, J Graham and E Bernardes, ‘Belonging schools’, Teach First, February 2024.

friendship.<sup>103</sup> Wider literature on early years emphasises that belonging is multi-layered and can be influenced by the ways in which children's identities, differences and perspectives are recognised and responded to within the setting. It involves peer cultures, place-based familiarity and the ways in which adults either support or limit children's experiences of inclusion.<sup>104</sup>

Evidence suggests that developing a sense of belonging may be harder to achieve for children experiencing barriers to their learning and/or wellbeing. For instance, Children in Need have reported experiencing poor support in the classroom when struggling with the curriculum compared to their peers. Looked-after children have described school as a hostile environment where they are not listened to, cared for or respected.<sup>105</sup>

Concerns about inclusion being treated as integration have been raised in studies drawing on parent and teacher perspectives and, in some cases, child/peer measures and observation.<sup>106</sup> Integration puts learners together without fully considering adaptations; inclusive settings adapt to the needs of all learners. When inclusion relies on integration into mainstream settings without the necessary adaptations being made, outcomes for children and learners tend to be weaker.<sup>107</sup> Conversely, in schools with better inclusive practice, the achievement of all children and learners is less likely to be affected or improves slightly. Additionally, in more inclusive settings, there is greater acceptance of and less prejudice towards SEND children and learners by their peers.<sup>108</sup>

Recent research has identified that, in some providers, responsibility for meeting children's SEND needs can become overly concentrated in the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) role, which may reduce shared ownership across staff. These patterns are linked to practical constraints such as time pressures, limited

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<sup>103</sup> K Allen, E Berger, L McLean, E Leif, W Warton, D Tuck, M Hammer and M Flear, 'Belonging in their words: exploring early childhood perspectives using draw, write, tell method', in 'Australian Journal of Psychology', Volume 88, Issue 1, 2025.

<sup>104</sup> E J Erwin, 'The study of belonging in early childhood education: complexities and possibilities', in 'International Journal of Early Years Education', Volume 32, Issue 3, 2022, pages 1 to 15.

<sup>105</sup> E P Melkman, 'Out-of-school suspension among young persons in care: The need to respond to attachment needs and provide a secure base that promotes learning', in 'British Educational Research Journal', Volume 50 Number 2, 2024, pages 563 to 579; D Berridge, J Sebba, M Cartwright and E Staples, 'School experiences of Children in Need: Learning and support', in 'British Educational Research Journal', Volume 47, Issue 6, 2021, pages 1700 to 1716.

<sup>106</sup> G de Graaf, G van Hove and M Haveman, 'Effects of regular versus special school placement on students with Down syndrome: a systematic review of studies', in 'New Developments in Down Syndrome Research, 2012, pages 45 to 86.

<sup>107</sup> S Dell'Anna, M Pellegrini, D Ianes, and G Vivane, 'Learning, social and psychological outcomes of students with moderate, severe and complex disabilities in inclusive education: a systematic review', in 'International Journal of Disability, Development and Education', Volume 69, Issue 6, 2022, pages 2025 to 2041.

<sup>108</sup> G Szumski, J Smogorzewska, and M Karwowski, 'Academic achievement of students without special educational needs in inclusive classrooms: a meta-analysis', in 'Educational Research Review', Volume 21, 2017, pages 33 to 54; A Kart and M Kart, 'Academic and social effects of inclusion on students without disabilities: A review of the literature', in 'Education Sciences', Volume 11, Issue 1, 2021.

training and lack of clarity about roles.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, inclusion can be experienced as competing with accountability and attainment priorities, which can create tensions when trying to sustain adaptive inclusive practice and support pupils' day-to-day participation and belonging.<sup>110</sup>

## Curriculum and teaching

### Strategic leadership of curriculum and teaching

Leaders are accountable for the quality of the curriculum and teaching. Recent evidence suggests there is a link between leaders who focus on quality-assuring teaching in their institutions – ensuring there are clear policies on teaching and taking action to improve teaching quality – and improved outcomes for children and learners.<sup>111</sup> This builds on earlier work that identified the characteristics of effective leadership in teaching, including rigorous monitoring and evaluation of teaching.<sup>112</sup>

However, a one-size-fits-all approach to quality assurance may not always achieve the desired results across all settings. For instance, the findings of research on developmental classroom observation have varied. One recent study highlighted improved learning outcomes of children when secondary school teachers observe their peers for training and development purposes. This was the case for children taught by both the observed teacher and observee, and was shown to be particularly useful for improving the quality of low-performing teachers.<sup>113</sup> Another study identified that a specific method of peer review ('lesson study') resulted in positive outcomes in children's test scores in large primary schools but had negative effects in small primary schools.<sup>114</sup> The authors attributed this to greater staffing capacity in larger schools, which allowed for stronger teacher matching. A further study found that lesson study made no improvements to children's maths and reading attainment at key stage 2.<sup>115</sup> This suggests the provider's context may need to be taken into consideration when using certain forms of quality assurance.

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<sup>109</sup> M D Smith and K E Broomhead, 'Time, expertise and status: barriers faced by mainstream primary school SENCos in the pursuit of providing effective provision for children with SEND', in 'Support for Learning', Volume 3, Issue 1, 2019, pages 54 to 70; '[Special educational needs in mainstream schools](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, 2025.

<sup>110</sup> Z Williams-Brown and A Hodkinson, 'What is considered good for everyone may not be good for children with special educational needs and disabilities: teachers' perspectives on inclusion in England', in 'International Journal of Primary, Elementary & Early Years Education', Volume 49, Issue 6, 2021, pages 688 to 702;

<sup>111</sup> R Bernhard, T McDermott, C Hasenhüttl, Katharine B and P Sammons, 'A focus on quality of teaching in schools increases students' progress of attainment: evidence from English secondary schools', in 'School Effectiveness and School Improvement', Early Access, October 2024.

<sup>112</sup> J Ko, P Sammons and L Bakkum, 'Effective teaching: a review of research and evidence', CfBT Education Trust, 2013.

<sup>113</sup> S Burgess, S Rawal, and E S Taylor, 'Teacher peer observation and student test scores: evidence from a field experiment in English secondary schools', in 'Journal of Labor Economics', Volume 39, Issue 4, 2021, pages 1155 to 1186; R Bernhard, T McDermott, C Hasenhüttl, Katharine B and P Sammons, 'A focus on quality of teaching in schools increases students' progress of attainment: evidence from English secondary schools', in 'School Effectiveness and School Improvement', Early Access, October 2024.

<sup>114</sup> R Murphy, F Weinhardt and G Wyness, 'Who teaches the teachers? An RCT of peer-to-peer observation and feedback in 181 schools', in 'Economics of Education Review', Volume 82, 2021.

<sup>115</sup> '[Lesson study trial](#)', Education Endowment Fund, 2017.

Leaders also have responsibility for managing staff and resources to effect positive outcomes for children and learners. Children and learners experiencing high teacher turnover tend to do less well in their end-of-year exams.<sup>116</sup> However, the recruitment and retention of staff remain a challenge in the early years, schools and FE and skills sectors, with different issues with staffing affecting different sectors. Issues such as low wages, high turnover rates, low levels of staff wellbeing, lack of professional learning and staff not having the right qualifications can make it difficult for early years providers to offer high-quality care and education for children.<sup>117</sup> Likewise, factors such as workload pressures, stagnating wages, limited professional learning opportunities and unclear career progression pathways are causing similar problems for the quality of education and institutional stability in the FE and skills sector.<sup>118</sup> Our '[Preparation for adulthood](#)' thematic review also refers to issues with the availability of specialist support staff.

Retention of practitioners, teaching and training staff is typically more challenging for providers in disadvantaged communities than for providers in neighbouring, more advantaged communities.<sup>119</sup> This means that disadvantaged children and learners are more likely to be taught by unqualified, inexperienced or out-of-subject practitioners and teachers.<sup>120</sup> One consequence of shortages in teaching staff in schools is that some leaders are having to use teaching assistants to deliver lessons, in the absence of qualified teachers.<sup>121</sup> This is despite evidence indicating that teaching assistants require highly structured programmes and high-quality support and training to have a positive effect on the outcomes of children and learners.<sup>122</sup>

The impact of staff changes, however, is not necessarily related to teachers' (in)experience. Teacher turnover damages the professional networks and relationships that teachers rely on for support and collective knowledge about the provider and the context of the children and learners on roll. This can disrupt teaching, impeding the school's efforts to improve.<sup>123</sup> Several studies discuss

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<sup>116</sup> S Gibbons, V Scrutinio and S Telhaj, 'Teacher turnover: effects, mechanisms and organisational responses', in 'Labour Economics', Volume 73, 2021; M Ronfeldt, S Loeb and J Wyckoff, 'How teacher turnover harms student achievement', in 'American Educational Research Journal', Volume 50, Issue 1, 2013, pages 4 to 36.

<sup>117</sup> 'Breaking point: the impact of recruitment and retention challenges on the early years sector in England', Early Years Alliance, December 2021; 'Maintaining quality early years provision in the face of workforce challenges', Ofsted blog, May 2024.

<sup>118</sup> G Husband and V Smith, 'Teacher recruitment and retention challenges in the further education and skills sector: lessons and solutions from international perspectives', in 'Education and Training', Volume 66, 2024, pages 465 to 476.

<sup>119</sup> R Allen, E Mian and S Freedman, '[Social inequalities in access to teachers](#)', Social Market Foundation, April 2016.

<sup>120</sup> R Allen and S Sims, 'Do pupils from low-income families get low-quality teachers? Indirect evidence from English schools', in 'Oxford Review of Education', Volume 44, Issue 4, 2018, pages 441 to 458.

<sup>121</sup> R Webster, 'Teaching on the cheap? The extent and impact of teaching assistants covering classes and leading lessons', in 'British Educational Research Journal', Early Access, June 2024.

<sup>122</sup> '[Deployment of teaching assistants](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, March 2025; J Dietrichson, M Bøg, T Filges and A M Klint Jørgensen, 'Academic interventions for elementary and middle school students with low socioeconomic status: a systematic review and meta-analysis', in 'Review of Educational Research', Volume 87, Issue 2, 2017, pages 243 to 282.

<sup>123</sup> J Holme, H Jabbar, K Trautmann and J Rodriguez, 'How teacher turnover disrupts school improvement efforts', University of Texas Policy Brief, 2024; S Gibbons, V Scrutinio and S Telhaj, 'Teacher turnover: effects, mechanisms and organisational responses', in 'Labour Economics', Volume 73, 2021.

responses to staff turnover that reduce the negative effect on students' achievement. A culture of support for professional learning is vital for inexperienced practitioners and teachers. Support mechanisms linked with lower staff turnover include high-quality subject-specific mentoring, supportive networks of colleagues and provision of the necessary instructional materials and resources for teachers to do their job.<sup>124</sup> It is worth noting, however, that teacher turnover can sometimes lead to improvement in children and learners' achievement. This happens when leaders are able to replace less effective teachers with those who are more effective.<sup>125</sup>

High-quality learning for the youngest children is linked to practitioners' perceptions of themselves as educators rather than carers. However, our '[Getting it right from the start](#)' research, carried out with providers who work with children under 2 years old, shows that they tend to see their role as one of care rather than education. This misconception can act as a barrier to high-quality provision that focuses on laying the foundations for future learning and development.

## Securing strong foundations for all children and learners

The foundational knowledge and skills that children acquire by the end of key stage 1 underpin learning at all stages of education. As our '[Overview of research for the EIF](#)' and recent '[Best start in life](#)' report highlight, early deficits can persist throughout primary education. Children who lag behind in reading during pre-school will typically continue to do so for the rest of their schooling. Without strong foundations in spoken language, reading, writing and mathematics – which predict later outcomes – children will struggle to access the wider provider and subject curriculum.<sup>126</sup>

Importantly, evidence has shown that children who attend pre-school provision of any kind have better attainment in language, pre-reading and early number concepts and typically attain higher total GCSE scores than those who do not. Additionally, the higher the quality of the pre-school provision, the higher the GCSE scores.<sup>127</sup> Conversely, the children most at risk of persistent academic and social difficulties during compulsory education tend not to have attended pre-school and are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>128</sup> In order to prevent

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<sup>124</sup> R Allen, E Mian and S Freedman, '[Social inequalities in access to teachers](#)', Social Market Foundation, April 2016.

<sup>125</sup> M Adnot, T Dee, V Katz and J Wyckoff, 'Teacher turnover, teacher quality, and student achievement in DCPS', in 'Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis', Volume 39, Issue 1, 2017, pages 54 to 76.

<sup>126</sup> '[Strong foundations in the first years of school](#)', Ofsted, October 2024; J Hodgen, N Barclay, C Foster, C Gilmore, R Marks and V Simms, '[Early years and key stage 1 mathematics teaching: evidence review](#)', Education Endowment Fund, November 2020; '[Research review series: mathematics](#)', Ofsted, May 2021; H Breadmore, E Vardy, A Cunningham, R K W Kwok and J M Carroll, '[Literacy development: evidence review](#)', Education Endowment Fund, July 2019; '[Research review series: English](#)', Ofsted, May 2022.

<sup>127</sup> B Taggart, K Sylva, E Mulhish, P Sammons and I Siraj, 'Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education project (EPPSE 3-16+). How pre-school influences children and young people's attainment and development outcomes over time. Research brief', June 2015.

<sup>128</sup> G Garon-Carrier, C Mavungu-Blouin, M J Letarte, J Gobeil-Bourdeau and C Fitzpatrick, 'School readiness among vulnerable children: a systematic review of studies using a person-centered approach', in 'Psychology: Research & Review, Volume 37, 2024.

increasing inequality, it is important to develop curriculums that take into account the context and prior experience of learners, and any gaps in their knowledge when they transition from pre-school to Reception Year.

Developing foundational knowledge across the [EYFS seven areas of learning](#) is particularly important as it enables children to make sense of their experiences and prepares them for formal schooling. For instance, early mathematical concepts like number sense and spatial awareness are foundational for later problem-solving skills; vocabulary acquisition is strongly linked to future attainment; and physical development underpins children's ability to engage with learning environments. It is essential that curriculum planning for children's communication and language progression is done carefully and deliberately to take account of all the areas of learning.<sup>129</sup> Foundational knowledge is not merely learning about isolated facts but about building coherent understanding through meaningful experiences.

Securing the core knowledge for reading and numeracy should also be a concern in secondary schools and FE providers. [DfE statistics](#) indicate that one in 4 children leave primary school without reaching the expected standard in reading. Our report on [struggling readers](#) highlights that older struggling readers often have gaps in specific aspects of their foundational reading knowledge that have not been identified before secondary school. Assessments of reading ages can show whether a child or learner has a problem with reading, but they do not identify what that problem might be.<sup>130</sup> Diagnostic assessments of individual reading components can identify specific areas of difficulty (for example, accurate word reading, reading with fluency or comprehension) and plan actions to address specific needs, so that children and learners can access the wider curriculum.

## School and subject curriculum

Since the publication of our '[Overview of research for the EIF](#)', there has been a strong consensus that the curriculum matters in all phases and types of education. Our '[Best start in life](#)' research highlights that what matters most is that leaders and practitioners have considered what knowledge is taught, for what purpose, the order in which it is taught, and the methods that are most effective for teaching different aspects of the curriculum. An effective subject curriculum is more than just a list of topics and content to learn. It represents a structured body of knowledge that is selective, purposeful and designed with end goals for children and learners in mind.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> '[Best start in life part 2: the 3 prime areas of learning](#)', Ofsted, September 2023.

<sup>130</sup> S Higgins, M Katsipataki and R Coleman, 'Interim evidence brief reading at the transition', Education Endowment Foundation, June 2014.

<sup>131</sup> Z Deng, 'Powerful knowledge, educational potential and knowledge-rich curriculum: pushing the boundaries', in '[Journal of Curriculum Studies](#)', Volume 54, Issue 5, 2022, pages 599 to 617; E Lonsdale, R Lind, T Marslen and K Griffiths, 'A knowledge-rich approach to curriculum design', Australian Education Research Organisation, May 2024.

Current conceptions of quality suggest that effective curriculum design is subject-specific and governed by several overarching principles: **selection, coherence, careful sequencing and disciplinary specificity**.<sup>132</sup> Ensuring that children and learners do not exceed the capacity of their working memory (**cognitive load**) is also an important consideration for curriculum development. This ensures that what teachers are asking children and learners to learn is appropriate at a particular stage of learning a topic or concept.<sup>133</sup> These principles are reflected throughout our [curriculum reviews](#). Our reviews emphasise deep understanding, clear and structured progression of subject-specific knowledge and cumulative learning as features of strong curriculums. Important in these concepts is an understanding that:

- knowledge is not simply the accumulation of facts
- progression builds on the prior knowledge of children and learners
- knowledge and skills are interlinked
- subjects have their own disciplinary traditions

High-quality curriculums need to include different types of knowledge that help learners to develop the ability to think critically and reason within specific disciplines. Teaching then needs to provide opportunities for learners to apply this knowledge to real-world situations.<sup>134</sup> Our [‘Educational effectiveness research and FE and skills’](#) report highlights that work-based learning providers often emphasise the importance of simulating real-world environments, so that learners can practise the problem-solving techniques they need at work. This assumes that learners have acquired the knowledge needed to problem-solve effectively. However, despite their age, some will still be novices in the courses they are studying. This reinforces how vital it is that curriculums take account of learners’ starting points and are designed so that theoretical knowledge is presented as a logical sequencing of subject-specific concepts (conceptual knowledge), content (substantive knowledge) and skills (procedural knowledge), which helps learners develop the ability to think as a subject expert (disciplinary knowledge).

The lack of access to disciplinary knowledge can be seen as disempowering, particularly for children and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Without access, learners can struggle to participate meaningfully in their professional fields because they lack the ability to think abstractly and conceptually about them.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> E Lonsdale, R Lind, T Marslen and K Griffiths, ‘A knowledge-rich approach to curriculum design’, Australian Education Research Organisation, May 2024.

<sup>133</sup> D Muijs, [‘Developing the education inspection framework: how we used cognitive load theory’](#), Ofsted, 2019.

<sup>134</sup> M Young and J Muller, ‘Curriculum and the specialization of knowledge’, in ‘Studies in Philosophy and Education’, Volume 32, Issue 2, 2013, pages 165 to 183; X Lv, J Zhou and X Ren, ‘The bidirectional relationship between critical thinking and academic achievement is independent of general cognitive ability: a three-year longitudinal study on elementary school children’, in ‘Learning and Individual Differences’, Volume 120, 2025; C Winch, ‘Curriculum design and epistemic ascent’, in ‘Journal of Philosophy of Education’, Volume 47, Issue 1, 2013, pages 128 to 146; J Hordern and M T Tatto, ‘Conceptions of teaching and educational knowledge requirements’ in ‘Oxford Review of Education’, Volume 44, Issue 6, 2018, pages 686 to 701.

<sup>135</sup> D Mitchell and A Stones, ‘Disciplinary knowledge for what ends? Values dimension of curriculum research in the anthropocene’, in ‘London Review of Education’, Volume 20, Issue 1, 2022; D Talbot, ‘From powerful

Furthermore, the importance of procedural knowledge for more practical subjects and vocational education should not be understated. For instance, our subject review of [business education](#) highlights the importance of aligning the theories learners acquire with knowledge about how to apply them.

## Teaching

A thoughtfully planned curriculum on its own will not improve the outcomes of children and learners. High-quality teaching of the curriculum plays a fundamental role in ensuring that children and learners secure the knowledge and skills they will need to progress in their education. Effective teaching takes account of children's and learners' starting points and what they already know, understand and can do. This information is used to plan what they need to learn next.

Our '[Best start in life](#)' series and research on '[Getting it right from the start](#)' emphasise the importance of communication and language for young children's development. Early interactions are crucial for children to develop language, and the quality and quantity of interactions are equally important, particularly for those who do not have a home environment where language is rich. High-quality interactions are a guiding principle for early years staff. They are essential for encouraging back-and-forth conversations, learning new vocabulary and providing the structured support ('scaffolding') necessary for children's thinking and development.<sup>136</sup> However, as our research with [children aged under 2](#) shows, high-quality interactions are dependent on the experience and qualifications of practitioners and their understanding of child development.

Evidence suggests that the most effective early years teaching methods and practice combine short, targeted episodes of explicit instruction with guided play opportunities that allow children to explore, apply and extend new knowledge in meaningful, engaging contexts.<sup>137</sup> As highlighted in our '[Best start in life](#)' research, practitioners can extend learning through skilful interventions in play, based on their understanding of what children already know and can do and what they need to know next. In guided play, scaffolding allows children to remain active agents in their learning while receiving targeted input that aligns with developmental goals.<sup>138</sup> This balance reflects the integration of children absorbing concepts through

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knowledge to capabilities: social realism, social justice, and the capabilities approach', in 'Journal of Philosophy of Education', Volume 59, Issue 2, 2025, pages 219 to 239. L Wheelahan, 'Not just skills: what a focus on knowledge means for vocational education', in 'Journal of Curriculum Studies', Volume 47, Issue 6, 2015.

<sup>136</sup> '[Improving early education through high-quality interactions](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, October 2024.

<sup>137</sup> K Skene, C M O'Farrelly, E M Byrne, N Kirby, E C Stevens and P G Ramchandani, 'Can guidance during play enhance children's learning and development in educational contexts? A systematic review and meta-analysis', in 'Child Development', Volume 93, Issue 4, 2022, pages 1,162 to 1,180; E G Merritt, M R Blanchard and S H Eason, 'Preschool children's science learning: instructional approaches and individual differences', in 'Frontiers in Education', Volume 9, 2024; M Lundvin and H Palmér, 'A play-responsive approach to teaching mathematics in preschool, with a focus on representations', in 'Education Sciences', Volume 15, Issue 8, 2023.

<sup>138</sup> R Parker, B S Thomsen and A Berry, 'Learning through play at school – A framework for policy and practice', in 'Frontiers in Education', Volume 7, 2022.

exploration and adults intentionally introducing specific ideas or skills.<sup>139</sup> Evidence shows that when these approaches are combined, children experience gains in literacy, numeracy, problem-solving and self-regulation.<sup>140</sup>

Our '[Overview of research for the EIF](#)' highlights that effective teaching is the single most important school factor that influences individual children's performance. A recent review of research reports has since established a model of effective teaching that incorporates features from our overview and extends it into 4 core stages of effective teaching: **understanding the content, creating a supportive environment, maximising the opportunity to learn and activating hard thinking**.<sup>141</sup> This model includes 17 indicators that represent key elements of effective teaching that have shown the greatest impact on children's learning. However, defining the characteristics of effective teaching remains a challenge for researchers, and this model identifies what are currently thought to be the most credible mechanisms of effective teaching.

Another recent model of effective teaching has drawn on insights from cognitive psychology. This highlights that subject-specific learning is related to teachers' skills in perceiving and interpreting learning in the classroom and making decisions about appropriate teaching strategies for different subjects.<sup>142</sup> Knowing the content of the curriculum is not enough; teachers also need to know how well pupils are learning it and adapt their teaching strategies in response. This is based on Shulman's idea of 'pedagogical content knowledge' (PCK), which refers to teachers' needing knowledge of effective teaching strategies and subject knowledge so that they can teach topics in ways that children and learners will understand.<sup>143</sup>

The evidence base for effective teaching in FE and skills providers is less secure than that for practitioners in early years and teachers in schools. However, our inspection evidence indicates that effective teaching in FE shares many of the core characteristics of high-quality teaching in schools. This also takes account of the vocational and experiential aspects of some provider types:

- choosing methods that focus learners' attention on the content, reducing unnecessary distractions
- making sure that learners have plenty of time to master conceptual knowledge and have plenty of varied opportunities to apply that knowledge

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<sup>139</sup> D S Weisberg, K Hirsh-Pasek and R M Golinkoff, 'Guided play: where curricular goals meet a playful pedagogy', in 'Mind, Brain and Education', Volume 7, Issue 2, 2013, pages 104 to 112.

<sup>140</sup> K Skene, C M O'Farrelly, E M Byrne, N Kirby, E C Stevens and P G Ramchandani, 'Can guidance during play enhance children's learning and development in educational contexts? A systematic review and meta-analysis', in 'Child Development', Volume 93, Issue 4, 2022, pages 1,162 to 1,180.

<sup>141</sup> R Coe, C J Rauch, S Kime and D Singleton, '[Great teaching toolkit: evidence review](#)', Evidence Based Education in partnership with Cambridge Assessment International Education, June 2020.

<sup>142</sup> S Blömeke, A Jentsch, N Ross, G Kaiser and J König, 'Opening up the black box: teacher competence, instructional quality, and students' learning progress', in 'Learning and Instruction', Volume 79, June 2022.

<sup>143</sup> L Shulman, 'Those who understand: knowledge growth in teaching', in 'Educational Researcher', Volume 15, Issue 2, 1986, pages 4 to 14; S de Almeida and J Viana, 'Teachers as curriculum designers: what knowledge is needed?', in 'The Curriculum Journal', Volume 34, Issue 3, 2022, pages 357 to 374.

- using clear explanations and demonstrations along with activities that encourage rehearsal, recall and application
- checking that learners have securely learned the information they need, so that they can remember it over time, not just for the next task or test<sup>144</sup>

Research also highlights that important differences in teaching in FE are shaped by learner diversity and vocational pathways.<sup>145</sup> High-quality teaching in vocational subjects integrates practical, authentic tasks and models expert thinking in ways that can differ from teaching in schools. There is an added layer of complexity because of the need to apply disciplinary knowledge to work-based learning and classroom learning.

Several studies have highlighted that no one single teaching method is best for all teachers, children and learners, topics and educational contexts.<sup>146</sup> For example, collaborative group work can be more effective than individual learning for complex tasks, because the mental effort (or 'cognitive load') can be shared across the group.<sup>147</sup> However, while potentially highly effective, collaborative group work can also be hard to carry out well. Children and learners need to learn and practise how to work together first with support.<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, evidence has shown that using methods that are associated with positive learning outcomes – like scaffolding, reviewing material at increasing intervals ('spacing'), encouraging the recall of previously learned material ('retrieval practice') and combining related topics in one lesson ('interleaving') – in every teaching situation or too often can lead to variation in their efficacy.<sup>149</sup> For instance, interleaving requires children and learners to have developed some expertise; otherwise, interleaving complex material before the basics have been mastered can hinder their progress. Recent research has also highlighted that teachers should consider not only what to teach, but how children and learners are likely to learn the content.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> 'What does high-quality curriculum and teaching look like in further education and skills?', Ofsted, 2023.

<sup>145</sup> B Lucas, E Spencer and G Claxton, 'How to teach vocational education: A theory of vocational pedagogy' City & Guilds, 2012; 'Teaching, leadership and governance in further education' Department for Education, 2018.

<sup>146</sup> S L Chew and W J Cerbin, 'The cognitive challenges of effective teaching', in 'The Journal of Economic Education', Volume 52, Issue 1, 2021, pages 17 to 40; S Burgess, S Rawal, and E S Taylor, 'Teacher peer observation and student test scores: evidence from a field experiment in English secondary schools', in 'Journal of Labor Economics', Volume 39, Issue 4, 2021, pages 1,155 to 1,186; T de Yong, A W Lazonder, C A Chinn, F Fischer, J Gobert, C E Hmelo-Silver, K R Koedinger, J S. Krajcik, E A Kyza, M C Linn, M Pedaste, K Scheiter and Z C Zacharia, 'Beyond inquiry or direct instruction: pressing issues for designing impactful science learning opportunities', in 'Educational Research Review', Volume 44, 2024.

<sup>147</sup> F Kirschner, F Paas and P A Kirschner, 'A cognitive load approach to collaborative learning: united brains for complex tasks', in 'Educational Psychology Review', Volume 21, 2009, pages 31 to 42.

<sup>148</sup> E Baines, P Blatchford and R Webster, 'The challenges of implementing group work in primary school classrooms and including pupils with special educational needs', in 'Education 3–13', Volume 43, Issue 1, 2015, pages 15 to 29; Education Endowment Foundation, [Teaching and Learning Toolkit](#).

<sup>149</sup> J Van de Pol, M Volman, F Oort, and J Beishuizen, 'The effects of scaffolding in the classroom: support contingency and student independent working time in relation to student achievement, task effort and appreciation of support', in 'Instructional Science', Volume 43, 2015, pages 615 to 641; V X Yan, F Sana and P F Carvalho, 'No simple solutions to complex problems: cognitive science principles can guide but not prescribe educational decisions', in 'Policy Insights from the Behavioural and Brain Sciences', Volume 11, Issue 1, 2023, pages 59 to 66.

<sup>150</sup> J L Little, J A Nepangue and A Longares, 'The optimal sequence for learning can depend on one's strategy: an individual differences approach', in 'Learning and Individual Differences', Volume 120, 2025.

We have seen issues with practice carried out across the board in our own research. For example, our evaluation of [tutoring](#) highlighted that too many schools and colleges were providing tuition for more children in single sessions than recommended by the evidence, affecting the likelihood of the customisation effect from tutoring improving learning outcomes. While the factors associated with effective tutoring are well understood in the research literature, it is not always implemented as well as it could be in practice. Understanding what will work for whom and when are important considerations for teachers in ensuring that strategies have a positive impact on learning.

Practitioners, teachers and trainers also need to have some awareness of ineffective teaching practices. Well-established education myths, such as learning styles, and poor proxies for learning – like children or learners appearing to be engaged in lessons – have been shown to be persistent despite the absence of evidence that they have a positive impact on learning.<sup>151</sup> The need for assessment is particularly important here as an independent check to establish what children and learners have learned and to correct misconceptions. Assessment remains a vital part of effective teaching. See the section on assessment from our [‘Overview of research for the EIF’](#) for more information.

## **Inclusive curriculum and teaching**

Our [‘Overview of research for the EIF’](#) stresses that inclusive curriculum design involves ensuring that all children and learners – including those who are disadvantaged, have SEND, are known or previously known to children’s social care, or may face other barriers to learning and/or wellbeing – can access the curriculum. However, our recent [subject reports](#) cautioned against over-reliance on creating differentiated resources to support these children and learners, as they tend to lower expectations. Simplifying content can lead to children and learners receiving only parts of the curriculum compared to the content and resources that their peers are using, which lacks ambition. This creates curriculum inequality and can affect their longer-term outcomes. This needs to be contrasted with the importance of teaching children who have gaps in their learning from an earlier stage of the curriculum to learn what their peers already know. Adapting the curriculum is essential in helping children and learners to catch up with knowledge that others have had the opportunity to build sequentially to develop fluency, such as word reading, spelling, handwriting and number facts.

Effective adaptations should enable children and learners to access and engage meaningfully with appropriately challenging curriculum content. Flexible grouping, giving children and learners mental tools for learning (such as metacognition), giving explicit instructions, using technology to support children and learners, and

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<sup>151</sup> W Furey, ‘The Stubborn Myth of “Learning Styles” – State teacher-license prep materials peddle a debunked theory’, in ‘Education Next’, Volume 20, Issue 3, 2020, pages 8 to 12; P Howard-Jones, ‘Neuroscience and education: myths and messages’, in ‘Nature Reviews Neuroscience’, Volume 5, 2014, pages 817 to 824.

scaffolding have been highlighted as features of teaching that can be used to successfully adapt the curriculum.<sup>152</sup> Adaptations have also been shown to be effective when personalised, demonstrating that the prior knowledge and backgrounds of individual children and learners are very different.<sup>153</sup> However, recent research has also indicated that some interventions do not appear to be effective across different types of SEND, suggesting that the type of need is important to consider when choosing interventions to use.<sup>154</sup> The success of certain adaptations lies in careful, regular and purposeful diagnostic assessment, which avoids prescriptive and inflexible teaching that does not meet the specific needs of the child or learner.<sup>155</sup>

As mentioned in the teaching section, the practice of adapting teaching in response to children's needs can vary between teachers and within providers and its implementation is, therefore, not always entirely successful.<sup>156</sup> Our recent evaluation of [teacher development](#) has indicated that teachers' knowledge of sophisticated adaptive support, particularly for children and learners with SEND, is generally limited and, therefore, remains a central issue for future professional learning. Teaching assistants have been shown to have some influence on children and learners' learning when they are used to deliver highly structured programmes. However, the evidence suggests that teaching assistants should help to supplement classroom teachers, not replace them.<sup>157</sup>

The success of educational interventions is dependent on how they are selected and implemented. For instance, complementing high-quality teaching with small-group and one-to-one interventions is one of numerous strategies that can be particularly beneficial for those at risk of falling behind.<sup>158</sup> However, teachers have highlighted the existence of a shortfall between research and practice, where access to and understanding of targeted interventions for SEND children and learners remain areas for development.<sup>159</sup> Our previous studies on [supporting struggling readers](#) and [tutoring](#) have shown that the efficacy of interventions can be undermined if they are implemented without a secure strategy in place to ensure they meet the specific needs of the children and learners targeted. Leaders need to be able to make evidence-informed decisions about the interventions that are right for their children

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<sup>152</sup> ['Special educational needs in mainstream schools'](#), Education Endowment Foundation, May 2025.

<sup>153</sup> C Brühwiler and P Blatchford, 'Effects of class size and adaptive teaching competency on classroom processes and academic outcome', in 'Learning and Instruction', Volume 21, Issue 1, 2011, pages 95 to 108.

<sup>154</sup> J Van Herwegen, J Dockrell, M S C Thomas, C Marshall, R Gordon and T Masterman, ['Raising educational outcomes for students with SEN and disabilities'](#), University College London, 2024.

<sup>155</sup> I Hardy, N Meschede and S Mannel, 'Measuring adaptive teaching in classroom discourse: effects on student learning in elementary science education', in 'Frontiers in Education', Volume 7, 2022.

<sup>156</sup> D Moore, R Proctor, S Benham-Clarke, H Gains, G J Melendez-Torres, N Axford, M Rogers, R Anderson, D Hall, J Hawkins, V Berry, C Forbes and J Lloyd, ['Review of evidence on implementation in education'](#), Education Endowment Foundation, April 2024.

<sup>157</sup> ['Deployment of teaching assistants'](#), Education Endowment Foundation, March 2025; R Webster, 'Teaching on the cheap? The extent and impact of teaching assistants covering classes and leading lessons', in 'British Educational Research Journal', Early Access, June 2024.

<sup>158</sup> ['Special educational needs in mainstream schools'](#), Education Endowment Foundation, May 2025; ['Teaching and learning toolkit'](#), Education Endowment Foundation, 2025.

<sup>159</sup> J Van Herwegen, J Dockrell, M S C Thomas, C Marshall, R Gordon and T Masterman, ['Raising educational outcomes for students with SEN and disabilities'](#), University College London, 2024.

and learners, the context and how they should be implemented. They also need to continually evaluate and adapt interventions to be sure they are having the desired impact. In summary, effective implementation of educational interventions should focus on:

- the 'how' as well as the 'what'
- the contextual factors relevant to the institution
- priorities and avoiding doing too many things at once
- regular evaluation of new approaches to assess their effectiveness<sup>160</sup>

## Achievement

The achievement of children and learners is broader than attainment in standardised tests and national exam results. Exam results, for instance, do not take into account children and learners' characteristics or prior attainment.<sup>161</sup> Neither do they consider broader indicators of success and contextual factors that affect outcomes, such as wellbeing and life satisfaction.<sup>162</sup> This is particularly the case for some children and learners with SEND, where meaningful work experience and preparation for adulthood and independent living are more appropriate ways of measuring achievement than exam results.

In high-stakes testing systems, attainment has frequently been misinterpreted as a measure of school quality, where differences in attainment are attributed entirely to how effective the school is.<sup>163</sup> Threshold measures based on attainment are commonly used to assess and improve educational outcomes and ensure accountability. However, these can encourage provider leaders to concentrate their teaching efforts and resources on children and learners who are just below the threshold for achieving key benchmark grades, used to assess the performance of learners against set targets. There is a risk here of children and learners who are either well above or well below the threshold being ignored.<sup>164</sup>

Curriculum narrowing has become a common response to the pressures of high-stakes testing and is more likely to affect lower-attaining children and learners.<sup>165</sup> For

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<sup>160</sup> D Moore, R Proctor, S Benham-Clarke, H Gains, G J Melendez-Torres, N Axford, M Rogers, R Anderson, D Hall, J Hawkins, V Berry, C Forbes and J Lloyd, 'Review of evidence on implementation in education', Education Endowment Foundation, 2024.

<sup>161</sup> G Walford, 'Redefining school effectiveness', in 'Westminster Studies in Education', Volume 25, Issue 1, 2002, pages 47 to 58.

<sup>162</sup> OECD (2021), 'Beyond academic learning: first results from the survey of social and emotional skills', OECD Publishing, Paris, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1787/92a11084-en>.

<sup>163</sup> A West and H Pennell, 'Market-oriented reforms and "high stakes" testing: incentives and consequences', in 'Les Cahiers de La Recherche Sur l'éducation et Les Savoirs (Journal of Research on Education and Knowledge)', Special 1, 2005, pages 181 to 199.

<sup>164</sup> A West and H Pennell, 'Market-oriented reforms and "high stakes" testing: incentives and consequences', in 'Les Cahiers de La Recherche Sur l'éducation et Les Savoirs (Journal of Research on Education and Knowledge)', Special 1, 2005, pages 181 to 199.

<sup>165</sup> D Berliner, 'Rational responses to high stakes testing: the case of curriculum narrowing and the harm that follows', in 'Cambridge Journal of Education', Volume 41, Issue 3, 2025, 2011.

example, the increased focus on mathematics and English to ensure that children and learners meet the national standards that prioritise these subjects has led to a reduction in the time spent on other curriculum areas, notably art, music and physical education (PE). Furthermore, teaching methods and practice, and curriculum content, are designed specifically to mirror test- and examination-related content.<sup>166</sup> Both curriculum narrowing and 'teaching to the test' are further intensified by the focus on grade boundaries.<sup>167</sup>

Progress measures are considered a fairer measure of achievement, as they take into account the influence of the child or learner's characteristics and their prior attainment. They can provide a more detailed picture of the contribution that a school makes to learning outcomes. For example, children at grammar schools generally have better attainment than those at other schools, but their progress might not be as good when their characteristics and prior attainment are taken into account.<sup>168</sup> Progress measures can also show the progress of children and learners who do not meet the required national standards, but have made substantial progress from their starting points. Progress measures are also closely associated with absence rates, exclusion rates and pupil mobility, demonstrating that missing school strongly affects student outcomes.<sup>169</sup>

Value-added models estimate the value added to students' achievement by what an individual provider does. They take account of each child or learner's starting point and show the progress they make over a given period. Prior attainment is generally considered to be the most important predictor in value-added models of performance. However, studies show that children and learners' characteristics are also an important predictor.<sup>170</sup> It has been argued that if value-added models are not adjusted for the provider's context and/or pupils' background, they may be biased in favour of providers with more educationally advantaged intakes.<sup>171</sup> Conversely, contextual value-added models, which take account of learners' characteristics and the provider's context alongside prior attainment, can rely on too many weak or overlapping variables. This may mask real differences in performance between providers and allow underperforming providers to justify the poor outcomes of some

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<sup>166</sup> E Hargreaves, L Quick and D Buchanan, 'National curriculum and assessment in England and the continuing narrowed experiences of lower-attainers in primary schools', in 'Journal of Curriculum Studies', Volume 55, Issue 5, 2023, pages 545 to 561.

<sup>167</sup> A West and H Pennell, 'Market-oriented reforms and "high stakes" testing: incentives and consequences', in 'Les Cahiers de La Recherche Sur l'éducation et Les Savoirs (Journal of Research on Education and Knowledge)', Special 1, 2005, pages 181 to 199.

<sup>168</sup> T Gill, 'How have students and schools performed on the Progress 8 performance measure?' Paper presented at the annual conference of the British Educational Research Association, Cambridge Assessment, 2018.

<sup>169</sup> Z Claymore, 'Being present: the power of attendance and stability for disadvantaged pupils', National Foundation for Educational Research, 2019.

<sup>170</sup> D Reynolds, P Sammons, B De Fraine, J Van Damme, T Townsend, and C Teddlie, 'Educational effectiveness research (EER): a state-of-the-art review', in 'School Effectiveness and School Improvement', Volume 25, 2014, pages 197 to 230.

<sup>171</sup> G Leckie and H Goldstein, 'The importance of adjusting for pupil background in school value-added models: a study of progress 8 and school accountability in England', in 'British Educational Research Journal', Volume 45, Issue 3, 2019, pages 518 to 537.

groups of children and learners.<sup>172</sup> One proposed solution is to provide users with both the value-added and contextual value-added data so that they can explore and compare performance across the two measures.<sup>173</sup>

The imperfect data from such models means that it is worth emphasising, as stated in our [curriculum research](#), that progression within the curriculum remains important for understanding children and learners' achievement. The logical sequencing of concepts, content and skills over time helps children and learners to develop more sophisticated thinking to master a subject. Progress is therefore directly linked to whether children and learners have learned what has been taught in the curriculum. Regular assessment can identify any elements of the curriculum that have not been learned or where children and learners have developed misconceptions. This gives teachers the opportunity to correct concepts that have been misunderstood. They may need to adapt the curriculum to support children and learners who are falling behind and/or put in place interventions to address a particular problem, so that they can continue to make progress. It must be remembered that progression is not linear, and curriculum flexibility is essential for children and learners who require more time to learn concepts.

Achievement in the early years is complex and multifaceted. It is rooted in the development of the whole child and seen in the three prime areas of learning: communication and language, physical development, and personal, social and emotional development. These areas underpin later academic success but are not easily measured through traditional summative assessments. Measuring achievement in early years through narrow attainment indicators risks undervaluing the developmental progress of children who may not meet age-related expectations but have made substantial gains from their starting points. This can lead to inappropriate teaching practices, such as prioritising literacy and numeracy at the expense of creative and physical development. This mirrors the curriculum narrowing seen in the high-stakes testing environments of older children.<sup>174</sup> Progress-based assessments, which consider prior attainment and contextual factors, offer a fairer and more accurate picture of early learning. For example, a child who enters a setting with limited verbal communication but leaves confidently expressing themselves has made significant progress, even if they have not met all the early learning goals.

## Attendance and behaviour

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<sup>172</sup> G N Marks, 'Should value-added school effects models include student- and school-level covariates? Evidence from Australian population assessment data', in 'British Educational Research Journal', Volume 47, Issue 1, 2021, pages 181 to 204; G Leckie and L Prior, 'A comparison of value-added models for school accountability', in 'School Effectiveness and School Improvement', Volume 33, Issue 2, 2022, pages 431 to 455.

<sup>173</sup> G Leckie and H Goldstein, 'The importance of adjusting for pupil background in school value-added models: a study of progress 8 and school accountability in England', in 'British Educational Research Journal', Volume 45, Issue 3, 2019, pages 518 to 537.

<sup>174</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 'A new vision for high-quality preschool curriculum', National Academies Press, 2024; V Campbell-Barr, 'Early childhood education – a unique and quasi-hidden curriculum', in 'European Early Childhood Education Research Journal', 2025, pages 1 to 13.

## Strategic leadership

As discussed in the leadership and governance section, leaders who focus on improving the school climate can have a positive effect on reducing exclusions, bullying and absenteeism. Developing positive relationships between teachers and children and learners has also been shown to have a measurable and lasting impact on children and learners' behaviour. When children and learners feel supported and treated fairly by their teachers, they exhibit fewer behavioural problems and more positive behaviours.<sup>175</sup> These effects are strongest when children and learners perceive these relationships positively, highlighting the importance of trust and fairness in the classroom.

Embedding effective classroom management strategies is an important aspect of leadership, as it influences the effectiveness of teaching on children and learners' progress and attainment. Reviews of evidence highlight that poor classroom behaviour disrupts learning and the time spent on task, and can lead to pupil disengagement and poor attendance.<sup>176</sup> Our '[Overview of research for the EIF](#)' highlights the importance of consistency in behaviour management. One of the reasons for this is that adolescents in particular are developmentally attuned to concepts of fairness that may be challenged when different teachers treat them in different ways. Further evidence, including our [managing behaviour](#) study, suggests that when behaviour management approaches are not used consistently and coherently across the school and by all staff, children can become demotivated and behaviour deteriorates because children and learners think that they are being treated unfairly. Professional learning for all staff on behaviour management – including support staff as well as leaders and those with pastoral responsibilities – and clear monitoring systems and policies have been shown to develop consistent practice.<sup>177</sup> By creating coherence and consistency, leaders play a key role in ensuring that behaviour can be managed effectively.

## Attendance

Attendance has an important influence on children and learners' outcomes and should be encouraged from the early years onwards. Our '[Overview of research for the EIF](#)' highlights a clear link between attendance and attainment. Missing school also disproportionately affects the attainment and progress of disadvantaged children and learners compared to their more advantaged peers.<sup>178</sup> Recent evidence has further shown that missing school has a negative impact not only on educational

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<sup>175</sup> I Obsuth, A Louise Murray, T Malti, P Sulger, D Ribeaud and M Eisner, 'A Non-bipartite propensity score analysis of the effects of teacher-student relationships on adolescent problem and prosocial behaviour', in 'Journal of Youth and Adolescence', Volume 46, 2017, pages 1,661 to 1,687.

<sup>176</sup> 'Improving behaviour in schools', Education Endowment Foundation, 2019.

<sup>177</sup> T Bennett, 'Creating a culture: how schools can optimise behaviour', Department for Education, 2017; '[Improving behaviour in schools](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, 2019.

<sup>178</sup> Z Claymore, '[Being present: the power of attendance and stability for disadvantaged pupils](#)', National Foundation for Educational Research, 2019.

attainment but also on future employment.<sup>179</sup> Poor or irregular attendance may also signal underlying safeguarding issues that children and learners may be experiencing at home, in the wider community or at school.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a considerable influence on children and learners' attendance in primary and secondary schools and in FE. Recent [DfE statistics](#) show that there remains a stark difference between the levels of attendance before and after the pandemic. The overall absence rate in state-funded schools was 4.7% in 2018/19 compared with 7.1% in 2023/24. Persistent absence rates are also notably high in special schools.<sup>180</sup> Improving attendance so that children and learners have more time on task in the classroom remains critical for providers. Since the pandemic lockdowns, there has been a noticeable shift in attitudes towards school attendance, as parents' expectations have become more relaxed. There are concerns that this reflects a broader break in the social contract between parents and schools, and that regular attendance is no longer seen as a shared responsibility.<sup>181</sup>

Children and learners' poor mental health has been identified as a key challenge that is linked to absenteeism, and there has been a noticeable rise in anxiety-related issues reported since the pandemic.<sup>182</sup> Recent research has highlighted the emergence of a 'Friday effect', which shows that children and learners are much less likely to attend schools in England on Fridays. This effect is larger in more deprived areas and also in secondary schools and has been commonly found on Fridays before bank holidays and half terms.<sup>183</sup> Declines in attendance between the first and second half terms in the academic year and between Year 7 and Year 8 have also been identified.<sup>184</sup> This suggests that the timing of attendance interventions might be an important factor to consider.

However, there is a lack of evidence for the interventions that are likely to improve attendance in schools in England. Specific interventions to improve children and learners' attendance are generally under-studied or their methods are not sufficiently rigorous to draw conclusions about their effectiveness.<sup>185</sup> However, there is growing recognition that interventions for improving attendance and reducing education inequality are context dependent. Activities that work well for one pupil or provider

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<sup>179</sup> M Klein, E Sosu, J Dräger and V Casoni, '[Understanding school attendance, educational attainment and labour market outcomes](#)', Nuffield Foundation, 2024.

<sup>180</sup> '[School absence tracker](#)', The Centre for Social Justice, March 2025.

<sup>181</sup> S Gibbons, S McNally and P Monteburuno, '[Pupil absence and the Covid-19 pandemic](#)', Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics, 2025.

<sup>182</sup> E Moore and M Walker, '[Voices from the classroom – Understanding how secondary schools support pupils returning from absence](#)', National Foundation for Educational Research, 2025.

<sup>183</sup> J Clifton-Sprigg and J James, 'The Friday effect': school attendance over the week', in 'British Educational Research Journal', Early Access, 2024.

<sup>184</sup> '[Understanding attendance](#)', ImpactEd, 2024.

<sup>185</sup> '[Attendance interventions rapid evidence assessment](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, 2022; C McDonald and A Pervez, 'School partnered approaches to emotionally based school avoidance in UK primary and secondary school-age learners: a systematic review', in 'British Educational Research Journal', June 2025; K Eklund, M K Burns, K Oyen, S DeMarchena and E M McCollom, 'Addressing chronic absenteeism in schools: a meta-analysis of evidence-based interventions', in 'School Psychology Review', Volume 51, Issue 1, 2022, pages 95 to 111.

may not for another.<sup>186</sup> There is also an awareness that attendance interventions that focus mainly on emotional and behavioural engagement may not affect children and learners' academic outcomes in the ways intended if their motivation and cognitive engagement are not also considered in the design of interventions.<sup>187</sup> As our '[Securing good attendance](#)' report highlights, good attendance does not happen in isolation. It is dependent on the school climate, the curriculum, and on children and learners' experiences of teaching.

Increasing children and learners' sense of belonging appears to have a positive effect on improving attendance.<sup>188</sup> School belonging has previously been shown to have a negative association with school dropout rates. That is, children who do not feel attached to their school are more likely to skip classes or become early school-leavers.<sup>189</sup> In schools that actively foster a sense of belonging, children and learners become more motivated, engaged and confident. They also perform better academically and are less likely to be absent or drop out.<sup>190</sup> Important factors in giving children and learners a sense of belonging include positive relationships with teachers and peers, feeling safe in school because bullying is prevented, and parents being involved in and supporting the school and their child's learning.<sup>191</sup>

There is evidence that children and learners in schools that combine structured support with recognition for good attendance feel more encouraged to attend. In schools that rely more heavily on sanctions, such as detentions, fines or phone calls, children and learners and parents are more likely to view attendance policies as unfair, especially when their absences are due to factors beyond their control.<sup>192</sup> Our '[Securing good attendance](#)' report suggests that good communication between staff

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<sup>186</sup> I R Hadden, P R Harris and M J Easterbrook, 'Context matters: diagnosing and targeting local barriers to success at school', in 'Journal of School Psychology', Volume 108, 2025; '[Understanding attendance](#)', ImpactEd, 2024; E Moore and M Walker, '[Voices from the classroom – Understanding how secondary schools support pupils returning from absence](#)', National Foundation for Educational Research, 2025.

<sup>187</sup> J Obrovská, M Majčík and J Simonová, 'Achievement vs. engagement: providing support in socially disadvantaged schools' in 'British Education Research Journal', Early Access, 2025.

<sup>188</sup> 'Back to class: how are attitudes to attendance changing?', Education Review Office, 2025.

<sup>189</sup> H Korpershoek, E T Canninus, M Fokkens-Bruinsma and H de Boer, 'The relationships between school belonging and students' motivational, social-emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes in secondary education: a meta-analytic review' in 'Research Papers in Education', Volume 35, Issue 6, 2020, pages 641 to 680.

<sup>190</sup> 'Understanding attendance: implementing strategies with impact', ImpactEd, 2024; H Korpershoek, E T Canninus, M Fokkens-Bruinsma and H de Boer, 'The relationships between school belonging and students' motivational, social-emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes in secondary education: a meta-analytic review', in 'Research Papers in Education', Volume 35, Issue 6, 2020, pages 641 to 680; S M Daily, M L Smith, C L Lilly, D M Davidov, M J Mann and A L Kristjansson, 'Using school climate to improve attendance and grades: understanding the importance of school satisfaction among middle and high school students', in 'Journal of School Health', Volume 90, Issue 9, 2020, pages 683 to 693.

<sup>191</sup> K Allen, P Kern, D VellaBrodrick, J Hattie and L Waters, 'What schools need to know about belonging: a meta-analysis', in 'Educational Psychology Review', Volume 30, Issue 1, 2018, pages 1 to 34; '[School belonging – a literature review](#)', National Children's Bureau, 2024; E Moore and M Walker, '[Voices from the classroom – Understanding how secondary schools support pupils returning from absence](#)', National Foundation for Educational Research, March 2025.

<sup>192</sup> E Moore and M Walker, '[Voices from the classroom – Understanding how secondary schools support pupils returning from absence](#)', National Foundation for Educational Research, March 2025; 'Back to class: how are attitudes to attendance changing?', Education Review Office, 2025.

and children and learners and their parents is a common feature in schools that have improved attendance from a low baseline. This should include:

- setting expectations about attendance from the outset
- explaining to parents and children and learners why good attendance is important and how it helps children and learners to achieve
- listening to parents carefully to find out why their children are not attending well enough, so that school leaders can act accordingly
- challenging parents who do not make sure that their children attend but also offering support where needed

This approach can best be summarised as ‘listen, understand, empathise and support – but do not tolerate’, although it requires the right practitioners to be in place to have conversations with parents. However, not all teachers have the skillset required to facilitate high-quality parental involvement effectively.<sup>193</sup>

## Behaviour, including bullying

Effective classroom management addresses poor behaviour and creates a positive and calm learning environment where children and learners feel safe and can thrive both academically and socially. It also addresses disengagement from learning as well as low-level disruption in the classroom to minimise the negative effects on learning.<sup>194</sup>

Our ‘[Overview of research for the EIF](#)’ shows that high expectations and a positive culture, shaped by respectful interactions, are important aspects of effective classroom management. This includes addressing the behaviour of children and learners outside school when it can spill over into behaviour in school, as well as inside school. Furthermore, a whole-school approach to behaviour, from designing the school culture, to building and maintaining it, is essential. Evidence emphasises that consistency and strong core values are important factors for the success of any behaviour management system, so that children, learners and staff know what to expect when it is applied.<sup>195</sup>

Children and learners have highlighted the importance of establishing a warm and responsive environment in influencing social dynamics across a provider.<sup>196</sup> Universal classroom management strategies like reward systems offer modest improvements to children and learners’ behaviour, while targeted and tailored interventions tend to

<sup>193</sup> C Jones, V Sideropoulos and O Palikara, ‘Do teachers have the knowledge and skills to facilitate effective parental engagement? Findings from a national survey in England’, in ‘Educational Review’, Online Early, 2025.

<sup>194</sup> ‘Classroom management: creating and maintaining positive learning environments’, New South Wales Department of Education, 2020; ‘[Low level disruption in classrooms: below the radar](#)’, Ofsted, 2014.

<sup>195</sup> J C Chow, R Sayers, Y Fu, K L Granger, S McCullough, C Kingsbery and A Morse, ‘Systematic meta-review of measures of classroom management in school settings’, in ‘Assessment for Effective Intervention’ Volume 49, Issue 2, 2024, pages 60 to 74.

<sup>196</sup> C Forsberg, E H Chiriac and R Thornberg, ‘Exploring pupils’ perspectives on school climate’, in ‘Educational Research’, Volume 63, Issue 4, 2021, pages 379 to 395.

be more effective for at-risk children and learners.<sup>197</sup> Evidence indicates that children and learners who find learning more difficult often receive a higher proportion of reminders about their behaviour or corrections from adults, whereas those who are more capable tend to experience more encouragement and nurturing.<sup>198</sup> As our [‘Overview of research for the EIF’](#) highlights, it is important that adults give all children and learners the same attention when addressing behaviour, given what we know about the effect of inconsistency on worsening behaviour and higher rates of exclusion.

Relationships between teachers and children and learners, partnerships between schools and parents, the quality of teaching and the school climate are strongly correlated with lower levels of bullying. Consistent implementation, evaluation and adaptation of policies and recording of incidents can also reduce levels of bullying.<sup>199</sup> Some structured anti-bullying programmes have been effective in reducing the extent of bullying. These programmes include comprehensive, school-wide anti-bullying policies, collaboratively developed classroom rules and parent-focused training or engagement sessions.<sup>200</sup>

However, our [‘Review of sexual abuse in schools’](#) highlights that some incidents of sexual harassment, online abuse and bullying are often under-recognised by staff. While school leaders and designated safeguarding leads tend to have a clearer understanding of these issues due to their involvement in confidential cases, many teachers underestimate the scale of the problem. Recent research, although based on a sample of only 14 schools, has indicated that schools are competent in developing policies and processes to address concerns about sexual harm. However, they appear less well equipped to address the cultural elements driving harmful and unsafe environments to secure real change.<sup>201</sup> Our review also indicates that staff typically lack the subject knowledge on topics like consent, healthy relationships and sharing of sexual images to teach the relationships and sex education curriculum effectively.

## Attitudes to learning

Attitudes to learning are the motivations, behaviours and habits that children and learners need to support their learning in the classroom. They include the emotional, social and cognitive behaviours that help children to learn. They include paying attention to the teacher, persevering with difficult tasks, working with others and

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<sup>197</sup> [‘Improving behaviour in schools: evidence review’](#), Education Endowment Foundation, 2019.

<sup>198</sup> [‘Improving early education through high-quality interactions’](#), Education Endowment Foundation, 2025.

<sup>199</sup> H Gaffney, D Farrington and H White, ‘Anti bullying programmes: toolkit technical report’, Youth Endowment Foundation, 2021.

<sup>200</sup> [‘Improving behaviour in schools: evidence review’](#), Education Endowment Foundation, 2019.

<sup>201</sup> J Lloyd and J Walker, ‘How schools are addressing harmful sexual behaviour: findings of 14 school audits’, in *‘British Journal of Educational Studies’*, Volume 71, Issue 3, 2023, pages 325 to 342.

being motivated. Recent research highlights the importance of actively teaching positive learning behaviours, in addition to managing poor behaviour.<sup>202</sup>

Routines are important to help young children develop positive attitudes to learning. Repeated activities are predictable and, because children know what to expect, they feel reassured and less anxious. This helps them to develop a sense of confidence and emotional stability.<sup>203</sup> There is a link between young children's personal, social and emotional development and academic achievement.<sup>204</sup> Children who can regulate their emotions are more likely to exhibit positive behaviours, show persistence in tasks, follow instructions, engage constructively with their peers and adapt to classroom routines.<sup>205</sup> This highlights the importance of co-regulation, where adults model and support emotional responses, gradually enabling children to develop independent strategies for managing frustration, excitement or disappointment.<sup>206</sup> Structured self-regulation activities such as storytelling, role play and mindfulness have been shown to reduce disruptive behaviour and foster positive attitudes towards learning.<sup>207</sup>

Positive, high-quality interactions between young children and practitioners help children to manage their emotions and can reduce negative behaviour towards others.<sup>208</sup> Our '[Best start in life](#)' research shows that executive function (the cognitive and emotional skills needed for everyday tasks) and relationships begin to develop long before children start school in the Reception Year. Babies rely on consistent carers from birth to form secure attachments. These early relationships are the foundation for regulating emotions, focusing attention and communicating effectively.

Our '[Best start in life](#)' report also highlights that executive function and social development are interdependent. Self-control allows children to manage their thoughts, emotions and focus so that they can take turns and manage conflict. Play and interacting with others gives children the practice they need to strengthen these skills. We found that high-quality provision actively teaches both executive function and relationship skills and does not just assume that they emerge on their own. Effective practitioners model positive interactions, provide the structured support necessary for collaboration and incrementally increase the demands on children's attention and memory. Activities such as rhymes, games and storytelling provide rich

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<sup>202</sup> D Moore, S Benham-Clarke, R Kenchington, C Boyle, T Ford and others, 'Improving behaviour in schools: evidence review', Education Endowment Foundation; '[Improving Behaviour in Schools](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, 2019.

<sup>203</sup> S B Selman and J E Dilworth-Bart, '[Routines and child development: a systematic review](#)', in 'Journal of Family Theory and Review', Volume 16, Issue 2, December 2023.

<sup>204</sup> C Merrell and K Bailey, 'Predicting achievement in the early years: how influential is personal, social and emotional development?', in 'The Online Educational Research Journal', Volume 3, 2012.

<sup>205</sup> 'Laying the foundations: supporting children's self-regulation', Early Intervention Foundation, 2022.

<sup>206</sup> '[Self regulation](#)', Birth to 5 Matters, 2025; M Hautakangas, K Kumpulainen and L Uusitalo, 'Children developing self-regulation skills in a Kids' Skills intervention programme in Finnish early childhood education and care', in 'Early Childhood Development and Care', Volume 192, Issue 10, 2022.

<sup>207</sup> '[Self-Regulation Strategies](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, 2025.

<sup>208</sup> S Jones, K Bub and C Raver, 'Unpacking the black box of the Chicago school readiness project intervention: the mediating roles of teacher-child relationship quality and self-regulation', in Early Education and Development, Volume 24, 2013, pages 1,043 to 1,064.

opportunities to build persistence, cooperation and self-control. This integrated approach ensures that all children develop the cognitive and emotional skills they need not only for academic success but for long-term wellbeing and healthy relationships.

Our '[Strong foundations in the first years of school](#)' report confirms that these skills remain crucial as children enter Reception and beyond. We found that some children begin school without the skills to focus attention, regulate impulses or cooperate with peers. When staff assume that these skills are already in place, children can be reprimanded for what they have not yet learned. By contrast, leaders who plan explicitly for personal, social and emotional development and teach children how to make friends, follow instructions and manage their emotions ensure that all children are able to thrive. This is particularly important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are less likely to attend early years provision and may miss out on these crucial foundations.<sup>209</sup>

However, our '[Strong foundations](#)' report suggests that opportunities to learn these skills are not always equitable. Confident children tend to receive more adult attention and progress further, while less confident children risk being left behind. To counter this, effective schools plan purposeful play and use adult interactions that stretch every child's executive and social capacities. This ensures that children practise persistence, problem-solving and collaboration in ways that build both their executive function skills and their relationships. Without such attention, children may remain busy but not actively learning.

Pupil motivation in schools is closely linked with managing attitudes to learning. External motivators like praise and rewards can help to manage minor instances of poor behaviour. However, internal motivation, driven by self-belief and personal goals, plays a more significant role in fostering resilience, academic success and positive behaviour.<sup>210</sup> When children and learners feel safe, competent and respected, they are more likely to develop motivation and positive behaviour.<sup>211</sup> This suggests that motivation is best nurtured through an approach that combines consistent behaviour management with emotional and relational support.

Resilience is closely linked to motivation and positive behaviour. According to our '[Overview of research for the EIF](#)', resilience is understood as both a personal trait and a dynamic process that enables individuals to adapt to adversity and recover from stress or trauma. In education, it encompasses both academic resilience, overcoming setbacks or disadvantages, and broader life resilience. While schools can play a role in fostering resilience, particularly through supportive climates, strong relationships, high expectations and opportunities for achievement, their overall influence is small. Early years settings and parenting are especially influential, with

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<sup>209</sup> G Garon-Carrier, C Mavungu-Blouin, M J Letarte, J Gobeil-Bourdeau and C Fitzpatrick, 'School readiness among vulnerable children: a systematic review of studies using a person-centered approach', in 'Psychology: Research & Review', Volume 37, 2024.

<sup>210</sup> '[Improving behaviour in schools](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, June 2019.

<sup>211</sup> 'Classroom management: creating and maintaining positive learning environments', New South Wales Department of Education, 2020.

warm, structured environments supporting the development of resilience. Character education, often discussed alongside resilience, is best promoted through whole-school approaches that include values and model positive behaviours.

## **Inclusive approaches to behaviour, attendance and attitudes**

Exclusion from school disrupts learning and can exacerbate behavioural and social difficulties. Extended transitions between schools not only separate children from face-to-face teaching but also disrupt their academic progress.

Research highlights that there are some interventions that show promise in reducing exclusions and which offer an alternative to more punitive approaches. Interventions that provide personalised support and consistent behavioural oversight, such as mentoring, counselling, teacher training and improving academic skills, are particularly effective.<sup>212</sup> This review of school-based interventions found that teacher training in improving mutual respect between teachers and pupils, strategies for working with parents and classroom behaviour management techniques also reduced exclusion rates in the short term. The same was true of interventions that targeted children's and learners' social skills.

However, these findings are based on analysis of a small number of studies, and although exclusion rates dropped significantly during the first 6 months after the intervention, the impact was temporary. Studies that measured exclusion rates 12 months or more after the intervention finished showed that the effect was not sustained. This suggests that these types of interventions need to be ongoing and embedded in practice to be effective in the longer term. As previously mentioned, a strong school climate and culture, characterised by clear values, positive relationships with teachers and peers, and a focus on inclusion can significantly reduce disciplinary rates and school absence.<sup>213</sup>

Alternative provision (AP) can serve as a critical intervention for children at risk of exclusion, persistent absence or disengagement from mainstream education. However, our recent [thematic review of AP](#) suggests that, while AP can offer a lifeline for these children, its success is highly dependent on strategic planning and the extent to which it is centred on the needs of children. AP that includes vocational opportunities and has an ethos of respect towards pupils can lead to improvements in engagement and attendance.<sup>214</sup> This is reinforced by evidence that highlights the importance of smaller class sizes, trusted relationships with teaching staff and flexible, tailored support. These elements help children feel safe, valued and more connected to their education.<sup>215</sup> Our review also highlights examples of good

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<sup>212</sup> S Valdebenito, M Eisner, D P Farrington and others, 'School-based interventions for reducing disciplinary school exclusion: a systematic review', in 'Campbell Systematic Reviews', January 2018.

<sup>213</sup> L Lester and D Cross, 'The relationship between school climate and mental and emotional wellbeing over the transition from primary to secondary school', in 'Psychology of Well-Being', Volume 5, Issue 1, 2015, page 9; N Gage, A Larson, G Sugai and S Chafouleas, 'Student perceptions of school climate as predictors of office discipline referrals', in 'American Educational Research Journal', Volume 53, Issue 3, 2016, pages 492 to 515.

<sup>214</sup> 'Effective alternative provision', National Foundation for Educational Research, 2007.

<sup>215</sup> 'What children need from an integrated alternative provision system', Children's Commissioner, 2022.

practice, in which strong multi-agency collaboration, clear referral pathways and robust quality assurance processes contributed to better outcomes for children in AP.

However, we also found in our [thematic review](#) that AP is often commissioned and overseen inconsistently, and many providers lack a clear strategy or shared understanding of its purpose. Furthermore, confusion about roles and responsibilities among partners frequently leads to gaps in accountability and fragmented support for children. Evidence drawn from the lived experiences of children in AP illustrates that support can be inconsistent, reintegration pathways are often unclear, and families frequently feel excluded from decision-making. This is particularly found in settings with high staff turnover. In some cases, a narrow curriculum also limits opportunities for children to make progress or re-enter mainstream education.<sup>216</sup> Additionally, differences in approaches to behaviour management between mainstream and alternative provision settings, such as behaviour management techniques and levels of support for children, can create further challenges when transitioning between settings.<sup>217</sup>

Our recent inspection evidence highlights that part-time and reduced timetables are being widely used in schools as a short-term measure to support children experiencing challenges such as anxiety, behavioural difficulties or the risk of exclusion. Estimates suggest that in the autumn and spring of 2022/23, up to 34,000 children had attendance patterns consistent with being on a part-time timetable.<sup>218</sup> However, this is only an approximation, and the lack of robust, consistent data makes it difficult to determine whether part-time timetables are achieving their intended goals or inadvertently contributing to informal exclusion.

When implemented with care, and with parents' consent, the involvement of specialist professionals, regular reviews and a clear plan for reintegration, part-time timetables can offer a structured way for children to re-engage with education.<sup>219</sup> However, [DfE statutory guidance](#) says that they should not be used to manage behaviour. Despite the prevalence of part-time timetables, there is limited evidence for their long-term effectiveness. Our [2023/24 annual report](#) raised concerns about the long-term impact of part-time timetables. It suggested that, while the use of part-time timetables was once a short-term solution to help children reintegrate after illness or school refusal, it is becoming more routine. In addition, a number of children, particularly those with SEND or health and behavioural challenges, are now receiving a hybrid education that combines online and in-person learning to better meet their individual needs.

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<sup>216</sup> 'What children need from an integrated alternative provision system', Children's Commissioner, 2022.

<sup>217</sup> J Deakin and A Kupchik, 'Tough choices: school behaviour management and institutional context', in 'Youth Justice', Volume 16, Issue 3, 2016.

<sup>218</sup> 'Can attendance data be used to identify pupils on part-time timetables?', FFT Education Datalab, June 2023; 'The annual report of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2023/24', Ofsted, December 2024.

<sup>219</sup> C Owen, K Woods and A Stewart, 'A systematic literature review exploring the facilitators and barriers of reintegration to secondary mainstream schools through "alternative provision"', in 'Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties', Volume 26, Issue 3, 2021; 'Working together to improve school attendance', Department of Education, 2024

## Personal development and children and learners' welfare and wellbeing

Effective personal development brings together the knowledge and skills that children and learners need, beyond the subject curriculum, to lead healthy, happy and successful lives. However, it is complex and multifaceted in terms of its content and how it is embedded in the wider curriculum. Personal development includes:

- spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development, including fundamental British values
- personal, social, health and economic education
- relationships, sex and health education
- careers education, information, advice and guidance
- physical and emotional health and wellbeing
- citizenship
- character education
- wider learning beyond the subject curriculum

Early years providers, schools and FE and skills providers all play a vital role in personal development and wellbeing that affects cognitive outcomes and helps children and learners develop into adulthood. Personal, social and emotional development (PSED) is one of the 3 prime areas of learning in the EYFS that underpin children's early learning and emotional wellbeing. Young children's PSED has been shown to predict later attainment in mathematics and literacy.<sup>220</sup> Research has also shown that the socio-emotional skills that children develop in the early years indirectly mediate their academic outcomes.<sup>221</sup>

Recent research reinforces the importance of emotional and relational factors in school life. For instance, our '[Big Listen](#)' report shows that children and learners say that safety, happiness and wellbeing are the most important aspects of a positive school environment. This growing emphasis on emotional climate highlights the need for inspection frameworks to consider wellbeing in a way that is meaningful but also reliable and evidence-based.

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<sup>220</sup> C Merrell and K Bailey, 'Predicting achievement in the early years: how influential is personal, social and emotional development?', in 'The Online Educational Research Journal', 2012; G Aleksić, C Merrell, D Ferring, P Tymms and J Klemenović, 'Links between socio-emotional skills, behaviour, mathematics and literacy performance of preschool children in Serbia', in 'European Journal of Psychology of Education', Volume 34, Issue 2, 2019, pages 417 to 438; D Hammer, E Melhuish and S J Howard, 'Antecedents and consequences of social-emotional development: a longitudinal study of academic achievement', in 'Archives of Scientific Psychology', Volume 6, 2018, pages 105 to 116.

<sup>221</sup> M Torres, C E Domitrovich and K L Bierman, 'Preschool interpersonal relationships predict kindergarten achievement: mediated by gains in emotion knowledge', in 'Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology', Volume 39, 2015, pages 44 to 52.

Promoting wellbeing in education requires a clear understanding of what wellbeing in education is and practical, inclusive systems of support. Wellbeing has many dimensions, and there is no agreed definition.<sup>222</sup> However, multidimensional models of wellbeing highlight the importance of agency, resilience and belonging as core components of personal development.<sup>223</sup> Understanding wellbeing as something that goes beyond short-term feelings and includes longer-term relationships, personal growth and flourishing may help schools to develop more inclusive approaches to wellbeing that include the experiences of all children and learners.<sup>224</sup>

## Personal development programmes

Personal development programmes are most effective when the taught elements are combined with a whole-school approach that supports a collective and an individual responsibility to promote the different aspects of personal development.<sup>225</sup> Leaders are central to creating a climate that gives children and learners opportunities to develop the characteristics associated with academic success and lifelong wellbeing.<sup>226</sup> This approach is characterised by respectful relationships between children and learners and staff and adult role-modelling. It also involves the participation of children and learners, so that they understand the value and purpose of personal development and how they can support and contribute to it.<sup>227</sup> Effective practice ensures that clear curriculum goals embed personal development into everyday practice, through structured teaching, inclusive pastoral care and well-defined opportunities that are part of wider learning beyond the subject curriculum.<sup>228</sup> However, more evidence to evaluate the factors that underpin the most effective practices is needed. The evidence for interventions and practices that may enhance personal development programmes is mixed. This can make it difficult for providers to know what to implement.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> D Stack, 'Promoting well-being through history teaching', in 'Transactions of the Royal Historical Society', Volume 2, 2024, pages 471 to 489; A Jarden and A Roache, 'What is wellbeing?', in 'International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health', 2023.

<sup>223</sup> K Ruggeri, E Garcia-Garzon, A Maguire, S Matz and F A Huppert, 'Well-being is more than happiness and life satisfaction: a multidimensional analysis of 21 countries', in 'Health and Quality of Life Outcomes', Volume 18, Issue 192, 2020.

<sup>224</sup> E Cary and L Webb, '[Children's wellbeing in schools](#)', UK Parliament POST, November 2025; W Ellyatt, 'Education for human flourishing – a new conceptual framework for promoting ecosystemic wellbeing in schools', in 'Challenges', Volume 13, Issue 2, 2022.

<sup>225</sup> L M Gutman and I Schoon, '[Essential life skills: summary of the existing evidence on how "non-cognitive skills" can be defined and measured](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, 2013.

<sup>226</sup> M Gedikoglu, '[Social and emotional learning; an evidence review and synthesis of key issues](#)', Education Policy Institute, 2021.

<sup>227</sup> F H K Wanders, I van der Veen, A B Dijkstra and R Maslowski, 'The influence of teacher-student and student-student relationships on societal involvement in Dutch primary and secondary schools', in 'Theory & Research in Social Education', Volume 48, Issue 1, 2020, pages 101 to 119; L M Gutman and I Schoon, '[Essential life skills: summary of the existing evidence on how "non-cognitive skills" can be defined and measured](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, 2013; M Gedikoglu, 'Social and emotional learning; an evidence review and synthesis of key issues', Education Policy Institute, 2021.

<sup>228</sup> M T Greenberg, '[Evidence for social and emotional learning in schools](#)', Learning Policy Institute, March 2023; L M Gutman and I Schoon, '[Essential life skills: summary of the existing evidence on how "non-cognitive skills" can be defined and measured](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, 2013.

<sup>229</sup> E Cary and L Webb, '[Children's wellbeing in schools](#)', UK Parliament POST, November 2025

Our '[Overview of research for the EIF](#)' emphasises the importance of self-belief, resilience and character in personal development. Behaviours, attitudes and skills, such as motivation, self-control and engagement in learning, are associated with personal development and academic success.<sup>230</sup> When developed in combination, skills such as self-efficacy and developing an awareness of – and the ability to reflect on – their own learning processes may improve children and learners' academic attainment.<sup>231</sup>

Recently, there has been growing interest in social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes aimed at developing the knowledge, skills and attitudes that underpin academic success and later wellbeing. Research suggests that, while it is clear that universal, school-based SEL programmes can help, we still know very little about the specific conditions and processes that make them most effective.<sup>232</sup> However, SEL tends to be most effective when teaching takes place across different subjects, includes taught knowledge and skills, and provides opportunities to put them into practice.<sup>233</sup> Evidence suggests that learning that gives children and learners an opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills to manage their emotions, make responsible decisions and work with others can have a positive impact on academic success and lifelong wellbeing.<sup>234</sup>

## Career education

Effective careers guidance plays an important role in helping learners make informed decisions about their education, training and career paths. There is an international consensus that well-targeted careers guidance can help all learners achieve their potential.<sup>235</sup> In particular, there are benefits for children and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may not have access to the networks and social capital that others do.<sup>236</sup>

Research has highlighted that increased exposure to careers guidance during secondary school is associated with improved employment and educational outcomes

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<sup>230</sup> L M Gutman and I Schoon, '[Essential life skills: summary of the existing evidence on how "non-cognitive skills" can be defined and measured](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, 2013.

<sup>231</sup> M Gedikoglu, '[Social and emotional learning; an evidence review and synthesis of key issues](#)', Education Policy Institute, 2021.

<sup>232</sup> J A Durlak, J L Mahoney and A E Boyle, 'What we know, and what we need to find out about universal, school-based social and emotional learning programs for children and adolescents: a review of meta-analyses and directions for future research', in 'Psychological Bulletin', Volume 148, Issues 11 to 12, 2022; C Cipriano, M J Strambler, L H Naples, C Ha, M Kirk and others, 'The state of evidence for social and emotional learning: a contemporary meta-analysis of universal school-based SEL interventions', in 'Child Development', Volume 94, Issue 5, 2023, pages 1,181 to 1,204.

<sup>233</sup> M van Poortvliet, D A Clarke and J G Cbe, '[Improving social and emotional learning in primary schools: guidance report](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, 2021; M Gedikoglu, '[Social and emotional learning; an evidence review and synthesis of key issues](#)', Education Policy Institute, 2021.

<sup>234</sup> M Gedikoglu, '[Social and emotional learning; an evidence review and synthesis of key issues](#)', Education Policy Institute, 2021.

<sup>235</sup> A Mann, V Denis and C Percy, '[Career ready? How schools can better prepare young people for working life in the era of COVID-19](#)', OECD, 2020; '[International approaches to careers interventions: Literature review](#)', Department for Education, March 2021.

<sup>236</sup> J Hunt, K Atherton, E Collerton and N Wilkinson, '[Effective careers interventions for disadvantaged young people: a report by the behavioural insights team](#)', Careers & Enterprise Company, 2021.

in early adulthood.<sup>237</sup> Indeed, studies have shown that higher earnings can be attributed to careers interventions in schools.<sup>238</sup> Careers guidance also positively affects shorter-term measures such as career readiness, which helps learners to transition into employment and make decisions about their next steps.<sup>239</sup> Children and learners who take part in employer engagement, including work experience at school, are also less likely to not be in education, employment or training (NEET).<sup>240</sup> Conversely, there is some evidence that being uncertain about career aspirations at age 16 is associated with poorer outcomes.<sup>241</sup>

Interventions designed to raise children and learners' aspirations have shown little effect in narrowing gaps in educational attainment.<sup>242</sup> Instead, careers guidance and support play a more important role in meeting the child or learner's expectations. The implication for teachers and parents is that they need to support children and learners not just in raising their aspirations, but also in understanding how they can work towards fulfilling them.<sup>243</sup> Our [report on post-16 careers guidance](#) suggested that expanding children and learners' understanding of the careers they could pursue can have more impact than just raising their aspirations more generally. Similarly, learners who have underestimated the qualifications they will need for a particular job ('career misalignment') are more likely to be NEET.<sup>244</sup> Longitudinal studies have suggested that the process of meeting their expectations of careers education should begin earlier in the education of children and learners from lower-income backgrounds.<sup>245</sup>

Evidence from schools that integrate personal guidance into broader career education programmes suggests that this improves children's personal effectiveness,

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<sup>237</sup> J Moote, L Archer, M Henderson, E Watson, J DeWitt, B Francis and H Holmegaard, 'More is more: exploring the relationship between young people's experiences of school-based career education, information, advice and guidance at age 14–16 and wider adult outcomes at age 21–22 in England', in 'Research Papers in Education', Volume 40, Issue 1, 2025, pages 72 to 95.

<sup>238</sup> A Mann, J Rehill and E Kashefpakdel, '[Employer engagement in education: insights from international evidence for effective practice and future research](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, January 2018; E Kashefpakdel and C Percy, 'Career education that works: an economic analysis using the British cohort study', in 'Journal of Education and Work', Volume 30, Issue 3, 2017.

<sup>239</sup> '[International approaches to careers interventions: literature review](#)', Department for Education, March 2021; J Collins and A Barnes, '[Careers in the curriculum. What works?](#)', The Careers & Enterprise Company, 2017; C Covacevich, A Mann, C Santos and J Champaud, '[Indicators of teenage career readiness: an analysis of longitudinal data from eight countries](#)', OECD, 2021.

<sup>240</sup> E Kashefpakdel, '[The benefits and burdens of work experience for all](#)', Speakers for Schools, Feb 2023; A Mann, E Kashefpakdel, J Rehill and P Huddleston, '[Contemporary transitions: young Britons reflect on life after secondary school and college](#)', Education and Employers, June 2017.

<sup>241</sup> D Hughes, A Mann, S Barnes and R McKeown, '[Careers education: international literature review](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, July 2016.

<sup>242</sup> S Gorard, B Huat and P Davies, 'The impact of attitudes and aspirations on educational attainment and participation', Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2012.

<sup>243</sup> R St Clair, K Kintrea, and M Houston, 'Silver bullet or red herring? New evidence on the place of aspirations in education', in 'Oxford Review of Education', Volume 39, 2013, pages 719 to 738; N Harrison and R Waller, 'Challenging discourses of aspiration: the role of expectations and attainment in access to higher education', in 'British Educational Research Journal', 2018, Volume 44, pages 914 to 938.

<sup>244</sup> D Hughes, A Mann, S Barnes and R McKeown, '[Careers education: international literature review](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, July 2016.

<sup>245</sup> E Kashefpakdel, J Rehill and D Hughes, 'What works? Career-related learning in primary schools', The Careers & Enterprise Company, 2018.

career readiness and educational outcomes.<sup>246</sup> This guidance has been shown to build on children’s confidence in making decisions and help them align their educational choices with their career aspirations.<sup>247</sup> Our recent [Independent review of careers guidance in schools and FE colleges](#) also identified how high-quality careers provision is typically defined by approaches that are integrated into the curriculum, tailored to individual learners’ needs, and supported by meaningful and well-structured employer engagement. Effective practice is often rooted in leadership that prioritises genuine, contextualised and personalised employer engagement.

## Pastoral support

Pastoral support covers a range of initiatives that together address children and learners’ personal development, academic outcomes, and social, emotional, mental and physical wellbeing. Pastoral care can have a positive impact on a range of different outcomes as part of the wider school culture. Effective pastoral care focuses on developing a whole-school ethos and approach to wellbeing through staff development and targeted support. Pastoral care is most effective when children, learners and parents have a voice in decisions and determining the school ethos.<sup>248</sup>

As providers respond to increasingly complex challenges – including child and learner anxiety and behavioural difficulties – pastoral provision has evolved to include dedicated roles such as pastoral support staff. However, while this specialist provision can offer more targeted support for vulnerable children and learners, it also risks shifting responsibilities traditionally held by teachers, sometimes creating tensions around the clarity of the role and accountability.<sup>249</sup>

The relationships between children and learners and teachers and the extent to which children and learners feel fairly treated and that the school cares about them, influence academic outcomes.<sup>250</sup> This review of teacher–pupil relationships shows that that positive relationships between teachers and children and learners can help to overcome some of the barriers to learning that affect the academic outcomes of disadvantaged children and learners and those groups associated with exclusion. Research shows that children and learners are more willing to engage and participate in learning when they perceive teachers as being caring and understanding.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> J Everitt, S Neary, M Delgado and L Clark, ‘[Personal guidance. What works?](#)’ The Careers & Enterprise Company, 2018.

<sup>247</sup> E Reid, ‘Impacts of shortening the length of career guidance: implications for practice, professionalism, service delivery and social justice’, in *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, Volume 50, 2022, pages 95 to 109.

<sup>248</sup> E Cary and L Webb, ‘Children’s wellbeing in schools’, UK Parliament POST, November 2025

<sup>249</sup> A O’Toole and S Soan, ‘Is the employment of pastoral support staff (PSS) working with students with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs changing the role and responsibilities of teachers in London and South East England?’ in ‘*Pastoral Care in Education*’, Volume 40, Issue 2, 2021, pages 197 to 216.

<sup>250</sup> G Di Lisio, A Milá Roa, A Halty, A Berástegui, A Couso Losada, and others, ‘Nurturing bonds that empower learning: a systematic review of the significance of teacher-student relationship in education’, in ‘*Frontiers in Education*’, Volume 10, 2025.

<sup>251</sup> F Wanders, I van der Veen, A Dijkstra and R Maslowski, ‘The influence of teacher-student and student-student relationships on societal involvement in primary and secondary schools’, in ‘*Theory & Research in Social Education*’, Volume 48, Issue 1, 2020, pages 101 to 119.

At the same time, broader thinking about pastoral care has moved towards a more proactive model that prioritises relationships and positions wellbeing at the heart of a whole-school culture and ethos rather than as an add-on. This shift is supported by calls for schools to embed emotional wellbeing into their everyday practices and for leaders to view pastoral care not just as responsive, but as a strategic and integrated part of whole-school development.<sup>252</sup> Together, these developments underscore the importance of clearly defined, collaborative pastoral systems that promote children and learners' wellbeing as a shared institutional responsibility.

## **Inclusive personal development and wellbeing**

There is a growing body of evidence outlining how schools and providers can support the mental health of children and learners. Whole-school approaches, professional learning for staff, targeted interventions, and the integration of external expertise have all been linked to improved outcomes.<sup>253</sup> [National wellbeing data following the COVID-19 pandemic](#) shows the importance of understanding the needs and experiences of different groups of children and learners to develop inclusive approaches to support wellbeing. Children and learners have highlighted the value of strong relationships with adults at their provision, which they report can help increase wellbeing and reduce feelings of loneliness.<sup>254</sup>

Evidence shows that integrating inclusive careers education, embedding respect for protected characteristics,<sup>255</sup> and implementing targeted curriculum adaptations are indicators of high-quality personal development. Equitable access to careers guidance, particularly for disadvantaged children and learners, those with SEND, and those who may be vulnerable, is associated with improved long-term outcomes in education, employment and training.<sup>256</sup> Targeted curriculum adaptations that are well planned and regularly reviewed can reduce barriers to learning without narrowing access to the full curriculum or limiting future opportunities.<sup>257</sup> This approach aligns with the principle that inclusion must support both access and ambition, ensuring that all children and learners are enabled to achieve personal and academic growth.

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<sup>252</sup> E Long, 'The future of pastoral care in schools: exploring whole-school trauma-informed approaches', in 'Pastoral Care in Education', Volume 40, Issue 3, 2022, pages 342 to 351.

<sup>253</sup> A Clarke, M Sorgenfrei, J Mulcahy, P Davie, C Friedrich and T McBride, '[Adolescent mental health: a systematic review on the effectiveness of school-based interventions](#)', Early Intervention Foundation, July 2021.

<sup>254</sup> '[State of the nation 2022: children and young people's wellbeing](#)', Department for Education, February 2023.

<sup>255</sup> The Equality Act 2020 lists 9 protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

<sup>256</sup> '[Good career guidance: the next 10 years](#)', The Gatsby Charitable Foundation, November 2024.

<sup>257</sup> '[Special educational needs in mainstream schools](#)', Education Endowment Foundation, May 2025.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspects services providing education and skills for children and learners of all ages, and inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people.

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