

Exploring school-level professional development in schools with high pupil disadvantage in England: Interim report 2024–25

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Highlights

- This report is intended to **support teachers' reflections on professional development (PD) within individual school contexts**.
- It presents **selected, preliminary** findings of the first year of a two-year project on 1) policy intentions for the coherent offer (CO) of school PD and 2) schools' interpretations and engagement with the CO.
- Our analysis of the Department for Education's (DfE) policy and framework documents indicates that the CO was intended to impact **pupil outcomes** through school-level areas of **high-quality teaching** and **culture and environment**. These components are complex and can be interpreted in different ways.
- Our case study schools interpreted these components differently and engaged with the CO in different ways.
- The report offers a **road map** that situates policy intentions and schools' engagement with the CO.
- This report concludes with **reflective questions** for schools' engagement with the CO.

Project journey

2024–25

Focus: Theory of Change

Provisional research questions:

- What are the mechanisms through which components of the coherent offer (e.g., programmes and evidence base) work together to achieve school-level outcomes?
- What are contextual enablers and barriers to these school-level mechanisms?
- What methods can help capture contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes?

Output: Final report, strategies and resources for schools to better use the 'coherent offer'

Provisional output: Academic paper(s)

2025–26

Focus: Mechanisms, Contexts, Outcomes

Research questions:

- What is the Theory of Change for how the 'coherent offer' contributes to improved pupil outcomes, with a focus on schools with high pupil disadvantage?
 - How is the 'coherent offer' intended to work?
 - How are schools with high pupil disadvantage engaging with the 'coherent offer'?

Output: Interim report on policy intentions and schools' interpretations

Provisional output in 2026: Academic paper on how schools engage with the 'coherent offer'

Overview of the project

High-quality PD is crucial for retaining teachers and improving pupil outcomes^{1,2,3} particularly for disadvantaged pupils^{4,5}. The Department for Education's (DfE) 2022 policy paper introduced a 'coherent offer' of PD (formerly called the 'Golden Thread'), promising support throughout the entire teacher career⁶.

This coherent offer is built on frameworks covering Initial Teacher Training (ITT), Early Career Teacher Entitlement (ECTE, formerly Early Career Framework (ECF)-based training and induction), and National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) (See Figure 1 for a visualisation). The frameworks share a consistent format, language and tone, and their evidence base, independently reviewed by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), draws on what the DfE describes as the best available research on what defines great teaching and leadership⁶.

Earlier evaluations^{7,8} have mainly focused on individual programmes rather than exploring whether and how the CO is working *in combination* in the same school. The experiences of schools in engaging with the offer and the key school-level outcomes remain underexplored, particularly for schools with high pupil disadvantage^a.

This [two-year mixed methods project](#) aims to explore how the coherent offer of PD is related to pupil outcomes, with a particular focus on schools with high pupil disadvantage.

^a There is no universally accepted definition of high pupil disadvantage. For this project, we consider financial disadvantage FSM (free school meals)/FSM6 as a proxy, and classify those above the national average as highly disadvantaged.

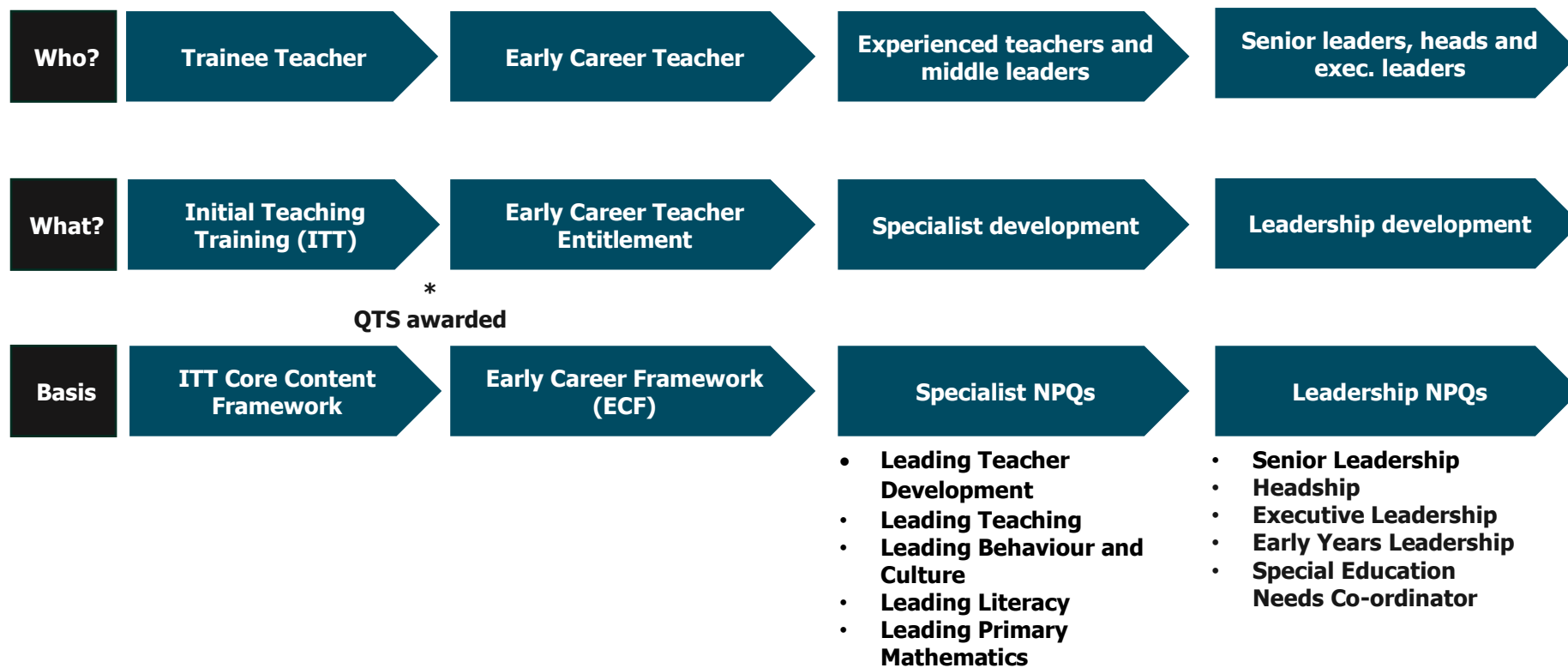


Figure 1: The coherent offer of professional development in England⁶

What did we do?

In the 2024–25 school year [Work Package 1], we explored 1) how the coherent offer of PD is intended to create impact and 2) how schools are engaging with the coherent offer, using **a qualitative design**.

Part 1 drew on:

- **Frameworks and policies^a**
 - ITT, ECF, and all NPQ framework documents
 - Two policy papers^{6,9}
- **Key information interviews (six total)** with
 - DfE advisory board members
 - A policy and research lead on the evidence base for the CO
 - A content designer from a lead provider
 - A programme lead from a lead provider
 - A head of programmes from a lead provider

Focus areas included:

- Policy priorities and considerations during development
- Evidence base
- Design challenges
- Intended school-level changes

Part 2 drew on **six school cases:**

- **School characteristics**
 - All served communities with above national average of FSM
 - Varied in type, size, phase, and location
 - Examples included: a voluntary-aided secondary school in the North West, a secondary school within a large multi-academy trust (MAT) in the South West, a primary community school in the North East, and a secondary academy within a very large MAT covering the East, South, and London, etc.
- **Semi-structured interviews** with
 - Senior leaders
 - PD leads
 - Participants of ECF and NPQs^b

Focus areas included:

^a We prioritised the DfE perspective and want to be clear about the limitation of this approach. In particular, policies and guidance from other bodies, such as Ofsted, which is also part of the CO system, may also shape PD, the outcomes expected, the resources received, and may influence school interpretation. We aimed to look at these wider influences through schools' perspectives.

^b No initial teacher trainees were available for interviews in the case study schools, and not all schools had full participation from the senior leadership team, PD leads, and PD participants.

- School culture
 - Engagement with PD
 - Implementation of PD
 - Perceived outcomes of PD
- **Establishing a profile** for each case using publicly available data.

We used **thematic analysis** to analyse the data, which involved input from our multi-disciplinary team and our Project Advisory Group.

What did we learn?

For the purpose of facilitating reflection, this report details the selected findings in response to two questions:

1. What were the policy intentions of the CO?
2. How did our case study schools describe and interpret their engagement with the CO?

1. What were the policy intentions of the CO?

1.1. A top-level road map

The CO of PD was intended to improve leadership, teaching and curriculum, culture and environment, and retention and progression at the school level, which would ultimately drive pupil outcomes. Leadership was considered as both an outcome of NPQs and an enabler of other outcomes e.g. culture and environment. The idea of teaching and curriculum embraced **high-quality teaching for pupils** and **high-quality PD for staff**.

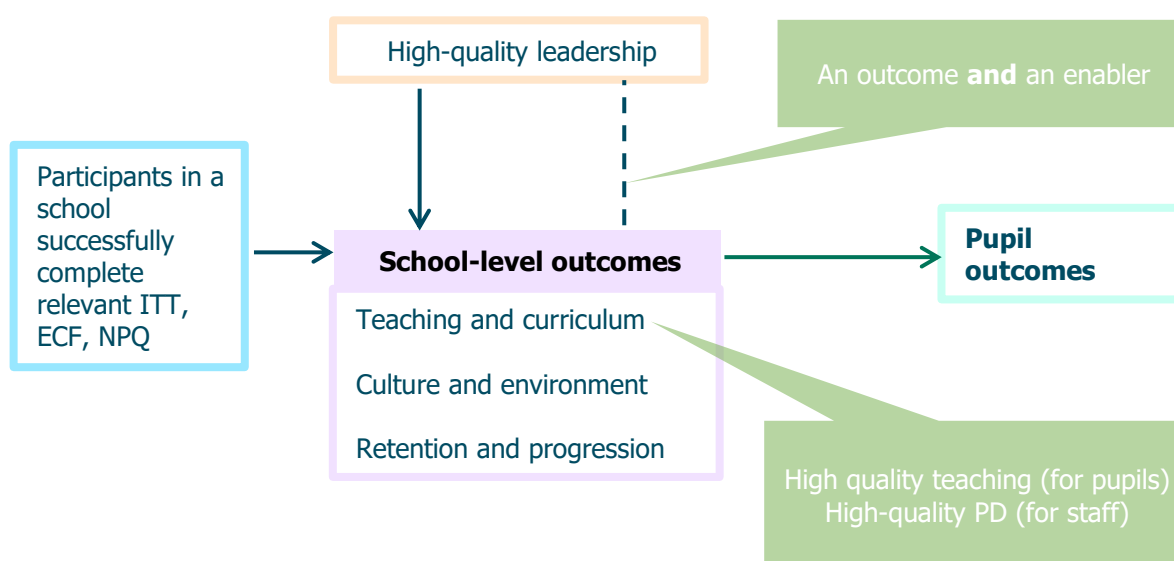


Figure 2: A top-level road map for how the CO contributes to pupil outcomes

1.2. How were the key outcomes defined in policies?

Our analysis of the DfE's policy and framework documents, together with insights from key informant interviews, revealed the **conceptual complexities** of the following three school-level outcomes. Different schools emphasise different interpretations of these outcomes in their engagement with the coherent offer of PD, which will be detailed in the next section on how our case study schools interpreted these ideas.

1.2.1. High-quality teaching as part of teaching and curriculum

'**High-quality teaching**' (used interchangeably with 'high-quality teachers') was used as an overarching concept that encompassed the following themes.

- Teachers have a **strong theoretical understanding**, evidenced by '*learn that*' statements in the frameworks
- **Setting the right culture and environment for learning** – e.g. establishing high expectations to promote challenge and aspiration, creating positive classroom environments and setting clear behavioural expectations⁹
- **High-quality delivery** – e.g. drawing on the cognitive science of learning, delivering subject and curriculum content, planning and teaching effectively and adapting to the needs of different learners^{9,10,11}
- **High-quality assessment** – e.g. making accurate and productive use of assessment to inform and improve teaching^{9,11}
- Teachers **continuously develop** – e.g. engaging in ongoing CPD, contributing to school culture through collaborative working relationships and shared responsibility for pupil outcomes, and attending to pastoral aspects of their role, particularly pupil wellbeing^{9,10}

1.2.2. Culture and environment

Culture was referred to as:

- **A sense of value** – e.g. “invest in and embed school cultures that create a sense of value through ongoing professional development” ^{12(p4)}
- **Expectations** – e.g. “early career teachers should not have to start from scratch every time they plan a lesson” ^{12(p23)} and that “all pupils can experience success” ^{13(p21)}
- **Attitudes, beliefs and appreciation** – e.g. “teachers and pupils have a positive attitude to mathematics, believe that all pupils can achieve, and appreciate the purpose and value of learning mathematics” ^{14(p12)}.
- **Respect and trust** – e.g. “culture of respect and trust in class that supports all pupils to succeed” ^{9(p8)}
- **Embedded in practice** – e.g. “articulating, modelling and rehearsing practices that contribute to the intended trust culture and supporting every member of the trust community to do the same” under “Trust Culture” ^{13(p10)}

Different **levels of culture** were also identified:

- **National level**
 - Broad and aspirational, framed as “establishing strong professional development cultures across the country” ^{6(p4)}
- **Trust level**
 - Shared beliefs about the role and impact of teachers and high-quality teaching
 - Expectations that all staff and pupils can achieve
 - Respectful and supportive environments
 - Tangible practices: aligning colleagues for consistency, leaders setting strategic direction, implementing policies and monitoring effects¹³
- **School level**
 - Shared beliefs and values about the role and impact of teachers and high-quality teaching
 - Expectations that all staff and pupils can achieve
 - Staff-focused: positive relationships with colleagues, reducing micromanagement, investing in staff, promoting work-life balance, championing evidence-based practice^{15,16}
 - Pupil-facing: positive relationships with pupils and parents/carers, setting behavioural expectations, positive attitudes and valuing learning^{9,10,13}
- **PD culture (within a school)**
 - Pursuit of continuous development
 - Shared responsibility for PD

- Tangible practices: co-creating PD priorities and regular communication^{15,16}
- **Classroom level**
 - Respect, trust and perseverance
 - A safe, predictable learning environment where pupils can make mistakes and learn from them^{9(p8),10(p9),16(p11)}

1.2.3. Pupil outcomes

There is a clear emphasis on ensuring that **all** pupils succeed, with particular attention to those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with additional needs. The language used to describe pupil success/outcomes varies, which broadly falls into four main categories:

- **Academic outcomes** – e.g. “Academic success”^{10(p17)}, “A high degree of success in applying previously taught material”^{9(p15)}; “I am not saying that academic success is the most important thing, but it is essential.” (Head of programmes from a lead provider)
- **Behavioural outcomes** (also considered as a foundation for learning) – e.g. “Established routines that can help create an effective learning environment”^{9(p22)}; “I suppose lots of things, but thinking about attainment, you know, thinking *about behaviour, thinking about attendance*” (Policy and research lead on the evidence base for the CO)
- **Mental health and psychological outcomes** – e.g. “support pupils with their mental health”^{10(p6)}; “The pupils are motivated and feel valued. They're supported in their mental health, they learn better, they retain better and they achieve more” (Content designer from a lead provider)
- **Experiential or holistic outcomes** – e.g. “Have the opportunity to experience meaningful success”^{10(p22)}; “Transformed understanding of the world” (DfE advisory board member); “Creating a more holistic sense of outcome for a young person” (Content designer from a lead provider)

2. How did our case study schools describe and interpret their engagement with the CO?

In their descriptions of school-level PD, our case study schools deployed these key ideas in different ways and placed emphasis on different relations between them depending on their own context.

2.1. *High quality teaching*

For high-quality teaching, staff across the case study schools talked about using evidence-based teaching strategies and strengthening learning environments for the benefit of pupils, though approaches were context-specific.

One school that faced ongoing issues around pupil disengagement since the COVID pandemic targeted specific teaching strategies, such as adaptive teaching, as well as prioritising reading to support pupils to access the curriculum:

In terms of what the priorities of the school are [...] that **students are actually fully engaged in their learning.**

So adaptive teaching, checking for understanding, making sure that challenging reading is an absolute priority to develop the ... reading ages so they can engage properly with the curriculum content, and they understand it.

PD Lead, School A (community secondary school in coastal area, NW)

Another school focused on ensuring an effective learning environment was in place. They emphasised routines and high behaviour expectations to ensure consistency that was in line with their MAT's vision and approach to teaching and learning:

If [students are] allowed to talk as they're sitting down or whatever it is, it makes it harder for their colleague down the road, you know, down the corridor when they come to teach them.

So **really insisting on consistency and putting a lot of time into setting that up well** and then coming back to it and not being worried about pulling people up if they're not being consistent, even if their lessons are going fine, to see the greater good.

Principal, School D (secondary school within large MAT in urban area, SE)

2.2. *Culture and environment*

Discussions with schools highlight the need to make distinctions between whole school culture, school PD culture and classroom culture, particularly where schools want to describe interactions between different levels of culture.

Schools discussed their **PD culture**, emphasising elements like collaboration and regular sharing of great practice:

The culture of the school is definitely one that is very supportive, you know, **we've all got that kind of collegiate culture because we've all got the same goal...**

We all want the best outcomes for our students, and we know that to do that we need to work together and when we provide those opportunities in CPD sessions for people to discuss what they're doing, you know how it's working, the impact, **people are really open and happy to share what they're doing.**

PD lead, School A (community secondary school in coastal area, NW)

I would say it depends, **it's more about how [staff] feel supported** and, you know, that the **culture of the school...** obviously PD is a massive part of that. But I think it's more in terms of... how they feel they're treated within the school environment rather than sort of professional development specifically.

PD Lead, School B (voluntary-aided religious secondary school in coastal area, NW)

Another emphasised a tension between a particular kind of 'performance management' PD culture and a wider culture in which students can grow:

When it was performance management, people were very focused on classes achieving certain things and what we weren't doing is, we weren't building culture within the school. We weren't looking at everything that you do as a school that is going to benefit the students. **The teaching is one element of it, and the school, whatever shape you make your school, the children will grow into that.**

PD Lead, School E (secondary school within large MAT in coastal area, SW)

2.3. *Pupil outcomes*

For some schools, pupil outcomes were interpreted broadly, with a focus beyond the academic to **a holistic approach** that involved investing in a personal curriculum or pastorally to support all students, including those from high disadvantage backgrounds:

We're not churning out robots here, you know, and **we're not an exam factory**. Yes, academic results are important and the academic excellence is really important [...] But for me it's the whole child and we have really invested in our personal development curriculum as well for our students because **we know our students, we know our community** [...] When you think of equity in terms of education and improving life chances for all, which is the trust values and approach.

Headteacher, School E (secondary school within large MAT in coastal area, SW)

It's a very child-centred approach. You know **we're looking at, not just the academic**, we're looking at developing the personal social development for the children as well. We've got quite a heavy pastoral side and it's quite a nurturing school.

PD Lead, School C (community religious primary school in rural area, NE)

Other schools emphasised their approach to achieve better **academic outcomes**:

What are our gaps within the school? What do we need to learn and build on from that? And then we do it in the classroom, don't you? What—the gaps of learning for the students—can we do to close them and make sure that they get better or what are the gaps of learning for the staff? [...] **and that's why the results are sort of what they are.**

PD Lead, School F (secondary school within large MAT in urban area, NE)

2.4. *Engagement with the CO*

When discussing their engagement with the CO, interview participants did not always clearly separate taking part in a programme from drawing on the evidence base that underpins it. Across the six case study schools, school leaders and PD leads described drawing on or engaging with the CO in different ways. This could be through:

- Individual colleagues completing specific PD programmes of the CO
- School PD drawing on the wider evidence base that supports the CO
- Drawing on skills and developed through engaging with the delivery of CO programmes e.g. mentoring expertise

3. An integrated road map: Bridging policy intentions and school interpretations

Drawing on the two stages of analysis above, we offer the following road map for the coherent offer of PD at the school level that integrates policy intentions with their interpretations by school colleagues. The following diagram indicates proposed causal relationships linking engagement with the coherent offer (including its underpinning evidence base) and pupil outcomes, at the level of the school.



This model links policy intention and school-level reflection by clarifying the components of the top-level road map. For example:

- 'Culture and environment' is separated into three linked conceptions of **whole school culture**, **PD culture** and **culture for learning**
- 'Teaching and curriculum' is separated into the linked areas of **high-quality teaching** and **high-quality PD**
- A distinction is made between **pupil outcomes conceived narrowly as attainment** and **pupil outcomes conceived holistically in terms of wellbeing and personal success**

While this diagram does not aim to be comprehensive, it further complicates the top-level road map. It indicates additional relationships between each of these components that were emphasised in the school case studies. It also indicates some of the looping and feedback relationships that underpin a hypothesis that the CO of PD might create a combined impact that is 'greater than the sum of its parts.'

We would tentatively argue that the components of the CO are positioned as impacting on teachers and leaders through developing what individual school colleagues **know** and **can do**. Synergies might then emerge through leaders making changes to whole school policies, practices and values that support or amplify the outcomes of individual participation in PD programmes.

Considerations for schools

We cannot yet comment on whether this road map is borne out in practice, or which of the posited causal pathways might be most significant. In the next year of our research, we plan to identify promising **mechanisms of synergy** between the different components of the CO and to investigate their impact at the level of the school.

At this stage of our research, we hope that the road map offered above and the following prompts can support schools in **reflecting on** how culture, high quality teaching and pupil outcomes are related for their own approaches to school level PD.

The DfE's coherent offer

- What do you understand by the 'coherent offer'?
- How does your school engage with its programmes, i.e. ITT, ECF/ECT entitlement/ECT programme, and NPQs?
- How does your school engage with the CO beyond the three programmes, if any?

School culture

Our case study schools were found to differ in how they conceptualised the role of culture in supporting pupil outcomes.

- How does your school currently conceptualise culture?
- How integrated is your PD culture with your school's wider culture?
- Where relevant, what is the role of MAT culture and vision in determining school culture?

Pupil outcomes

Several case study schools showed reluctance to reduce PD impact to academic attainment alone. They emphasised wider pupil outcomes such as **personal growth, well-being, and pastoral development**, with whole school culture contributing directly to these. Which outcomes we value matters for attempts to determine the success of a coherent approach to PD.

- How does your school currently conceptualise pupil outcomes?
- Do you think it is possible to measure the impact of PD on pupil outcomes in your school?
- What outcomes or metrics related to pupils do you currently use to measure the impact of PD in your school?
- To what extent does PD in your school draw on CO programmes or the wider evidence base to support these outcomes?

Next steps for research

Work package 1 suggests engagement with the coherent offer of PD could have an impact at the school level that is **greater than the sum of its parts**. Promising lines of inquiry include but are not exclusive to:

- how leaders deploy ECTs and mentors as expert resources to disseminate evidence-informed teaching and PD practices.
- how the consistent language of the CO supports collaborative teaching, and how it supports sharing best practice and transition of teachers between school contexts.

In our next work package, we will further explore these suggested **mechanisms** in a wider range of schools:

- To further identify what underpins the expectation that the coherent offer generates impact greater than the sum of its parts, including the **school-level synergies** that arise through engaging with the CO, drawing on data beyond the six schools and at the national level.

- To co-develop **strategies and resources** with schools through participatory workshops to help the sector make fuller use of the CO.

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