

How a school develops one aspect of its SDP: a report that critically reflects on the actions, impact and evidence base.

Introduction

In October 2014, the Welsh government introduced the School Development Plan (SDP) to promote sustainable school development. The purpose of an SDP is for a school to identify short- and long-term goals, each supported by specific action points and success criteria to help achieve them. For the purpose of this report the phrases: School Development Plan (SDP) and School Improvement Plan (SIP) are interchangeable as they both represent the document created as required by the Welsh Government.

The purpose of this report is to review a specific long-term goal taken from School X's Improvement Plan (SIP), looking at how the goal was achieved and how the impact was measured, using an evidence-based framework. Specifically, this report focuses on the school's goal to improve the quality of teaching and learning by continuing to implement the new Welsh curriculum and to maintain innovation school status. To achieve this goal, the school have chosen to develop assessment models to monitor progress and embed formative assessment in order to promote responsive teaching. The SIP being evaluated in this report was created in early 2019, and is from an English-medium school located in a city in South Wales. The school teaches approximately 1,800 students between the ages of 11 and 18, including pupils from a wide range of ethnic, religious and economic backgrounds. Examples of how the school has begun to implement their action points are taken from their mathematics department.

Literature review

Over the years, education systems have seen many reforms including that of governance and policy making. While these changes vary between countries, Au and Ferrare (2015) recognise a general shift from central government decision making to more decentralised governance. In these reforms, responsibilities for governing are being given to public-private partnerships within school networks and communities. At times when governance has changed hands, governments have maintained a stake in school to school policy influences though this has been limited to mandatory legislation and regulatory frameworks (Joseph, 2010) and avoids influencing the day to day operation of individual schools. Educational networks and partnerships that have chosen to decentralise their decision-making are identified as 'polycentric' (Ostrom *et al.*, 1961; Black, 2008) as opposed to monocentric forms of direction, whereby national governments dictate policy guidelines, monitoring and control (Teisman, 1992).

In 2014 the Welsh government produced a 5-year reform plan (DfES 2014), that identified key activities and measures to be taken by schools in order to improve the outcomes of learners from low income families. The cause for concern about Wales' education system came as a result of a countrywide review conducted by OECD (2014). The OECD (2014) recognises the potential advantages of smaller school systems, but when compared to similarly small school systems (such as those in Alberta, Finland, Hong Kong and Singapore), Wales underperformed significantly. The review argued that Wales had lacked a long-term vision and an appropriate school improvement structure.

As a result of the OECD's findings, the Welsh government implemented the reform plan (DfES 2014) presenting their interpretation of the concept of a self-improving school system. In the context of this report, the most relevant aspect of the government's reform plan is the

ending of “top-down” monocentric governing, enabling schools to take control of their futures and development and to strengthen partnerships between schools allowing them to support and challenge each other (DfES 2014, p. 21). While the government provided no specific guidance for such collaborative arrangements, school networks were allowed a degree of freedom to implement these new polycentric governing methods, with local authorities providing support when needed. Prior to this, Estyn’s annual report (2012 - 2013) recognised that over a quarter of schools in Wales could benefit from self-evaluation and planning for improvement. The result of the OECD and Estyn reports prompted the introduction of the School Development Plan (SDP) in October 2014 by the Welsh government, to promote sustainable school improvement.

One of the long-term goals included in School X’s SIP is to implement the new Welsh curriculum within the school. In order to achieve this, a key action point has been developed which is to embed formative assessment into teaching practices, allowing teachers to track pupil progress and promote responsive teaching.

In the new curriculum for Wales, Donaldson (2015) discusses the importance of formative assessments as a means for practitioners to guide the direction of lessons, with the intention to maximise learning opportunities within the classroom.

Formative assessment has been defined as the means of using pupil’s performance within the classroom to dictate the direction of the lesson and / or future lessons (Cowie and Bell, 1999) (William, 2011). Black and William (2009) explain that the information gained from formative assessment are likely to provide a better insight about the next steps in instruction and / or be better founded than those decisions where no evidence was elicited at all. An additional benefit of formative assessment, as identified by Rosenshine (2016), is the potential for misconceptions to be identified and addressed in a timely manner before they can manifest themselves in pupils. Furthermore, because the feedback from formative assessments is instant, practitioners are able to see if the lesson content is being correctly received by the class. This allows the lesson to continue as planned, or in the event of misunderstanding, allow time for topic to be re-explained.

Formative assessment therefore appears to be important to the success of implementing the new curriculum. However, there is a flaw in assuming that we are capable of accurately assessing what pupils have learnt during the lesson. Didau (2014) postulates that we are incapable of differentiating whether the outcomes of assessment are the result of prior knowledge, short-term recall or actual understanding of the topic. Didau highlights that when using formative assessments, we may therefore actually be assessing a pupil’s performance as opposed to their learning. In this context, ‘learning’ refers to relatively permanent change in a pupil’s knowledge and understanding of a topic, whereas ‘performance’ is defined as the temporary variation of a pupil’s knowledge and understanding of a topic that is measured throughout instruction (Soderstrom and Bjork, 2015). In addition, it has been found that performance is often inconsistent and has a weak correlation to learning (Soderstrom and Bjork, 2015). This important difference between learning and performance has the potential to misguide practitioners if they misinterpret short term performance as a step towards long-term learning.

William (2011) discusses the fact that the chances of a pupil committing learning to long-term memory are improved if they were able to answer a question successfully at one time. Therefore, although the shortcomings of formative assessment are apparent, by not asking questions we limit our understanding of pupils current understanding and risk misconceptions forming.

Developing an action point

The implementation of the new Welsh curriculum by 2022 is mandated by the Welsh government. However, no specific guidance has been provided to schools as to how to deliver this new curriculum, and the onus has been put on local school networks to collaborate with each other to successfully achieve this common goal. Many schools, such as School X, have decided to include this as a goal within their SIP, with supporting action points and success criteria.

To support schools in achieving the goals set out in their SIPs, the Welsh government produced a School Development Plan Guidance document (SDPG, 2014). The SDGP provides a typical planning cycle to assist schools with achieving their targets, including four stages: self-evaluation, strategic planning, making improvement / action, reviewing impact (see Figure 1). The cyclical nature of this plan emphasises that fact that improvements can always be made and all schools should continually be striving to do better.

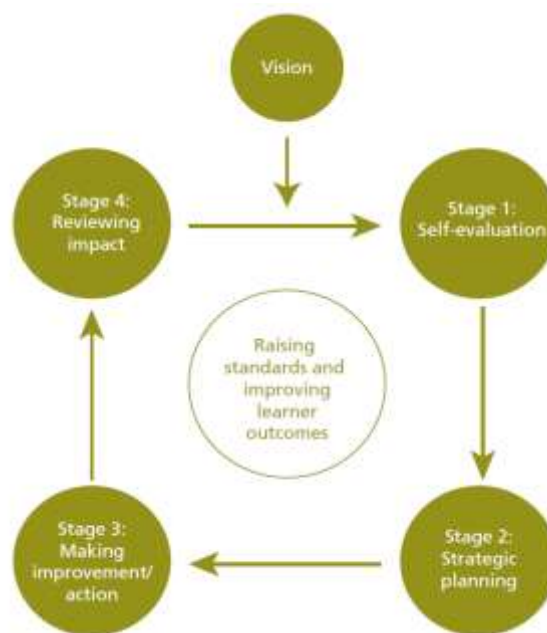


Figure 1: School development planning cycle (SDGP, 2014)

Stage 1: Self-evaluation

As recommended by Estyn (2012 - 2013), the first step to take when creating an action point is for schools to self-evaluate their current position with regards to raising standards of their pupils. Due to the new curriculum, many schools will share this common target but how they will achieve it may differ. School X recognises the need to adapt their current curriculum so that they are teaching in line with the new curriculum requirements. The school also refer to their status as an “Innovation School” within their network, and intend to maintain this status and continue to be leaders within their network.

Stage 2: Strategic Planning

In order to achieve the school’s vision of successfully implementing the new curriculum, School X has involved all school partners and stakeholders so as to achieve equity in input

from all members of the school team and local community. In School X's case this included the head teacher, members of the senior leadership team (SLT) and governors.

The key action points identified to achieve the school's goal of implementing the new curriculum and maintain innovation school status are as follows:

- Develop areas of learning experiences (AoLE's)
- Develop curriculum designers
- Develop assessment model that aligns with new curriculum progression steps.
- Embed formative assessment.

The first three points address the requirement to create a bespoke KS3 curriculum in line with the new guidelines and an appropriate assessment method to monitor progress and performance, and will be common among schools across the country. The choice to focus on formative assessment as a fourth action most likely stems from Donaldson's (2015) recommendations with regards to responsive teaching as a means to improve pupil outcomes. It is the school's interpretation of responsive teaching as formative assessment that has most likely lead to this decision.

After successfully identifying the key actions, the school has established a timeframe of 3 years aligning with the Welsh governments plan for the new curriculum to be delivered in schools. The staff member responsible (RSM) for overseeing the action point has also been allocated the total budget as a surplus to their salary packet.

Stage 3: Making improvement / action

In order to implement these action points, all departments have been informed by the RSM about the creation of new curriculums and assessment models. The specifics of this are detailed in another action point in the SIP, but it transpires that the creation of such aspects is the duty of the appointed individuals within the departments. The departments will report back in regular intervals to the RSM to ensure that adequate progress is being made.

With regards to formative assessment and assessment models in the mathematics department, at the start and end of every module pupils complete diagnostic and check-up tests respectively. These are used to establish where pupils are starting from and how much they have improved over the course of the module. While these tests are very informative to the teacher, it could be said that the numerousness of tests can be overbearing for the pupils at times.

Curriculum designers in the mathematics department are currently trialling the new curriculum with a top ability set year 7 class, with the intention to continue the use this class as the pilot for rest of KS3. All pupils starting in the school from 2020/21 onwards will also be following the new curriculum. An initial review of the class following the new curriculum, shows the pupils have high levels of engagement in lessons and learning outcomes appear to be rich and substantial. However, there are growing concerns that the new style of teaching in the curriculum may not be appropriate for lower ability sets. The outcomes of the implementing the new curriculum in lower ability sets will not be known until 2020/21 academic year when all pupils in year 7 will be following the new curriculum.

Stage 4: Reviewing Impact

The RSM is responsible for collating data from all the departments to document the rate of progress of pupils throughout the academic year. These "data drops" are used by the RSM to oversee how pupils are performing during the implementation phase of the school

development planning cycle. These insights into the school's progress allow departments to adapt their strategies so that they will have a functioning curriculum in place by July 2022.

In the context of the mathematics department, the diagnostic and check-up tests of pupils studying the old curriculum are being compared against those trialling the new curriculum to observe if any changes for better or worse are materialising. It is considered that the high frequency of these tests allows an accurate insight to the relative progress of those trialling the new curriculum.

School X have made use of inset days to show their progress to schools in their network. These sessions have been very successful, with praise and constructive feedback being provided to the curriculum designers.

Reflection and evaluation

The fourth key action point, to embed formative assessment within teaching practices, was chosen by the school as it has been found to be an efficient way of allowing responsive teaching. In accordance with Donaldson's (2015) recommendations with regards to responsive teaching as a means to improve pupil outcomes, School X have decided to focus on formative assessment as a key element of the new curriculum. As discussed in the literature review, the key shortfall of formative assessment is related to the misinterpretation of performance as learning. However, through appropriate questioning, formative assessment allows practitioners to establish if pupils are developing misconceptions about the work (Mason, 2002). It is arguable that the damage caused by allowing a misconception to manifest is greater than the potential of misinterpreting a pupil's performance as learning. It is therefore considered that, on balance, formative assessment in the classroom is beneficial for both teachers and pupils.

Assessment models will differ between departments, but within the mathematics department at School X, they have implemented an assessment model that incorporates measuring a pupil's prior knowledge at the start of a module and their understanding at the end of the module. A criticism raised by members of staff and pupils is that at times, there have been more testing sessions in a week than taught lessons. This clearly does not promote a fluid progression of learning, however the information gained from these formative and summative assessments have been shown to be successful in deciding lesson directions. The results of the check-up tests compared to the diagnostics also show practitioners how the child has improved, and specifically in which aspects.

Whilst the decision to trial the new curriculum on a high-ability class will provide an insight into how pupils will take to the new style of teaching, the effectiveness of the new curriculum for middle to lower abilities may not be taken into account. The potential for teaching to lapse into old-curriculum style is increased if new curriculum techniques aren't trialled across a range of pupils to see how they adapt. The primary concern is that the new curriculum requires pupils to take charge of their own learning, which may not be as effective for lower ability pupils. This is because lower ability pupils, by definition, have lesser prior knowledge than their higher achieving peers and it is this disparity in knowledge that will make investigation style lessons much more difficult for lower ability pupils.

Conclusion

To conclude, it would appear that the school have successfully begun to implement their action point and are well on their way to having a suitable KS3 curriculum in place for the 2022/23 cohort. While the decision to trial the new curriculum on a higher ability class will highlight the benefits available to those pupils, medium to lower attainment pupils should

have been taken into consideration to allow appropriate adaptations to be made ready for the 2020/21 year 7 classes. The decision to share the ideas of the curriculum designers' ideas with schools in the local network has improved community within the local network and maintained the school's status as an innovation school. The assessment models used within the mathematics department, while controversial, are clearly able to show improvement on prior performances and should be continue to be utilised to monitor the progress of pupils as they follow the new curriculum.

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