

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

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Introduction

Embedding a robust strategy that encompasses the most fundamental priorities of a school is at the heart of a School Development Plan (SDP). Welsh Government (2023) highlight that planning for improvement is a process and a continuous cycle which strives to improve learner outcomes whilst raising standards of education. Reflecting the less prescriptive nature of the Curriculum for Wales, Welsh Government (2014) also sets out a guidance for SDP's that is not overly prescriptive. Recognising the unique nature of schools Welsh Government (2014) highlight that what might work for one school may not be suitable for another. This report will explore how School X develops a particular aspect of it's SDP whilst critically reflecting on the actions, impact and evidence base that surrounds it. Focussing on literacy development and more specifically *reading for pleasure*, this report seeks to demonstrate how this specific action point is addressed and impact measured within an evidence-based framework. This report will firstly explore the literature surrounding school improvement theory, along with debates in the research concerned with literacy development. The report will then move onto critically discussing Schools X's SDP, focussing on literacy development and how the Humanities Area of Learning and Experience (AOLE) sought to improve it. Finally, the report will reflect and evaluate the chosen action point and make practical suggestions based on theoretical knowledge, research and practise. To put it into context, School X is a large mixed-gender secondary school, teaching ages 11-19. Pupils eligible for free school meals is below the national average of 21.2% in 2023 and is recorded as being 11.4% in 2023.

Literature review

Chapter one – School Development Process

According to Welsh Government (2023) the overall purpose of SDP's is to guide schools in enabling their learners to receive the best possible learning experiences, regardless of their background. This ties in with the idea of tackling issues in pursuit for social justice whereby schools act as key agents that can enable social justice. Welsh Government (2022) suggest that the starting point of any improvement and development process begins with effective self-evaluation. Barber (2001) supports this and argues that self-evaluation is the key to the search for improvement. The principles of progression are intertwined in the self-evaluation process whereby evidence of learner progression acts to inform the schools self-evaluation process (Welsh Government, 2022). However, if there is no coherence in the planning of

progression, whereby a school is not actively making decisions about what they are doing and why, it is more challenging for self-evaluation to take place.

Within an SDP there are a range of stakeholders who each have a role and responsibility to play. A report on effective practise in a case study school highlighted an example whereby the self-evaluation is a shared responsibility of all staff (Estyn, 2020). Bridghouse and Woods (1999) argue for the idea of 'critical friends' being invaluable to schools, asking questions and speculating out loud. One could argue that one such 'critical friend' could be deemed as Estyn, who play a key role in the school development process in delivering inspection reports. Welsh Government (2022) argues for schools to focus on improvement rather than satisfying external accountability. For this to take effect it could be argued that the whole culture of the 'inspection' needs to change.

In order for a school to drive forward the school improvement priorities, a supportive professional learning culture and commitment to it's continuation, is paramount (Estyn, 2023). Similar to School X, Blackwood Comprehensive School displayed effective practise in developing a culture of professional learning, delivering it in INSET, staff meetings and fortnightly teacher briefings (Estyn, 2023). Senge et al (2011) argued for schools to be reconceptualised as 'learning organisations' in order for the school to deal better with the rapidly changing world we live in. However, Kools et al (2020) suggests that there are significant gaps between the research and practise in classrooms and that collecting evidence that makes an educational institution a 'learning organisation' is challenging.

Chapter two – literacy development

The Education Endowment Fund (EEF) argue that *"young people who leave school without good literacy skills are held back at every stage of life"* (EEF, 2021, pp.2). School X supports the EEF guidance that literacy is the responsibility of all practitioners across all learning areas rather than just the sole responsibility of English teachers and literacy coordinators (EEF, 2021). The idea of disciplinary literacy focusses on improving literacy across the curriculum with subject specific support (EEF, 2021). However, Shanahan and Shanahan (2012) highlight that there is a confusion and failure to differentiate between 'disciplinary' literacy and 'content' literacy.

Supported by Kools et al (2020), Castles et al (2018) suggests there is a gap between the research surrounding learning to read and the level of public understanding of putting it into practise. Castles et al (2018) argues that even when there is strong national guidance, it

often fails to filter down to local level. However, this essay will explore how School X did evidence aligning research with practise, with a focus on subject specific vocabulary.

Castles et al (2018) highlight how for decades there has been great contestation over how children learn to read known as the 'reading wars'. School X took on the '*just read*' approach with their Year 8 cohort which is a strategy explored by Westbrook et al (2019) who looks at the impact of reading aloud on 'poorer readers'. Westbrook et al (2019) suggests '*just reading*' to learners makes a significant difference to learners standardised reading scores. This idea of '*reading along*' is supported by Didau (2023a) who believes that '*just reading*' to children makes more of an impact than teaching learners to read. However, Didau (2023b) also notes that the problem arises when the expectation is that learners follow along at the same speed.

In contrast to teachers '*just reading*' to their class, explored by Westbrook et al (2019), there is also significant research surrounding the benefits of *reading by listening* supported by Wallin (2021). It is also worth noting the debated importance of what is being read, whether it be general or subject specific. EEF (2021) argues that general approaches of '*just reading*' in form time are unlikely to be as impactful as subject specific approaches. School X chose a subject specific approach within their Humanities AOLE which supports the idea of disciplinary literacy (EEF, 2021). EEF (2021) highlights the importance of a balanced approach to reading that combines writing instruction with reading. This is in slight contrast to Didau's (2023a) and Westbrook et al (2019) '*just read*' approach which focusses solely on continuous reading in class.

Developing an action point

Looking at literacy development as the chosen aspect, this section discusses the SDP and explores the processes that the school underwent with a degree of criticality. Literacy development was identified by School X as being a fundamental priority and this report looks specifically at what the Humanities AOLE is doing to improve it.

Self-evaluation

With literacy development being intertwined throughout the National Mission and results from the National Literacy Trust suggesting that strong reading skills improve children's academic attainment, School X underwent a self-evaluation process. After choosing literacy development as a whole-school priority, this was then filtered down into the AOLE plans that

link to the overarching priorities. The Humanities AOLE in School X chose to do a 'pre-reading' questionnaire to explore learners' confidence in reading and the frequency of time spent reading. Although Estyn (2020) highlight how the SDP is the responsibility of all staff, it could be questioned whether certain AOLE's have more scope in engaging in certain priorities than others. This is evident in School X whereby the Humanities AOLE had a huge focus on literacy development, whereas it could be questioned as to how much other AOLE's also engaged in this priority due to the nature of the subjects.

School X senior leadership team also collected their own quantitative and qualitative data using a mixed methods approach to gain a panoramic view of literacy development across the whole school. Randomised, stratified sampling was used to select pupil participants and a range of data was gathered on teacher's current practise. Research instruments used throughout the data collection included observations, semi-structured interviews with pupils/teachers, questionnaires and work sampling.

Data analysis

Through analysing the pre-reading questionnaire, the Humanities AOLE in School X was able to determine that large numbers of learners had not read any books in the last six months. Clark and De Zoysa (2011) suggests there is a positive relationship between reading frequency and attainment which highlights why the school used this method of questionnaire.

Involving stakeholders

Similar to Estyn's (2020) report on effective practise within a school creating a culture of shared ownership and responsibility of the SDP, School X also shared this vision. Whilst literacy development is a whole-school priority at School X, this was then filtered down into each of the AOLE's. As part of the literacy trial in the Humanities AOLE, teachers took part in training during 'twilight' meetings to improve their knowledge and expertise surrounding the topic of disciplinary literacy. EEF (2021) highlights the importance of giving staff the training before '*reading aloud*' and suggests that it improves the support the teacher is then able to give the student. Alongside training surrounding 'explicit vocabulary instruction', a mutual climate of support was created through providing access to resources and sharing the whole-school's vision of literacy development and its importance.

Strategic planning

With the whole-school priority focussing on literacy development, the Humanities AOLE decided that their target for the literacy trial was to inspire 'reading for pleasure'. Using the

principles of progression as the success criteria as a clear pathway, the Humanities AOLE was able to create a plan of what needed to happen and the strategy involved. After delivering training to staff in 'twilight' sessions and justifying the cost of three hundred books for the Year 8 cohort, the trial began and the book 'Freedom 1783' by Catherine Johnson was chosen to be read over the course of two weeks, which translated into approximately eight lessons. This project aimed to allow learners to engage with a historically accurate novel, with the hope that it would encourage pupils to choose to read more. EEF (2021) advocates this idea of disciplinary literacy and improving literacy with subject specific support.

Measuring impact

In order to know if the literacy trial was effective and measure the success, the Humanities AOLE used reflective journals throughout the project to reflect 'in action' on the impact of the literacy trial. Herrington et al (2014) supports the idea of using a personal journal as a tool to structure thinking and encourage student participation. Reflecting '*in action*' as well as '*on action*' is also advocated by scholars such as Herrington et al (2014) who argues that reflection is a critical aspect of fostering a sense of student agency and motivation.

Alongside the reflective journals, the Humanities AOLE conducted informal interviews with staff and pupils as a way of collecting qualitative data on the impact of the literacy trial. School X concluded that with no robust testing, they were unable to make conclusions on the progress made regarding literacy skills.

Reflection and evaluation

This section of the report will reflect and evaluate what the Humanities AOLE has done to improve literacy development using a specific example of their literacy trial '*just read*'. Along with critiquing their actions, this report will also make practical suggestions, based on research and knowledge, of how things could be done differently.

Aligning research with practise

School X continuously aligned their vision with that of the 'National Mission', using research and theoretical knowledge to pioneer their focus. Castles et al (2018) suggests that national guidance often fails to filter down effectively to their local level. However, School X proved that it can be done with a strong focus and understanding of what the national guidance is and the research that supports it.

'Just read'

The literacy trial '*just read*', supported by scholars such as Westbrook et al (2019), allowed teachers at School X to model good speech. Sherrington (2015) advocates this idea of modelling good speech and encouraging children to speak correctly. However, Didau (2023) argues that expecting children to follow along at the same speed can cause cognitive overload, derailing comprehension. A possible solution to this is to instead play an audio book, whereby children are still being exposed to the vocabulary but there is not the expectation to follow along with the text which inevitably overburdens 'poor readers' working memory. Alongside solving the solution of cognitive overload, an audio book is substantially more cost effective and a more sustainable way of motivating learners to read whilst exposing them to subject specific vocabulary. Wallin (2021) supports this and argues for a fundamental shift in reading practises and advocates the idea of *reading by listening* whereby reading is carried out through the senses. However, Lundh and Smith (2015) argue that switching from a printed book to audio book is more than just a change in format. Lundh and Smith (2015) highlight the potential challenges of an audio book whereby choices by the narrator such as expression and intonation can alter meaning and are also fixed in time (Have, 2015 and Pedersen, 2015).

Timescale

School X chose the '*just read*' approach to introduce the topic of slavery, reading aloud Johnson's (2018) 'Freedom 1793'. On finishing the book, pupils completed a series of lessons exploring the topic of 'Slavery'. Although it is an alternative and creative way of introducing a topic, McCarthy and McNamara (2021) suggests that activating what a learner already knows acts as a tool to facilitate and guide their comprehension of new knowledge. Therefore, altering the sequence of lessons so that pupils are taught about the transatlantic slave trade before reading the book, would allow pupils to make connections with what they have previously learnt giving learners more chance to remember what they read. Jetton and Alexander (1997) support this highlighting the importance of learners being able to see the relevance and significance of what they read. This could also tie in with the EEF guidance on a balanced approach to reading which combines writing instruction with reading (EEF, 2021). This highlights that the sequence of lessons does not necessarily have to be flipped around but instead intertwined with each other, combining a series of lessons with reading the book.

'Reading for pleasure'

The impact of the target for the literacy trial, to inspire 'reading for pleasure', is difficult to measure. Although the EEF (2021) suggests that general approaches are less likely to be as

impactful as subject specific approaches, one could argue that when 'reading for pleasure' learners may be more inspired when given the choice of what they wish to read. Clark and Phythian-Sence (2008) support this arguing that *choice* is an important factor in developing reading for pleasure. Therefore, in future it may be more efficient to target 'reading for pleasure' as a general approach during form time where learners can choose what they read and use time spent in subject areas to target the area of disciplinary literacy as the EEF (2021) suggests. However, it could be argued how reading for pleasure and disciplinary literacy are interconnected and can be used alongside each other to reach common goals.

Conclusion

To conclude, this report has discussed and evaluated School X's SDP in relation to the specific focus of literacy development within the Humanities AOLE. Combining what I have learnt from the research, literature and School X, I seek to always play an active role in the SDP, collaborating with colleagues to share the same vision and work towards shared goals. Gaining an insight into the debates surrounding how children read will influence my practice in the future allowing me to trial the different techniques and understand the importance of following national guidance, bridging the gap between research and practise. Along with increasing my knowledge surrounding literacy development as a school priority, this report has also enriched my understanding of the complex processes involved in a SDP.

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