

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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According to the Welsh Government's guidance (2014), a School Development Plan (SDP) is a strategic plan for improving student outcomes, shaped by self-assessment and contextual data. It outlines how the school will reach its goals, allocate resources, and support staff development. Woods (2013) claims that these SDP documents play a crucial role in highlighting opportunities for self-development. Within this essay, I will critically evaluate one of the action points from my placement schools Development Plan. The improvement plan used for this evaluation is taken from an English medium secondary school in Swansea, throughout this essay I will refer to school X. School information obtained from my local school (2023) states that there are currently 1117 pupils enrolled, 25.4% of these pupils are eligible for free school meals (FSM). Estyn's school report (2018) claims that around 52% of pupils attending the school that year lived in the 20% most deprived areas in Wales. In addition to a high number of pupils on FSM, in 2023 the schools' number of English as an additional language (EAL) pupil has risen by 10% since 2022 and now sits at 30.4% (mylocalschool, 2023). This data also shows an increase in Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Pupils enrolled at the school and currently sits at 45.9%. This information is inciteful as I have chosen to critically analyse how the school addresses equity and how they are currently trying to minimise the gap between learners and ensure they all have the same opportunities no matter their background. This is becoming increasingly important due to the number of ethnic minority pupils enrolling at the school increasing along with the number of children eligible for FSM and classed as living in poverty.

Literature review

An SDP is all about evaluation and improvement, according to Hwb (2022) when self-evaluating, schools should ask themselves 'How well are we doing? How do we know? How

can we improve?'. The SDP is shaped by the school's regular self-assessment and contextual data, outlining improvement priorities and both short- and long-term goals. These priorities align with national goals such as enhancing literacy and numeracy standards and addressing the impact of poverty on education (Gov, 2014). When evaluating and developing their SDP it is also integral that schools engage with stakeholders (pupils, staff, community) in order to develop the school as an effective learning organisation. By doing this, the school will collect a wide range of feedback and will also help the school communicate its ideas and reasoning for decisions with harder to reach groups. Graham Donaldson (2015) emphasised that school improvement involves senior leadership teams strategically planning school progress through utilising evidence-based strategies to analyse data. External organisations will also influence a school's SDP such as Estyn. Estyn (2021) believe that improving schools through self-evaluation is vital, but many lack effective processes, especially in leadership. They stated that it is crucial to focus on improvement guided by thorough evaluation and diverse evidence. The main goal of an SDP or school improvement is to ensure that all students, regardless of their background, receive high-quality learning and achieve their full potential. This coincides with the new Curriculum for Wales, where schools are now tasked with supporting each learner's individual progress in line with the four purposes (Gov, 2022). The curriculum reformation is aimed to nurture and develop pupils individually based on their individual progression and ability rather than looking at pupils collectively (Gov, 2023). Similarly, Macbeath (1999) argued that there isn't a singular ideal method for executing school development either, although there will be overarching themes and aims between different schools, the SDP will be personal to that school, encompassing the school's priorities based on their learners along with their schools' ethos.

School X's development plan is designed around 5 strands in which they have created their own acronym spelling PEACE; (Prayer and worship, Equity, Ambition and attitude to learning, Curriculum and cultural enrichment, Engagement). The school development plan in question was primarily written by senior leadership in summer 2023 and is re-evaluated every academic year. I have decided to focus this enquiry on equity and critically analyse how the school aims to close the attainment gap between pupils. According to Cascaid (2021) equity within education ensures that every individual receives whatever they need to access equal opportunities as others within the same environment, no matter their background. This highlights the fact that some pupils may need extra assistance or resources in order to achieve the same as other pupils, rather than equal support and opportunities. As explained in 'The White Paper' by the Department for Education (2010) while school is typically enriching for most students, it remains concerning that those from

disadvantaged backgrounds consistently achieve lower academic outcomes compared to their peers across all ability levels within the education system. Brighouse and Woods (2005) cite that closing the attainment gap is a fundamental part of school's purpose and culture, despite the overall rise in standards, attainment gaps between groups of children are difficult to close in many schools. There is a significant attainment gap between pupils on FSM and other pupils. In terms of GCSE level, they claimed that students on free school meals performed about 27% worse compared to others, especially noticeable among working-class white boys, with a gap of over 30% (Brighouse and Woods, 2005). The need to prioritise these learner groups in order to narrow the attainment gap is apparent, Estyn (2021) state in their 'School improvement guidance' that evaluation, improvement and accountability arrangements should prioritise equity and inclusion whilst considering the outcomes of different learner groups. This approach would ensure that educational initiatives address the needs and outcomes of all students, particularly those who may face disadvantages or barriers to learning. Jeremy Miles (2022), minister for Education for Wales stated at the Senedd that "tackling the impact of poverty on attainment is at the heart of the national mission in education." and claims it's the only way they can succeed in achieving high standards and aspirations for all pupils. This supports what was reported over a decade ago by Estyn (2012), where they recognised and acknowledged the strong link between poverty and educational underachievement, in their report they emphasised the need for schools to focus on supporting children and young people growing up in poverty. Estyn (2012) suggested that schools should focus on developing the literacy and learning skills, social and emotional skills, attendance, punctuality, and behaviour of disadvantaged learners in order to raise achievement. Estyn also stated that data should be used to track the progress of these disadvantaged learners and analyse their progress.

Developing an action plan

When critically analysing how School X addresses equity within their SDP, I found that their current SDP is running from 2022 – 2025 and is reviewed every year. At the end of each academic year, a meeting between senior leadership takes place to summarise and contextualise the priorities and action steps for the next academic year. School X develops a 3 year priority and their current focus strands are; prayer & worship, equity, ambition & attitude to learning, curriculum & cultural enrichment and engagement. Each priority strand has its own table within the SDP. The table includes the initials of staff appointed to take lead of the action points, success criteria, timescale, and comments from governing committee. The input of the governing committee is integral to the school and each action is run past

them before being implemented. Gichohi (2015) supports this and states that stakeholder involvement is crucial in school management to achieve common goals and utilise resources effectively. In relation to equity, the school has implemented various actions to address the issue which they acknowledge is ongoing, the SDP timescale for equity is noted as ongoing and is becoming one of the top priorities within the school with the increase in pupils eligible for FSM as well as an increase in EAL pupils enrolling from overseas.

Furthermore, in relation to data recording, the school records pupil data using SMID. The school found it to be an effective and integrated it as part of everyday practice when it comes to knowing the pupils and recording data. According to the SDP, the school's current indicators of attainment is based on achievements in Maths and English. Using SMID shows where a pupil should be if they are making usual progress, by comparing it to the achievement of the pupils they can see where the pupil is progression wise. The school monitors the pupils progress throughout the year and appoints specific teachers to monitor this. The teachers' appointed initials are listed in the SDP so the whole school recognises the lead staff.

During the meeting with senior leadership, I found out that the school wanted to complete the RADY training scheme but couldn't afford it within their budget. They therefore did their training through Partneriaeth. The school admits they haven't done a lot of staff training on this yet, therefore it is stated as an ongoing priority within the SDP.

The school have identified groups of learners which they deem to be of disadvantage; Special educational needs, Additional learning needs, English as an additional language, Low reading age and poverty/pupil deprivation. The school currently only measures the attainment of FSM (Free school meal) and EAL (English as an additional language) pupils as well as attendance, they have found a clear link between low attendance and these groups of learners. Through monitoring FSM learners' attendance, they found that these pupils missed school on a regular basis. The school decided to appoint the heads of year to monitor attendance and contact parents accordingly.

In relation to budget, looking at the spend audit, school X's largest outgoing is on support staff. They believe this has a positive impact on the learners, especially in relation to equity and supporting the disadvantage learners. This belief is supported by Jeremy Miles (2022) who stated that support staff are essential, particularly in assisting teachers with mitigating the effects of poverty on student performance. He also stated that the government will provide support staff with access to quality professional development programs to ensure

school leaders have clear guidance on deploying support staff effectively to address educational disparities.

According to Estyn (2012), an effective school in challenging circumstances – raising attainment for disadvantage learners should ‘tailor the curriculum to the needs of disadvantaged learners’. This is implemented within school X where they have and continue to develop an alternative curriculum approach for this group of learners. School X has created an ‘Aspire’ unit where pupils (usually with behavioural issues) will develop hands on skills, such as hair dressing and brick laying as an alternative to the usual curriculum. The school’s most recent Estyn report (2018) recognised and acknowledges the strength of the school’s ‘Aspire’ programme, an adaptation of the curriculum aimed to provide personalised support for pupils with behavioural issues. They found it to be successful in providing successful outcomes for these vulnerable pupils. Within their SDP, school X looks to further this approach with the creation of ‘E classes’. Usual classes are mixed ability but the E classes will be created to cater for pupils who need further assistance. The E classes are currently being implemented throughout each year group but is now being developed as a priority. The pupils in the E group will be exposed to a changed curriculum, designed around the progression levels of the group. The classes are also appointed Additional Learning needs (ALN) coordinators and trained support staff to support the pupils.

Reflection and Evaluation

In reflection, while School X has done a good job when addressing equity, there are things that could be improved. This includes having more people involved in making decisions, currently the stakeholders are the staff and Governors. I think involving pupils voice could have a positive impact. According to Crane (2001) ‘Schools cannot learn how to become better places for learning without asking the students.’ This statement is supported by BERA (2016) who believe that the benefits of student voice, includes greater engagement, stronger teacher-student relationships, improved communication within the school, and fosters a learning environment within the community. Looking at a wider range of information when collecting data and continuing to invest in training for staff. By building on what they’re already good at and taking advantage of chances to improve, School X can keep making progress in making sure everyone feels included and treated fairly in their school.

A key strength of School X’s equity initiatives lies in its responsive curriculum design, as highlighted by Estyn (2012). The development of alternative learning pathways, such as the

'Aspire' unit and the creation of 'E classes,' underscores a commitment to meeting the diverse needs of learners. By offering tailored support and practical skills development, these programs cater to students who may face challenges within the traditional classroom setting. This also meets the criteria of the new curriculum, creating 'enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work' (Gov, 2023). Moreover, the recognition of the 'Aspire' program's success in previous evaluations demonstrates a willingness to learn from past experiences and continuously refine strategies for supporting vulnerable pupils.

The allocation of resources also reflects the school's equity-driven ethos, with the biggest investment in support staff. However, the challenge of budget constraints is apparent, as evidenced by the inability to afford certain training programs such as RADY, underscores the importance of creative solutions and partnerships. Moving forward, allocating some budget into this type of training may be more beneficial than having extra support staff, the quality of support given may outweigh the quantity.

Furthermore, data is really important for making fair decisions, and School X uses a system called SMID to help with this. By keeping track of how well students are doing in subjects like math and English, and comparing their progress to what's expected, the school can understand what each student needs and provide the right support. But it's also important to look at other things besides just grades, such as well-being and socio-economic factors, to make sure everyone gets the help they need. School X has started to focus on pastoral care but further attention to this may also have a positive impact on attainment levels with pupils being in the right frame of mind to learn and attend school.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is evident that school development plans are pivotal in developing and emphasising opportunities for school growth, as earlier stated by Woods (2013). Analysing School X's approach to equity through its School Development Plan has provided valuable insights that will influence my professional practice in the future. Firstly, it has underscored the importance of prioritising equity within educational settings. Furthermore, school X's equity initiatives have reinforced my commitment to promoting fairness and equal opportunities in education. Learning from their strategies, such as alternative learning pathways and stakeholder engagement, I'm inspired to adopt evidence-based approaches in my future practice. I'll prioritise collaboration and data-driven decision-making to create inclusive learning environments where every student can succeed. Thus creating 'ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives' (Gov, 2023).

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