

This report will illustrate and explain how a school develops one particular aspect of its School Development Plan (SDP). It will focus in particular on a school in the Swansea area, hereafter referred to as School X. School X is approximately 1,000 pupils in size and in 2019, moved from the yellow support category into green. Other relevant attributes of the school include approximately 30% of children eligible for free school meals (eFSM) – well above the national average of 16% - and 10.5% of pupils with English as an additional language (EAL), also well above the national average of 2.9%. Whilst these statistics cannot provide an exhaustive awareness of the context of the school, they combine to indicate that both poverty and accessibility could be crucial issues, with potential to affect learning and wellbeing among the student population.

As a part of School X's SDP for the year 2019/20, the senior leadership team (SLT) included as one of its aims to improve empathy within the school. With this aim in mind, the school has worked closely with a NESTA-funded initiative called Empathy Lab to develop a whole-school strategy which could improve the empathy skills of individuals.

The purpose of any SDP is to provide a theoretical and practical framework for the school to fulfil its identified aims. The school's aims should be formulated based on an identified need, which is to say that the goal of the leadership team in constructing an effective SDP should be to identify areas of weakness which may negatively impact or otherwise present barriers to learning, wellbeing or advancement for stakeholders, and suggest practical next steps to ensure that these barriers can be overcome. The stakeholders in this context can thus be defined as any individuals involved in the life of the school or community who may be impacted, for better or worse, by the manifest aims of the SDP. Stakeholders could therefore feasibly include students, parents, teachers, support staff, senior leaders and governors among others.

In formulating an individual strategy for the SDP, the foremost factor to consider is data about the school and its stakeholders. Data in this sense should be conceptualised as raw information from which conclusions can be drawn about potential steps needed to positively impact the school. As a catch-all term for the information received from or generated by the stakeholders, this data could be apparent in a variety of forms, including, but not limited to: student assessment statistics; procedurally generated information such as attendance figures; demographic data such as eFSM, EAL or ALN percentages; or written feedback from stakeholders such as the feedback generated by Student Voice panels.

The composition and methodology of an effective SDP requires that it be reviewed regularly by senior leaders, with aims and practical goals within which can be continually adapted and refined based on the analysis of the most relevant data. Therefore, it should be viewed not as a benign document, but as a live system under the stewardship of senior leaders. As shown in Appendix 1, the process begins with a self-evaluation which gathers into account the relevant data. This self-evaluation may include multiple instances of data review including data offered by external bodies such as Estyn. Having identified the school's needs based on the data, senior leaders will plan action points at varying levels. In an effective strategy, the action points suggested should have conclusive measurable identifiers of success which can be returned in the form of data and shared with stakeholders at planned instances.

The system contained within the SDP should allow for aims and practical steps to be amended in light of new data at the next stage of review. If the new data indicates that the steps implemented in the SDP have been successful in achieving the aims as stated, senior leaders may wish to amend the aims to maintain those achievements; if the data indicates

that the measures have not been effective, senior leaders may opt to amend, remove or replace practical steps in order to better fulfil identified needs.

School X began its status as a pioneer school for Empathy Lab in 2019. Empathy Lab was chosen as an initiative because of its potential impact on a wide range of outcomes for students. Based on the mission statement for School X, an increased focus on empathy as a skill could have a positive impact on the following desired outcomes for students:

- Spiritual, moral, cultural, social and physical development.
- Preparing students for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.
- Striving to ensure that students leave School X as happy, **empathetic** and enterprising citizens.

Empathy was identified as a priority skill based on a variety of data during self-evaluation. In School X's SDP, the following needs were used to inform this choice:

- Literacy (reading in particular) as a crucial skill.
- Reading ages and national test scores.
- Communication skills and relationships.
- Behaviour issues based on data literacy.
- Stakeholders who believe there is a change in students' ability to empathise with one another.
- A need to improve responsibility for actions, to continue with restorative practice - but to understand the language and build vocabulary around understanding emotions and feelings.

The information presented above, derived from a variety of data, was seen as indicative of needs which could be addressed by an empathy focused initiative such as Empathy Lab. Empathy Lab's practical steps promote reading for pleasure, encourage students towards feeling and understanding the perspectives of others, and support the use of active listening skills. These steps include formulating lessons around "empathy focused questions" such as those seen in Appendix 2, and pastoral activities such as discussion of feelings and consequences in relation to actions. While these steps can be difficult to implement in subjects which are not literature-focused, the data types shown above could be considered as measurable indicators in literature heavy subjects, presenting teachers and senior leaders with a clear method of review for the success of these steps.

In order to develop action points for the inclusion of Empathy Lab within the school, it is necessary to consider the initiative as a part of the ongoing strategy of self-evaluation which the SDP serves. Its current weaknesses, then, are not necessarily ongoing flaws, but may be addressed and planned for at the first stage of the review cycle.

The main weaknesses of Empathy Lab as an initiative can be summarised in a small amount of points related to similar flaws in its selection and implementation. While a strength of Empathy Lab is that it could have a positive impact on many outcomes for students due to its applicability to wide variety of other skills and situations, it also represents some dissociation between the practical steps and the data against which it can be selected and evaluated. In seeking to classify "improved empathy" as a conglomeration of the data points scrutinised during self-evaluation (as shown above), is the school making a link between skills which

cannot be conclusively causal? Is empathy too esoteric a skill in its definition to be measurable by these criteria?

While it could be argued that improving data points such as reading age will have an objectively positive impact on student outcomes, it would be potentially misleading to say that in its current form, this could be evidenced as resultant of improved empathy – the stated aim of the initiative – without evidence of a causal link. In the example of reading age, if it can be said that Empathy Lab has made a positive impact, it would serve future practitioners more usefully to know the magnitude of that impact in relation to the existing teaching & learning taking place.

Qualitative stakeholder feedback presents the same difficulty in conclusiveness. While feedback from multiple stakeholders may offer senior leaders a plurality of perspectives on the school environment, this feedback is limited in that it lacks specificity, is heavily weighted by individual differences in perception, and provides no clear causal link between the initiative and any observed difference in empathy skills in the student population.

Though the SDP can still be adapted in light of the observed data, from the issues shown as inherent in the measurables above we can comfortably state that future changes to the plan may risk being inaccurate or arbitrary due to the lack of clear causal links in the data.

With these issues in mind, a potential action point to move the strategy toward this conclusive causal link could be to view empathy as a tightly defined set of skills, and gather data related specifically to those skills for individuals. The Empathy Lab initiative classifies empathy as “the ability to feel and understand others’ emotions and perspectives”. This skill is further broken down into three elements:

- Recognising how others feel.
- Considering why people might be thinking and feeling the way they are.
- Doing something about what we have discovered.

While empathy focused questioning such as that shown in Appendix 2 can encourage students toward development of these skills, these activities provide little in the way of feedback that could be used to measure these skills against data points such as reading age.

In order to facilitate a conclusive measurement of individual empathy skills, it could be a potent step to introduce an all-subjects empathy score, identified by teachers during empathy-focus lessons. In a similar vein to “Attitude to Learning” (ATL) scores, which can be assigned based on a default high score of 1 and then reduced to 2, 3 or 4 by teachers in accordance with observed behaviour, empathy could be measured based on a scale which is only scored during empathy focused tasks in the interests of simplicity at its first round of review. During further stages of review, this scoring method could be expanded to take into account behaviour outside empathy-focused sessions or outside the classroom in order to further encourage students to practice their empathy skills in all areas and to broaden the scope of the data if successful in its first iteration.

I would suggest that this scoring system work similarly to ATL scores: individuals could be assigned a default score of 3 out of 5 (differing from ATL in the sense that students do not begin with the top score and have opportunities to improve their skill), and could improve their score based on teacher observations of the three component elements of empathy, as defined by Empathy Lab.

This action point could bolster the effectiveness of the existing data types by adding an element of specificity directly relating to empathy. While this point may not return a causal link between improved empathy and improved behavioural or learning outcomes in its first stage of implementation, it does serve to add a specific data instrument for empathy skill in individuals which can be measured against other data types, improving our picture of how those empathy skills may be impacting that data, and therefore, those outcomes.

From my experience of planning and implementing Empathy Lab sessions at School X, I found the experience to be wholly positive; all teachers and support staff were united by the message and measures of the SDP, and freely shared ideas and practices on how to practically develop an empathy focus in lessons.

This addressed one of the principal difficulties in implementing the initiative, in that some subjects (namely discussion-heavy subjects such as English, History and RE) naturally lent themselves to empathy focused sections, while STEM teachers, for example, had fewer opportunities to include empathy practice.

Students readily accepted and engaged with empathy focused sessions during English lessons. While much has been made in this report of a focus on developing empathy skills, it is also a pertinent point that children have, in the first stage of implementation during 2019, freely used their existing and in some instances sophisticated empathy skills in order to better access the literature. While this feedback would firmly be classed as nonspecific and anecdotal, it is possible for me to personally assert the effectiveness of empathy on improved accessibility. Empathy questioning was a particularly effective pedagogical choice, allowing the whole class to explore texts and relate to fictional characters using the language of feelings and emotions that students may already possess, and in turn to develop that language.

The ongoing difficulty, then, is for teachers and senior leaders to conclusively evidence such anecdotal feedback in a way which can be of value to practitioners outside the environment of School X going forward – I have attempted to address this issue using the action point described above, though this point itself is not without logistical difficulty. While many stakeholders may state an observed positive impact due to Empathy Lab as an aspect of the SDP, in order to maximise its value, capitalise on its strengths and prove its effectiveness, ongoing stages of review should amend its strategy toward specificity in the search for a conclusive causal link.

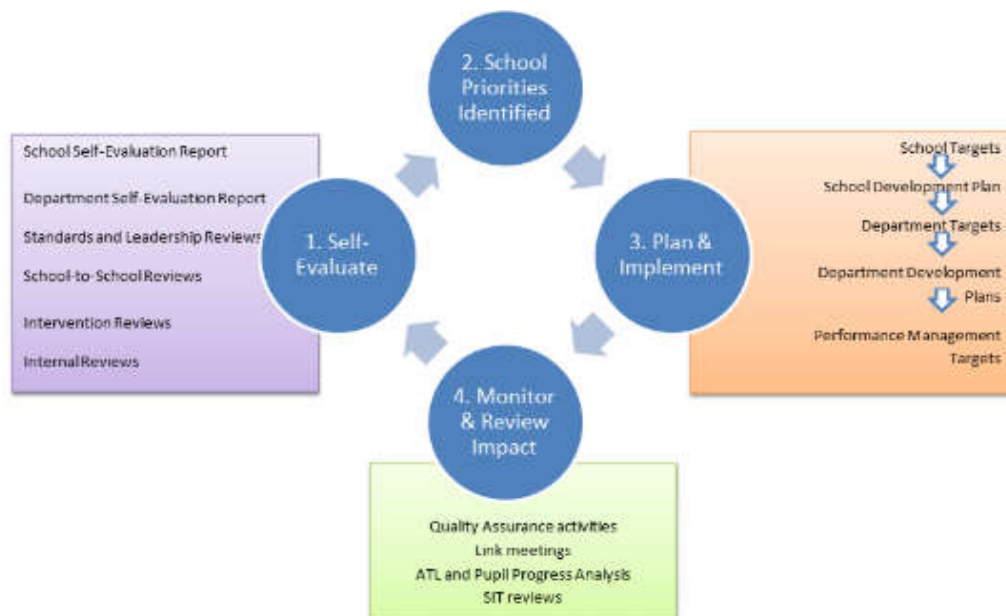
In summary, in this report I have illustrated and explained how – and to some extent why – a school may select one element of its SDP. I have shown that stakeholder feedback in concert with relevant data can inform senior leaders of the issues which may present barriers to learning and wellbeing. I have demonstrated an understanding of how senior leaders can use the school's process of self-evaluation to propose solutions to these issues, monitoring them in a way that provides a conclusive gauge of their effectiveness, and providing themselves with ways to accurately identify areas for improvement. To this end, I have gained and shown knowledge of systems of ongoing strategy and review, and I have developed awareness of how single initiatives like Empathy Lab can function as part of a holistic strategy to address barriers to pupil outcomes. I have further shown the method and benefit of maintaining the SDP as a live, guiding element of the school's self-evaluation process.

Furthermore, I have proposed what I hope are useful critiques of the Empathy Lab initiative from theory and personal practice, providing potential strategies to improve measurability. These strategies could improve the ability of the school to identify and build on the

successes of the initiative, whilst enabling teachers to work without wastefulness in all subject areas to best select the Empathy Lab strategies that will work for their students.

Appendix 1

School Self-Evaluation Cycle



Appendix 2

Reading Time
Read p23-33 and discuss the questions below

Empathy Questions:

- How might we empathise with Scrooge's fear on p23?
- Why does Marley say 'Mankind was my business' when Scrooge asks about his job? How can this apply to our lives now?
- How would you feel if you saw a ghost like that described on p32?

