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Targets:

- 1) Read even more relevant and peer reviewed books and journal articles when researching.
- 2) Continue to synthesise research into your writing to aid the support of your key points.
- 3) Continue to develop a critical approach throughout, offering the opposing view whenever possible for recommendations.

A Critical Evaluation of the Development of a Strategic Target in a School Development Plan: Actions, Impact, and Evidence-Based Reflections

Introduction

In accordance with the ethical standards established by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), this assignment will critically evaluate one action item from the School Development Plan (SDP), namely the program designed to improve children's reading. While examining how well the program has improved children's reading outcomes, this evaluation makes sure that ethical research principles such as integrity, transparency, respect for participants, and the responsible use of data are followed. Enhancing reading fluency and engagement throughout the school is the strategic goal that has been selected, with an emphasis on tackling issues like low reading attainment, assisting English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners, and promoting a reading culture. Strong literacy abilities support both academic success and overall cognitive development, making this goal essential (DfE, 2021). The school in question is a diverse community, catering to approximately 350 students from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. A notable challenge is the varying levels of reading proficiency, with some students requiring additional intervention. Attendance concerns and limited home reading support further impact literacy outcomes. Consequently, the school has prioritised reading within its SDP to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities. This assignment will first explore the rationale behind the reading improvement initiative, followed by a critical evaluation of its implementation strategies. It will then assess its impact on student outcomes and conclude with recommendations for further enhancement.

Literature Review

To improve educational outcomes, schools employ School Development Planning (SDP), a systematic strategy, to identify strategic goals, carrying out focused interventions, and track progress (Welsh Government, 2018). Auditing existing school performance, establishing specific goals in line with national education priorities, putting those goals into practice, and assessing the results are the usual steps in the process (Estyn, 2020). In line with its more comprehensive educational policies, including the National Literacy and Numeracy

Framework and the Curriculum for Wales 2022, the Welsh Government places a high priority on school development to guarantee ongoing improvement (Welsh Government, 2022).

Effective school growth planning should be inclusive, data-driven, and sensitive to the needs of students, according to the Welsh Government (2022). However, there is disagreement over how well SDP promotes long-term transformation. Although SDP offers a defined framework, Harris and Jones (2019) suggest that staff participation and leadership quality are key to its effectiveness. Similarly, Estyn (2020) points out that staff workload and resource limitations cause certain schools to struggle with long-term implementation. This implies that although SDP is a useful tool, its effectiveness depends on external elements like school leadership and resource availability.

Increasing children's reading proficiency is a difficult task that is impacted by several variables, such as status in society, language difficulties, and reading habits outside of school (Snowling & Hulme, 2021). Increasing reading skills is a challenge for schools in Wales, particularly in regions with high deprivation and a sizable EAL student population (Welsh Government, 2021). EAL students frequently encounter extra difficulties in their literacy development, necessitating specialised support techniques, according to Cummins (2017), bilingualism can be advantageous; however, EAL kids may experience difficulties with vocabulary acquisition and understanding if they do not receive sufficient help. However, an overemphasis on bilingual techniques without systematic phonics instruction might impede literacy growth, especially for students who have little exposure to English outside of the classroom, according to Clarke (2018). Studies show that children who engage in reading activities at home demonstrate stronger literacy skills (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2019). Yet, Goodman and Gregg (2018) found that demographic disparities affect parental involvement, with lower-income families facing barriers such as limited access to books and time constraints. This suggests that school-led initiatives, such as reading workshops for parents, may be necessary to bridge this gap. Parental involvement in early reading, especially through workshops that teach print-referencing strategies, greatly improves children's early literacy skills, according to a 2024 report from the Lincolnshire Research School. Similarly, Justice and Ezell (2000), stated parents who received training in these methods may successfully assist their children's literacy development at home. Additionally, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (n.d.) emphasises that parental engagement strategies, including those that involve parents in their children's reading activities, can lead to approximately four months of additional progress in a child's learning over a year. The EEF suggests that providing practical strategies and resources to parents can make home activities more effective, thereby supporting children's literacy development.

Recent research has looked at the varied connections between parental involvement and students' academic success, and it has shown that some types of parental involvement may not always be beneficial. For example, a 2024 study by Tóth-Király et al. revealed that although parental participation generally promotes academic success, too much help, especially with homework, might compromise student independence and have an adverse effect on performance. According to Peng et al. (2023), children who experience high levels of parental involvement may be under more academic pressure, which could result in stress and worse academic performance. These results imply that although parental involvement is advantageous, it is essential to strike a balance between encouraging independence and providing support to prevent any negative consequences on children's academic development.

Research identifies several effective strategies for enhancing reading skills. Systematic phonics instruction is widely supported as a foundational literacy approach (National Institute for Literacy, 2017). A meta-analysis by Ehri et al. (2019) found that phonics instruction significantly improves early reading development. However, Castles et al. (2018) caution that while phonics is essential, it should be complemented with comprehension strategies and vocabulary development to ensure well-rounded literacy progress. Reading for pleasure is another evidence-based approach linked to improved literacy outcomes. A study by Sullivan and Brown (2020) found that children who read regularly for enjoyment show higher levels of academic achievement. The Welsh Government (2021) advocates for embedding a reading-for-pleasure culture within schools, supporting initiatives such as library improvements and author visits. However, McGeown et al. (2021) note that motivation plays a crucial role, with some students disengaging from reading due to negative past experiences. This highlights the importance of creating a comfortable setting for reading.

Technology-assisted reading interventions have also gained attention in recent years. Research by Burgess and Jones (2022) highlights how digital reading tools, such as audiobooks and interactive e-books, enhance engagement and comprehension. Similarly, McTavish (2019) emphasises that e-books contribute to the development of digital literacy skills, further supporting young learners' reading comprehension. However, Clark and Teravainen-Goff (2021) warn that while technology can support literacy, excessive screen time may reduce deep reading skills. Therefore, a balanced approach integrating digital tools with traditional reading practices is recommended.

While research highlights effective strategies for improving reading, there are notable gaps and contradictions. For example, the debate between phonics-based instruction and whole-

language approaches remains unresolved. Even while systematic phonics is generally supported (Ehri et al., 2019), studies show that it is beneficial for helping young students become proficient readers (Castles, Rastle & Nation, 2018). Yet Goodman (2020) argues that an overemphasis on decoding abilities could overlook understanding and meaning-making. A balanced literacy approach incorporating phonics, fluency, and comprehension strategies appears most effective (Castles et al., 2018). Another key debate is the role of parental involvement. While Sénéchal and LeFevre (2019) highlight its benefits, recent studies indicate that school-based interventions may be more effective in contexts where parental engagement is low (Baker et al., 2022). This raises questions about the possibility of relying on parental support as a literacy intervention strategy. Additionally, the long-term impact of digital reading remains unclear. While studies support its short-term benefits (Burgess & Jones, 2022), concerns about screen dependency and reduced deep-reading skills persist (Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2021). Further research is needed to explore how digital literacy tools can be effectively integrated into traditional reading instruction.

Context of the Target

Strengthening reading comprehension and fluency in all year groups, with an emphasis on underperforming children, is the school's selected School Development Plan (SDP) goal. The school's overall objectives of improving academic performance and adhering to each pupil's unique learning requirements are directly in line with this goal. In compliance with the Welsh Government's pledge to improve standards and address educational inequality, the school's mission places a strong emphasis on encouraging a passion for reading, learning and establishing an inclusive environment where all children may thrive (Welsh Government, 2022). Statistics from internal reviews also showed pupils were performing below the national average, particularly in reading comprehension, which has a significant influence on total academic performance (Wales Government, 2022). Research validates the idea that reading comprehension is crucial for success in literacy and all other subject areas. Early literacy skills and long-term academic success are strongly correlated, according to research (Suggate, 2019). Community comments also expressed concerns about the lack of parental involvement in reading at home, which may contribute to children's reading difficulties (Hancock et al., 2019). Given these findings, the school's decision to prioritise reading comprehension in the SDP was crucial since bridging this gap would affect the educational growth of pupils.

Implementation

The school adopted multiple approaches to meet the goal, starting with teacher professional development. Training on efficient reading teaching techniques, including phonics, vocabulary growth, and comprehension techniques, was part of this. Research-based tactics like reciprocal teaching, which emphasises teacher-student cooperation to enhance reading comprehension, were presented to teachers (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). The school also gave teachers access to digital tools to assist individualised learning, interactive whiteboards for interesting reading activities, and varied resources including levelled reading materials. The implementation of "Reading Buddy Time," in which older and younger pupils were partnered to read together, was a crucial step in the school's strategy. The goal of this program was to help children who are older develop a sense of responsibility, confidence, and peer support. Peer reading programs have been shown to be successful in enhancing reading abilities in the UK. Montgomery et al. (2016) discovered that peer reading programs significantly increased reading comprehension and fluency, especially for struggling readers. Supporting a study by Durlak et al. (2011), peer mentoring benefits both the mentor and the mentee, with younger pupils receiving individualised support and older students gaining leadership abilities. In line with Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism, this approach highlights the importance of social interactions in the learning process, where more knowledgeable peers can scaffold younger students' learning. Even though peer reading initiatives like "Reading Buddy Time" are frequently praised for their advantages, some research has cast doubt on their effectiveness. For example, assessments conducted in 2015 by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) revealed that some peer tutoring programs, such as Paired Reading, had minimal impact on math or reading scores. Furthermore, Hurry and Sylva (2007) conducted a study that looked at the long-term impacts of early reading interventions, such as Reading Recovery, on pupils in primary schools. Although the intervention's initial benefits were substantial, the study discovered that these effects declined over time. The children who received Reading Recovery and those who did not showed no noticeable disparities in their reading skills three and a half years after the intervention. This implies that without continued assistance, early literacy initiatives could not always produce long-lasting benefits.

The implementation was phased out throughout the course of the academic year, starting with lower-year interventions and working its way up to upper-KS2 groups. In addition to the larger school community participating in school-wide literacy efforts, teachers were expected to carry out focused reading interventions in small groups. Clear timetables drove these initiatives, and progress reports were conducted at the conclusion of each term to evaluate the success of the interventions and make any required modifications. To encourage cross-curricular literacy, the school also placed a strong emphasis on incorporating reading

principles into other subjects. According to the National Literacy Trust (2021), this method helps pupils improve their writing and reading skills by encouraging them to use their knowledge in a variety of situations. Similarly, Mana Education (2024) suggests that incorporating literacy into disciplines like mathematics, science, and history can deepen comprehension and retention of content. They recommend strategies such as introducing subject specific vocabulary, using context related reading materials, and assigning varied writing tasks to promote literacy across the curriculum. However, challenges exist in implementing cross-curricular literacy approaches. Thomson, Hall, and Jones (2012) found that while schools attempted to innovate by integrating curricula, these efforts were often constrained by a lack of familiarity with historical experiences and international examples. The study highlighted that without a broader range of intellectual resources, schools might struggle to effectively implement cross-curricular strategies.

Impact Measurement

Both quantitative and qualitative data were used by the school to assess the effectiveness of these programs. To monitor progress in reading comprehension and fluency, standardised reading tests were administered on a regular basis. Teachers were also able to track each student's development in real time by using formative exams. To gauge the perceived effectiveness of reading buddy time and other reading interventions, surveys were also sent to both parents and pupils. According to feedback from pupils, reading confidence has grown, especially for those who were having difficulty (Montgomery et al., 2016). Additionally, the overall effectiveness of the reading programs was assessed using attendance data and student engagement levels. According to preliminary findings, children who participated in peer reading programs had shown increases in their reading proficiency and positive attitude towards reading (Durlak et al., 2011).

Although the school's strategy for reaching the SDP target has produced encouraging outcomes, it is crucial to assess the implementation's advantages and disadvantages. The method in which the school incorporates peer reading through reading buddy time is one of its main advantages. In addition to offering focused assistance to struggling readers, this approach helps older children develop a sense of belonging and accountability (Montgomery et al., 2016). Furthermore, the implementation of research-based instructional methodologies and teacher professional development guarantees that reading interventions are based on best practices. However, there is room for improvement. The use of standardised tests, although these tests provide useful information, they may not adequately capture the complex growth of reading comprehension abilities. According to Hancock et al.

(2019), tests alone may overlook elements essential for long-term performance, such as pupil motivation and engagement. However, some educators argue that standardised tests offer a consistent metric for assessing student progress and identifying areas needing intervention. For instance, the National Education Association (2023) suggests that, despite their limitations, standardised assessments can serve as valuable tools when used alongside other evaluative measures.

Conclusion

This assignment assessed the implementation and impact of the School Development Plan's (SDP) reading improvement effort. The analysis emphasised the advantages of focused treatments for improving reading fluency, such as teacher professional development and reading buddy time. However, difficulties were identified, such as the uneven long-term effects of peer reading programs and the inadequacies of standardised tests in gauging comprehensive literacy development. The assessment emphasised the significance of inclusive, flexible, and evidence-based school development planning. Structured interventions can improve literacy results, but long-term development necessitates skilled teachers, continuous assistance, and specialised teaching methods for a range of students. Furthermore, the complicated realities of parental participation imply that school-led programs are crucial for resolving inequalities in at-home reading assistance. The critical nature of teaching strategies guided by research is validated. Differentiated instruction, a culture of reading for enjoyment, and cooperation between staff, pupils, and their families should be the top priorities of future practice. Teachers can enhance literacy results and maintain professional teaching standards that support inclusive, high-quality education by putting evidence-based solutions into practice.

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