

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

INTRODUCTION

School Development Plans (SDPs) help schools identify areas for improvement, set clear objectives, and implement strategies to enhance student learning. This assignment evaluates one action point from the SDP at School A (BERA REF), a Catholic secondary school in South Wales, focusing on **“developing positive attitudes to learning through reinforcing positive behaviours”** (Ref School SDP).

During my teaching placement, I observed that students responded positively to reinforcement strategies, particularly when applied consistently to encourage desirable learning behaviours. This aligns with Skinner’s (1953) behaviourist theory, which suggests that reinforcement strengthens positive actions. School A’s SDP prioritises reinforcing positive behaviours to foster a more engaged, motivated, and respectful classroom environment.

Developing positive learning attitudes is particularly important during adolescence, where social influences, peer interactions, and autonomy-seeking behaviours can lead to disengagement or classroom disruptions (Steinberg, 2014; Brehm, 1966; Van Petegem et al., 2015). Research suggests that students who develop perseverance, self-regulation, and a growth mindset engage more effectively with learning and achieve stronger academic outcomes (Dweck, 2006; Zimmerman, 2002).

School A serves 1,328 pupils aged 11-18 (Estyn, YEAR), with high FSM eligibility (20%) and ALN needs (16%). The school has experienced high rates of exclusions between 2015-2020, but has managed to reduce this by almost half since following their latest SDP action points and making behaviour management a priority. In recent years, the school introduced an X-Class (class name changed) to each school year that is made up fully of ALN students. This has helped reduce classroom disruptions, but staff debate its long-term impact on student independence.

This assignment will examine literature on SDPs and behaviour, evaluate School A’s approach, and provide evidence-based recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A School Development Plan (SDP) is a structured guide for school improvement, helping schools address key challenges such as student engagement, behaviour management, and learning outcomes. Rather than facing issues as they arise, an SDP enables schools to take a proactive, long-term approach to improving teaching and learning (Welsh Government, 2022). It ensures that interventions remain focused, evidence-based, and aligned with national policies, particularly in schools following the Curriculum for Wales.

At School A, the SDP prioritises **developing positive attitudes to learning through reinforcing positive behaviours**, aligning with the Curriculum for Wales and Welsh Government priorities on student well-being, engagement, and inclusivity (Welsh Government, 2021). Given the school’s

diverse student intake and behavioural challenges, a consistent whole-school approach is essential to ensure that all staff apply reinforcement strategies fairly and effectively across all classrooms.

The Welsh Government (2022) outlines a four-stage approach to school development planning:

1. **Assessment:** Schools analyse behaviour trends, engagement levels, and attendance data while gathering feedback from students, staff, and parents (Estyn, 2018). School A's assessment included academic data, student surveys, and pupil trails, where a staff member followed a student's lessons for a day to observe learning behaviour.
2. **Strategic Planning:** Schools set clear and measurable targets, often following the SMART framework (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) (Welsh Government, 2022). However, School A chose not to adopt the SMART model, instead developing its own structured but more flexible and achievable goals.
3. **Implementation:** Schools introduce strategies such as staff training on behaviour management, structured reinforcement policies, and restorative approaches to discipline.
4. **Evaluation and Reflection:** Schools regularly assess the impact of strategies, using behaviour tracking, classroom observations, and feedback to ensure continuous improvement (Welsh Government, 2022).

By following this approach, schools create long-term improvements rather than short-term fixes, ensuring that behaviour policies remain effective and adaptable.

When targeting the goal of 'developing positive attitudes to learning through reinforcing positive behaviours' school A may experience some challenges such as reinforcing positive learning behaviours. - While positive reinforcement is widely used in behaviour management, its effectiveness depends on several contextual factors, including student demographics, consistency in teacher application, and wider school policies.

With a high intake of EAL students, School A faces challenges in applying traditional reinforcement strategies effectively. Research suggests that students from different cultural backgrounds may interpret praise and reinforcement differently, potentially affecting engagement (Lucas et al., 2008). For example, at School A, staff were encouraged to use 'positive discrimination,' giving EAL learners slightly more praise and attention. However, in one case, a student's parents reported that their child felt embarrassed by the attention, feeling singled out. This aligns with research suggesting that excessive praise in certain cultures can be perceived as insincere or unnecessary (Li, 2005). To address this, studies suggest that non-verbal reinforcement methods, such as gestures, visual cues, and symbolic rewards (e.g., merits), are more universally understood by EAL students (Cummins, 2000). However, some studies warn that over-reliance on visual reinforcement can hinder verbal language development, meaning schools must ensure a gradual not sudden, transition from non-verbal to verbal engagement (Gibbons, 2015).

Another approach is effort-based feedback, where praise is linked to specific improvement and learning progress rather than vague praise. At School A, teachers were encouraged to explain why students were being praised, for example, rather than saying 'Well done!' staff would elaborate; 'The way you used shading techniques here creates great depth, you're really improving your pencil skills!'

At School A, disruptive behaviour remains a challenge, particularly in the behaviour support room, where some students are placed full-time. While these spaces are intended to help students re-engage with learning, research suggests they often become chaotic, limiting the opportunities for structured reinforcement (DfE, 2019). Restorative approaches such as honest teacher-student conversations about behaviour can help students take responsibility for their actions (Hopkins, 2004). Research indicates that schools using structured and restorative approaches report lower exclusion rates and stronger student-teacher relationships (McCluskey et al., 2008). However, at School A, staff expressed concerns that managing the behaviour support room often became 'crowd control,' leaving little time for positive reinforcement. Additionally, behaviour rooms can sometimes become 'echo chambers' of negative behaviour, where students reinforce each other's disengagement rather than transitioning back to mainstream classrooms.

With 30+ students per class at School A, personalised reinforcement for each student is difficult. Research suggests that peer-driven reinforcement models can bridge this gap, ensuring that all students receive recognition for positive behaviours (Wentzel, 2015). Methods used at School A included table points and incentives such as rewarding the quietest group with sweets and merits or allowing the tidiest group to leave first at break. However, research warns against excessive competition-based reinforcement, which can create pressure or resentment towards lower-achieving students (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Staff at School A found that group rewards sometimes caused frustration, particularly when some students felt 'held back' by less engaged peers. To address this, a balance between competitive and cooperative reinforcement is recommended.

While positive reinforcement is an effective short-term strategy, research suggests that students must transition towards self-motivation over time (Dweck, 2006). At School A, staff noticed that students in art lessons rushed their work to earn merits, rather than focusing on quality. This aligns with research showing that over-reliance on extrinsic rewards can reduce intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). To address this, the school introduced self-reflection strategies, where students assessed their own progress after each task, shifting reinforcement towards internal motivation (Zimmerman, 2002). While these strategies showed initial success, research suggests that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may require longer exposure to structured reinforcement before fully developing independent motivation (OECD, 2018).

While positive reinforcement is strongly backed by research, there are ongoing debates about its long-term effectiveness and best implementation methods. Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation – Skinner's behaviourist theory supports external reinforcement (Skinner, 1953), but research suggests intrinsic motivation is more sustainable (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Schools must ensure a gradual transition between the two.

Reinforcing positive behaviours to develop learning attitudes and encourage engagement is widely supported by research, but implementation challenges must be considered. At School A, a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to work, meaning strategies must be adapted to cultural differences, class sizes, and student motivation levels.

DEVELOPING AN ACTION POINT

School A's SDP is structured around their 'PEACE' framework with the target of 'developing positive attitudes to learning through reinforcing positive behaviours falling under the letter A for Ambition. This aligns with the school's mission to 'foster aspiration, self-improvement, and resilience.' (Ref SDP)

The school prioritised this focus due to concerns over student behaviour, low attendance (88.5% in 2023-2024), and the ineffectiveness of exclusions. Staff observed that exclusions led to resentment rather than behaviour improvement, and many students from social services backgrounds or non-parental care lacked consistent praise at home. Recognising this, I implemented cost-free, sustainable reinforcement strategies to contribute to a positive, supportive learning environment.

During my three-month placement, I trialled reinforcement techniques designed to be accessible, sustainable, and relationship-based rather than relying on external rewards. One key focus was ensuring all students received equal attention and praise, including; quiet students and those with lower confidence who might otherwise go unnoticed. I also made sure to focus on students who were not often trusted with responsibilities but could benefit from leadership opportunities.

Rather than reacting to negative behaviour, I reinforced positive actions, applying Skinner's (1953) reinforcement theory, which states that 'behaviours receiving positive attention are more likely to be repeated'. I praised engaged students, creating a ripple effect where others followed suit. When students became noisy, I redirected them with challenges or games, such as setting a timer on the board and saying; "I challenge you to see if we work in silence for five minutes!?", turning discipline into engagement rather than punishment.

To build trust and motivation, I maintained a predictable classroom environment by keeping promises about merits and rewards, ensuring students trusted my reinforcement, and outlining the next lesson at the end of each session, reducing anxiety around the unknown and increasing excitement. Research by Hattie & Timperley (2007) highlights that clear expectations and structured feedback significantly improve student motivation. When students understand what to expect in lessons and how they will be recognised for positive behaviour, they are more likely to engage with learning rather than feel anxious about uncertainty.

I also sought student feedback on my lessons, openly acknowledging that I was a student myself. This built mutual respect, where students were more engaged in helping me progress just as I aimed to support them. Over time, I noticed students approaching lessons with enthusiasm, bringing in extra work from home to show me, demonstrating genuine motivation for praise and recognition.

Although my placement was only three months, I assessed my strategies' impact through increased engagement from quieter students when given equal attention. Reduction in minor behaviour issues when students realised that attention was only given for positive actions and a positive shift in student-teacher relationships, where students were more open to asking for help and engaging with tasks. My mentor made observations of improved behaviour within the classroom as my time there went on.

At a whole-school level, School A tracks reinforcement success using the software Class Charts (£6,995 investment), which monitors student behaviour trends and highlights students who may be overlooked.

Another method used is pupil voice and parental voice surveys, assessing whether students and parents feel reinforcement efforts are effective.

School A also takes note of attendance and tracks exclusions, as improved attitudes to learning should correlate with fewer absences and disciplinary actions.

A major strength of my approach was that it required no financial investment, making it sustainable across any teaching context. Unlike external merit-based reinforcement systems, my strategies focused on relationship-building and consistent recognition, aligning with Ryan & Deci's (2000) research on intrinsic motivation. Over time, this approach helped increase participation and reduce low-level disruptions without the need for formal discipline interventions. However, positive reinforcement does not work equally for all students. Some students with more complex behavioural difficulties continued seeking negative attention, showing that additional restorative or individualised strategies may be required (McCluskey et al., 2008). One particular student was extremely suspicious of praise, assuming I was insincere. This highlights the complexity of student perceptions of positive reinforcement, suggesting that some students require gradual trust-building before accepting praise as genuine.

Another limitation was time constraints. In large classes, ensuring every student received personalised attention was challenging. While I prioritised overlooked students, some still received less reinforcement than others. Research suggests that peer-led reinforcement strategies could help address this issue (Slavin, 1995), something I would consider incorporating in the future.

At a whole-school level, Class Charts provides structured consistency, but there is a risk of over-reliance on external rewards. Some students may focus more on earning merits than developing internal motivation. Additionally, inconsistencies in staff engagement with reinforcement strategies mean that students' experiences of praise vary between classrooms, which could undermine the system's effectiveness.

REFLECTION & EVALUATION

My three-month placement at School A reinforced the importance of simple, cost-free reinforcement strategies in shaping positive learning attitudes. By ensuring all students felt equally recognised, focusing on positive reinforcement rather than reactive discipline, and fostering a structured, welcoming classroom environment, I definitely saw notable improvements in engagement and motivation. However, no single approach is universally effective, and in the future, I will consider peer-led reinforcement, increased focus on intrinsic motivation, and tailored strategies for students more resistant to praise. While School A's approach has many strengths, refinement is needed to ensure reinforcement is consistently applied and reaches all students effectively.

CONCLUSION

This assignment has explored how reinforcing positive behaviours contributes to developing positive attitudes to learning, focusing on both whole-school strategies at School A and my own teaching practice. Through my three-month placement, I implemented cost-free, sustainable

reinforcement techniques, ensuring that all students not just the most vocal or disruptive received recognition and encouragement. I found that equitable attention, structured praise, and maintaining a predictable classroom environment led to notable improvements in student engagement and motivation.

A key lesson learned is that reinforcement must be consistent and carefully tailored to different student needs. While positive reinforcement worked effectively for many students, some required additional restorative support to address deep-rooted behavioural challenges. This aligns with research suggesting that a balanced approach, combining positive reinforcement with restorative interventions, is necessary for long-term behaviour change (McCluskey et al., 2008). Additionally, my experience reinforced the importance of whole-school consistency in behaviour management. The use of Class Charts and structured rewards at School A provided a framework for reinforcing positive behaviours, but variation in staff engagement with these strategies showed the need for greater consistency.

This experience has significantly influenced my future teaching practice, reinforcing my commitment to inclusive, evidence-based behaviour management. I now understand the importance of combining immediate positive reinforcement strategies with long-term approaches that foster intrinsic motivation (Dweck, 2006). Moving forward, I will prioritise peer-led recognition strategies, structured goal-setting, and restorative approaches to ensure that reinforcement is both fair and effective. This aligns with professional standards for inclusive practice, behaviour management, and evidence-informed teaching. Ultimately, this experience has shown that reinforcement strategies, when applied consistently and equitably, can create a more positive learning environment, helping students feel more valued, motivated, and engaged in their education.

