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|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                    | Targed/target                                                                      | Yr hyn yr wyf wedi'i wneud yn yr aseiniad hwn<br>What I have done in this assignment...                          |
| Targed/Target<br>1 | Engage with a much wider range of current research                                 | Utilised additional sources, particularly published within the last five years.                                  |
| Targed/Target<br>2 | You should avoid secondary referencing where possible.                             | I have tried to improve the accuracy of my referencing and have provided page numbers when using a direct quote. |
| Targed/Target<br>3 | Critical engagement with literature that both supports and challenges your points. | I have attempted to be more critical in my engagement with literature.                                           |

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

## **Introduction and Context**

In order to adhere to BERA's ethical guidelines the focus school of this assignment will be referred to as School X throughout in order to protect its anonymity. School X is an English medium, mixed, 11-18, community secondary school. Around 70% of pupils are from a minority ethnic background and speak an additional language. The school has a higher than average intake of pupils eligible for free school meals at 32.7%. The percentage of those with a special educational need is also higher than the national average at 35%. The purpose of this assignment is to reflect on the implementation of a key aspect of School X's development plan. The priority I have chosen to focus on is the school's aim to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

## **Literature review**

SDPs provide a systematic approach to identifying and setting school improvement goals. Holly and Southworth (1989) claim that shared goals provide direction and establish a rationale for taking action, as well as provide a sense of legitimacy. However, there are those that criticise such a systematic approach, for example McNeil (1988) claims that in their aim to enhance learning, schools end up "organizing it out of existence" (Holly and Southworth 1989: P20). His rationale is that by overly focusing on the perceived competency of the school as an organisation, practitioners can undermine their central goals such as the advancement of teaching and learning.

The Key aspect of School X's development plan that forms the focus of this assignment, is the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning. Holly (1983) claims that the schools that prioritize educational goals give their teachers security in taking the risks required to develop their practice. D'Andrea and Gosling (2005: P2) criticise the simplicity of the ideology surrounding the idea of effective teaching and learning. They describe the notion of effective learning as "a thin description of the goals of teaching". Despite D'Andrea and Gosling's criticism being aimed at higher education, I feel that as a broad statement, it is arguably relevant to education as a whole. Without a clear measure of what constitutes effective teaching and learning it is difficult to establish what would be considered a success. This highlights the need for a clear success criteria to be included within the improvement priorities.

Brighouse and Woods (2013: P19) make the point that "at the micro-level of teaching and learning" teachers should constantly be "adjusting their practices" to best suit the particular needs of a particular class. This point is expanded by Kulik et al (1990) who argue that learning should not take place at a predetermined pace but rather should allow for the different time scales that different learners need to reach an objective. I believe that the demographically diverse nature of School X's catchment area makes such a flexible approach particularly beneficial to its learners. For example, 70% of students within School X (ESTYN 2017) have English as an additional language. The school has established a structured method of providing for those with EAL which includes the existence of specific induction groups and a flexible curriculum for those new to English. School X also has a higher than average intake of pupils with ALN. Again, having a flexible approach to teaching and learning, focusing on the meeting of a learning objective, allows for a more inclusive learning environment; catering to

the diverse needs of such students. This objective can be in the format of a learning 'goal'. Hattie (2009) explores the importance of goals in enhancing performance and providing the appropriate level of challenge. The Department of Education and Training Melbourne (2017) put particular emphasis on the importance of learning goals, again referring to Hattie (2009) to conclude that lessons need clear learning goals to clarify what success looks like. They also make the point that when teachers explain to students the links between learning goals, learning activities and assessment tasks: students can then monitor their own learning and progression. Although this observation is made in regard to the curriculum in Australia, I feel these ideas are also relevant to Wales' new curriculum (Donaldson 2015) and comparisons can be made between the two.

School X's principle plan to bring about improvement in teaching and learning is to continue to develop the Curriculum for Wales and to promote its innovation school status. This is particularly pertinent during these times of education reform in Wales. OECD (2017: P40) states that "innovation in schools should happen at the micro level and cannot be forced upon them from above". This suggestion is supported by Sutch et al (2008) who describe a need to move to a model of bottom-up innovation that emanates from the practitioners themselves. However, OECD (2017: P40) makes the point that the policymakers in schools are in a position to spark innovation in schools by setting goals and providing a vision for the future. In order to do this successfully; Duke et al (2013: P6) describe how educators involved in school improvement planning should be proficient at "diagnosing problematic conditions, analysing student achievement data and evaluating program effectiveness". However, it would seem that adopting a sophisticated blend of top-down/bottom-up strategies as suggested by Fullan (1994) would go some way to avoid a scenario described by Hung et al (2019) where a top-down enforcement of mandated adoption hindered progression as people were less willing to make adaptations under forced compliance. Contrastingly, having a mixture of top-down/bottom-up strategies would also aid to avoid the scenario OECD (2003: P59) describes; where a bottom-up approach creates "successful pockets of innovation but fail to make a sustainable impact on the development of others". Welsh government is criticised for having a tendency to revert to top-down decision making (Hadfield & Ainscow 2018): the introduction of the new national curriculum is held up as an example of this. Hadfield and Ainscow (2018) attribute this pattern to causing fragility in the development of self-improving schools across Wales.

## **Developing an action point**

Welsh Government (2018) describes school development plans as "the school's strategic plan for improvement." Its purpose is to identify the school's improvement priorities and determine the actions that will be taken to improve learner outcomes. SDPs are designed to function over a three-year period. Indeed, the SDP developed by School X is designed to be active between 2019-2022. SDPs are developed on the basis that the schools themselves are best placed to identify areas for improvement. The development process involves all school partners and stakeholders; making it a process that allows for these interested parties to be involved in school improvement.

The development of School X's improvement plan was, in part, in response to the 2017 ESTYN report. Recommendations from ESTYN allowed the school to identify three priorities to raise the standards of achievement. These include:

- To improve the quality of teaching and learning
- To continue improving wellbeing
- To develop leadership across the school.

As each of School X's improvement points are in direct response to their ESTYN 2017 report, I would suggest that this shows an overreliance on ESTYN data to develop their school improvement priorities. I would then argue that this overreliance shows a possible lack of self-evaluation. Whereas traditionally it has been the government's role to monitor school quality, it is now expected that schools "monitor and improve what they deliver themselves" (Mac Ruairc 2019). Practitioners within School X are arguably better placed to have a more holistic perspective of the strengths and limitations of the school.

Provisional targets were devised in order to give the three identified priorities a measure of success. These include: targets for the expected percentages of students achieving specified levels of progress; a percentage target for whole school attendance; a maximum percentage target for the differences in achievement between non-FSM students and those with FSM and a desired percentage for year 11 sixth form uptake. School X's decision to focus on the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning was likely developed due to the fact that the 2017 ESTYN report ranked teaching in School X as "good" whereas most other categories were ranked "excellent". School development plans are often associated with putting strategies into place to "overcome persistent problems" (Duke et al 2013: P9) but should also be utilised for sustaining success. For example, one of School X's improvement priorities is to continue to improve wellbeing. This priority identifies the successes the school has had in developing wellbeing, but recognises the need to sustain and improve upon this.

Within the SDP each priority point is split into a further 6 sections:

1. Plans to bring about improvement
2. Key actions required
3. Success criteria
4. Lead and others responsible
5. Time frame
6. Resources, costings and budget source.

These 6 sections provide a clear scaffold for improvement and follow many of the original recommendations made by the ILEA who first raised the prominence of SDPs in 1985 (Holly and Southworth 1989: P30). Also included in each of the improvement plans is a section dedicated to the strategies used to monitor and evaluate progression and outcomes. However, although specific provisional targets are set out to measure success in implementing the three main improvement priorities, the success criteria for explicit plans to bring about improvement are much less specific. Although each plan has a success criteria, some of the criteria tends to be broad statements such as "positive impact on progress and outcomes in all areas". Without providing a clear measure of success it is difficult to monitor the progression that is being made. Indeed, Welsh government (2018) states that where possible "targets for improvement must be quantifiable". Furthermore, Welsh government (2016) guidance suggests that "it is important that the whole school and wider community are aware of the school's plans to bring about improvement". School X's development plan is not made readily available to the public and is not included within its online policies. I would argue that this is not in keeping with the aim to involve community partners if these partners are unable to easily access the final product.

## **Reflection and Evaluation**

One plan included in the SDP to improve the quality of teaching and learning is to promote continuous learning for all staff across the school and beyond. Every Wednesday SchoolX provides CPD training for new members of staff and trainee teachers. As a PGCE student I attended these myself and found the content to be useful. However, this training was exclusive

to new members of staff and therefore I feel did not address the aim of promoting CPD for all staff. In fact, in an unrelated research task undertaken as part of an elective experience within School X; myself and my research partner found that there was a noticeable discontinuity between staff being offered training in the use of classroom technology. Newer members of staff had undertaken such training whereas more senior members hadn't. I would also argue that the more senior members of staff could benefit from such training as they may not be as familiar with recent technologies. I felt this discontinuity was better addressed during INSET days where multiple CPD workshops offered a range of content suitable to teachers of varying experience.

The nature of the training provided often addresses difficulties that practitioners may encounter as a result of School X's diverse population. With such a large percentage of students with EAL, often training is focused on the use of different EAL strategies. A feature of this training is to provide the practitioner with a worksheet in a foreign language and set a time limit to complete said worksheet. The aim is to impress upon the practitioner the struggles that EAL students face and demonstrate how making provisions for such students is not only an aspect of good teaching and learning but also goes some way to look after the students' mental wellbeing. Similarly, a feature of the training provided for teaching those with ALN includes showcasing the visual capabilities of students with various visual impairments, using either a computer-generated image or modified goggles. These more practical methods of demonstration arguably allow practitioners to gain a more insightful knowledge of the difficulties encountered by some of their students. This gained knowledge and understanding can then be used to inform lesson planning and differentiation.

An additional focus included in School X's SDP is to develop a culture of enquiry and innovation within the school. During my time in School X I attended a 'marketplace' activity. Different departments had trialled different teaching and learning techniques; implementing them in their lessons and reflecting upon their effectiveness. During the 'marketplace' staff showcased their findings to other members of staff across the school. Examples of the initiatives I observed include the use of student role lanyards to promote student leadership, the use of different questioning techniques and the use of word banks to differentiate student tasks. This sharing of good practice allows for the dissemination of new ideas and innovations.

A further plan included in the SDP to bring about improvements in teaching and learning is to develop the cross curricular skills of students. Literacy, numeracy and digital competency are considered to be "fundamental and essential building blocks" (Welsh Gov, 2016) for learning. School X identifies the continued use and awareness of software such as Accelerated Reader as a key strategy. However Accelerated Reader is not without its critics, with some claiming that it does little to teach children to read such as Greene (2015). However, the language used within Greene's article criticising Accelerated Reader is arguably overtly negative regarding the software. The article itself is titled "Accelerated Reader's Ridiculous Research" this seemingly unprofessional approach to analysing such software makes this article's purpose seem more like a platform in which the author asserts his opinions rather than evoking more meaningful discussions. However, perhaps School X should be cautious about over relying on a singular software designed by a for profit corporation.

## **Conclusion**

School X's SDP identifies multiple strategies to improve the quality of teaching and learning and provides a clear scaffold for achieving this. These initiatives go some way to address the diverse needs of its students, although some of the success criteria tends to be broad. There does seem to be some overreliance on ESTYN report data to identify the school's

improvement priorities. However, I feel the priorities chosen do reflect upon aspects of the new curriculum such as focusing on student wellbeing and leadership. There are clear strategies to monitor and evaluate the outcomes of the three main improvement points. Though, I would argue that the school neglects to make its SDP readily available to the local community in a way that is commensurate with the government's desire to involve such partners in the processes of school improvement.

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