

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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1. Introduction

This report critically reflects on the actions, impact and evidence associated with the development of *outdoor provisions* as stated in the *School Improvement Plan (SIP)*. The chosen aspect is an important component of the school's ongoing improvement efforts.

The secondary school is located in the Vale of Glamorgan and caters to 1,521 students, including 335 in sixth form (Estyn, 2019). The demographic of the student body is notably different from the national average. 4% of the students are eligible for the free school meals whereas the national average in Welsh comprehensive schools is 16.4%. Similarly, the proportion of students that have special educational needs is around 8% which is significantly lower than the national average of 19.2% (Estyn, 2019).

In light of this context, the report will focus on outdoor provision, analysing the actions taken, their impact on the school community and the evidence supporting these initiatives. It will also look into the future actions and critically reflect on these aims to provide insights into the efficacy of the school's SIP.

2. Literature review

2.1 School Improvement Plan (SIP)

A SIP is important for educational institutions as it serves as a strategic guide for their growth and development.

The plan established a clear vision for the school and outlines their goals and objectives, thereby giving a roadmap for the future (Woods and Brighouse, 2013). Additionally, it identifies areas of improvement and allows the tracking of progress of measurable targets (VanGronigen et al., 2023).. It also helps with accountability since it gives a framework to assess the targets and monitor the fulfilment of the stated goals and objectives (VanGronigen et al., 2023), thereby ensuring accountability.

Moreover, it assists with the allocation of resources (financial and human) by prioritising areas that require attention. Through the involvement of stakeholders (teachers, parents, careers, students, community members). **It ensures** that all perspectives are considered (VanGronigen et al., 2023), making it a collaborative and inclusive process.

Furthermore, the SIP supports making data-informed decisions and complying with educational standards and regulations set out by the authorities. As such it is a tool for ensuring continued development and improvement.

2.2 Outdoor Provision

The SIP of the school set out to develop further outdoor provisions for all age groups (3-19 years old). The targets set in this year's plan explore planning development of the school areas, in particular in the lower school. It has the stated objectives to have additional fencing for security and to develop more natural areas to support outdoor learning (SIP, 2024).lo

The school already has climbing frames, a basketball court, outdoor chess areas, and a pond with a boardwalk as well as table tennis and areas to play football or rugby (School X, 2024).

Incorporating outdoor provisions is a decision driven by the curriculum for Wales as well as other benefits that it brings to students (School X, 2024). From a behavioural perspective, outdoor activities have been associated with stress reduction, improved mood, and enhanced focus (Sobel, 2004).

Another perspective that needs to be considered is physical health as students spend much of their day sitting down in classes, especially in light of current overweight and obesity rates. In 2019 12.6% of children aged 4-5 were obese and a further 14.4 were overweight (Baker, 2023). However, the school is situated in an affluent area therefore overweight and obesity rates are lower (18% in adults) than the national average (23% in adults) in 2013 (Local Area Summary - Home, 2014). A study by Nuffield Trust (2022) found that obesity rates are likely to be higher in deprived areas.

Additionally, the curriculum for Wales emphasises a more holistic and experimental approach to education. Through outdoor resources, students can enhance their imagination and creativity and build empathy for the environment (Welsh Government, 2020).

Furthermore, it develops their proprioception and provides unique possibilities to develop motor function, assess risks, and develop resilience and confidence (Welsh Government, 2023).

2.3 Behaviour

During the conversations with school in order to write the report it has been repeatedly mentioned that the outdoor provisions that are in place already help with the behaviour management in the whole school.

A lot of research suggests that having outdoor learning spaces can indeed help with behaviour management inside and outside the classroom (Bresling et al, 2023; Rockliff & Chinnery, 2016).

2.4 Physical and mental health

Being outside between lessons can reduce stress, improve mood, and increase activity, amongst other things (Sobel, 2014).. Studies found out that most children in the UK spend more than two hours in front of a screen per day and only 52% engage in the recommended amount of physical activity (Senedd Wales, n.d.).

Therefore it is not surprising that obesity rates amongst school children have been increasing in recent years. In 2011 the percent of school children (under 16) that were obese or overweight was at 35% (Senedd Wales, n.d.). In comparison to other countries, Wales has the fifth highest rate of obesity amongst a survey sample of 35 countries, and it is claimed that this is likely to increase (Senedd Wales, n.d.).

However, in light of this report, it is important to note that the school is situated in the Vale of Glamorgan in an affluent area in which the obesity rates are much lower than in other areas of Wales. In the Vale of Glamorgan, 16% of the adults are obese in comparison the national average was 22% in 2012 (Local Area Summary, 2014). There are no figures for children, however, Senedd Wales (n.d.) mentions that if the parents are obese there is a strong likelihood that the children are as well.

Furthermore, we have also seen an increase in mental health problems and stress in recent years (Page et al., 2022). Considering these numbers, it is more important than ever for schools to give their students an area where they can be active. Researchers have also found that children feel better and perform better after being outdoors and having a greater appreciation of nature (Stixrud and Johnson, 2018; Senedd Wales, n.d.).

The UK government announced in 2019 that they would train over 600 educational physiologists to meet the needs of the learners (GOV.UK, 2019). However, much research has been done on the

strong correlation between physical activity and mental health (Senedd Wales, n.d.; Breslin et al., 2023). Despite these findings, budgets are being continuously cut. According to TES magazine (n.d.) £100m has been cut from the education and language budget.

3. Developing an action point

3.1 Steps in SIP

To develop a SIP different steps need to be taken, these might vary depending on the goals set out. However, general practice is to assess the current status of the school, establish a leadership team, set goals and objectives, make action plans including resource allocation and stakeholder involvement, implement the action plans and prejudicially review the SIP assessing the effectiveness and make adjustments based on changes in circumstances, new date or shifts in priorities (VanGronigen et al., 2023). The following section will look into four general stages of an SIP in light of the chosen focus of the outdoor provision in the school.

3.2 Stage 1: Self-evaluation

The following section describes a school's possible strategy for evaluation and planning. In light of the more stringent inspection protocols, schools are directed to increase their self-evaluations (Woods and Brighouse, 2013). While schools should prioritise key OfSTED or in Wales Estyn findings, concerning achievement, teaching quality, pupil behaviour safety and leadership, schools should also take into account the diverse needs of pupils (Woods and Brighouse, 2013) by asking for feedback from students, teachers, the community outside of school and parents and carers, to obtain a wide diversity of viewpoints (Woods and Brighouse, 2013).

Another way to assess and evaluate the school is to do a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats).

The school being described in this report could have filled out the following SWOT analysis:

Strength	Weakness	Opportunities	Threats
Outdoor dining, basketball court, outdoor gym, multipurpose pitch, pond and boardwalk	No outdoor learning, grounds are unnatural, not enough toys, safety	Recently opened primary school - chance to build in better way, money, more space	Money, ensuring behaviour and safety outside, possibly unmanageable outdoor spaces due to size

Furthermore, the 2013 Estyn report recommended that school X strengthen its self-evaluation and planning strategies within the school (Estyn, 2013), this is absent from the subsequent 2019 report, where the school achieved '*excellent*' with no specific recommendations.

The recent report mentions the recent addition of the outdoor dining area (Estyn, 2019), however, conversations with some of the stakeholders showed the school's inherent ambition to extend outdoor facilities further. It also noted that some students are unhappy with the provisions that are currently in place, mainly not having enough playground equipment (e.g. footballs, bikes) and it mostly being asphalt areas (School X, 2024).

The inclusion of outdoor learning provisions aligns with students' preferences and the new curricular demands (Welsh Government, 2020) and reflects the integration of different perspectives in the decision-making process, which is in line with Woods and Brighouse's (2013) point of including diverse perspectives in a SIP.

The general aim of the outdoor provision section in School X's SIP is to enhance behaviour management and offer students additional recreational options during breaks. Due to the constraints in length and time of the assignment, other areas of the SIP will not be looked at.

3.3 Stage 2: Strategic planning

After identifying areas for improvement through self-evaluation and Estyn reports, schools need to consider how they make changes. In order to make changes, many areas need to be addressed to be able to strategically plan those improvements. To facilitate this process and achieve objectives, schools typically adopt an SIP where they identify targets and success criteria, accountabilities, timeframe and the financial requirements. This way of working is relatively new as developing and implementing an SIP has only been a feature in schools since the Education Act in 1992. Having a SIP is not statutory, however, it has become common practice (Woods and Brighouse, 2013).

The outdoor provision section of the school's SIP outlines three targets:

1. Exploring planning development of general access resources to the lower school area
2. Additional security fencing at the car park (safeguarding)
3. Exploring option of developing more natural grounds to support outdoor learning (SIP, 2024)

In order to make these changes a trust fund of £20.000 has been allocated. So far, the school has achieved target 2 with the implantation of a gate and additional fencing to be installed in January / February 2024.

The other areas are still in development. The given reasons for these choices in the SIP are as follows:

“Outdoor areas secure excellent behaviour and learning and engage pupils appropriately in outdoor activities during curriculum time and social (break/lunch) time. Outdoor provisions in Lower Schools is age-appropriate and facilitates the curriculum” (SIP, 2024)

The plan also details who is responsible for each target. Every three-months, an update is given to see which targets have been achieved and which need to be taken into the next year's SIP. The next update on this area of the SIP will be shared in March / April 2024 with a final report in June / July, deciding whether each area of improvement can be removed from the plan or need to be carried over into the next year.

3.4 Stage 3: Making improvements

After evaluating and planning improvements, the plan will be put into action and the stated improvement objectives need to be made.

School improvements are constantly evolving and present complex challenges that require continuous attention (Oude et al., 2021). Even with a well-thought-out plan the improvements might change due to emerging unpredictable situations.

As previously mentioned, the school is currently improving the fencing in the car park to ensure safety for all. Furthermore the lower school students have access to a big outdoor play area with natural playground equipment and the head of the lower school is working together with local authorities in order to provide more natural education for example in the form of forest schools (School X, 2024).

The other areas listed on the SIP are currently still in the planning phase and as yet, no action has been taken.

3.5 Stage 4: reviewing impact

Murphy (2013) mentions that the context of location, demographics and the type of schooling matter greatly. The described school is in the process of providing more natural grounds. However, the school is situated on the outskirts of a town surrounded by woodlands and fields, making the improvement of the school grounds less pressing in comparison to schools in a more urban

environment. Hence, the context (location) matters when reviewing the impact and what has happened so far.

Furthermore, improvements are for the learners and to support them on their journey. After interviewing the students in the lower school, the general impression was that they were very pleased with the pond and the current playground equipment. They mentioned they would like a climbing frame to have more space to play, which, according to the head of the lower school, will be implemented this year.

The outdoor provision has only been on the school improvement plan since this academic year (2023/24) (SIP, 2024), therefore measuring an impact is relatively difficult.

However, the impact of the outdoor learning areas that are already there and the opening of the multi-purpose pitch, which previously had only been used after school, has helped with behaviour management in and outside of the classroom (School X, 2024). Students also said that they enjoy break times more now because they have a designated place where they can play football, basketball and other sports, whereas before there was only a parking lot for them to play on. They particularly enjoy the fact that they can play on grass rather than concrete. The impact on health, general behaviour and grades will need to be evaluated in a couple of years to empirically measure the difference that outdoor provisions make..

Another matter that must be mentioned is that the outdoor provision is mainly focused on the lower school at the moment, despite being titled “outdoor provision for 3-19 learners”.

Apart from more natural grounds, the central focus is on improving motor skills in young learners and working with forest schools, which are generally also aimed at young learners. The fencing that will be installed in the next month will keep all students safe but will not necessarily improve their outdoor learning possibilities as the same area is currently being used, albeit with teacher supervision.

It seems that the idea of outdoor learning currently in literature and curriculum for Wales is mainly aimed at primary education and that there are not many practical suggestions for secondary pupils. However, many Scandinavian countries do use their natural surroundings in secondary settings as well. The case study by Fägerstam and Grothérus (2018) mentions the use of natural surroundings in maths class and German class without there being an additional cost to the school. The school grounds are fairly big and as mentioned before some adjacent fields and forests could be used by secondary pupils in outdoor learning without any additional cost. To do that

safeguarding is perhaps the biggest hindrance, but that can be mitigated by staying on the school grounds or teaching the students appropriate behaviour whilst participating in these activities. Ultimately, the school is focusing a lot of its efforts on the lower school and seems to be less focused on the provision for the secondary school.

4. Conclusion

All things considered the school is taking the right steps to promote mental health, physical activity and outdoor learning which will in turn help their students with their learning but also their behaviour and mental health. However, it needs to be mentioned that currently the school is predominantly focusing its efforts on the primary (lower) school and is only doing marginal things to improve the school life of the secondary pupils.

It can be assumed that the outdoor provision will stay in the SIP of the school for the next academic year in order to fulfil their objective of attaining more natural grounds and providing outdoor learning for all age groups.

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