

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

ECAD 7003

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Part: B

Introduction

The purpose of this assignment is to explore school improvement in practice and reality, critically examining the process through which a particular school develops one aspect of their school improvement plan (SIP). Such school is an English medium, mixed gender primary school located in South Wales (Estyn, 2023). With a pupil roll of 646, and the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average at 13.6%, a figure that lies below the national average for primary schools at 23.0% (Estyn, 2023). 6.7% of pupils in the school have additional learning needs and 27.2% of pupils have English as an additional language. However, of particular importance to this assignment, during its most recent inspection, the school was ranked “excellent” across all areas of scrutiny. Yet, for the purpose of this assignment, I will be critically analysing the schools actions, impact and evidence for their priority 1 target following the inspection. This target reads as follows “Further improve the teaching and the learning environment to support the development of pupils’ independent learning skills” (Estyn, 2023). I have chosen to focus on this specific target as pupils taking ownership of their own learning is outlined as a crucial aspect to teaching and learning in Donaldson’s (2016) 12 pedagogical principles.

Literature Review

For the first part of this literature review, I will outline the theoretical process behind the School Development Plan (SDP) and discuss academic articles which support, and question this process of development. The overarching purpose of school improvement is to help schools give learners the best possible learning experiences and outcomes, whatever their background or circumstance, in order to achieve high standards and aspirations for all. Under the Curriculum for Wales (2014), a fundamental part of this will be ensuring that schools support every learner to make progress, contributing to the four purposes of the curriculum. In order to self-evaluate and improve, schools need to understand what is expected of them more widely and to have an understanding of what success would look like across the breadth of their work (Curriculum for Wales, 2014). Thus, the foundation of the school improvement policy is self-evaluation leading to ongoing self-development. It should succinctly and clearly summarise the school's goals, the primary steps it will take to increase standards, the resources allocated to these steps, and the main results and objectives it hopes to accomplish. The definition of school improvement theory is an approach to educational reform that raises student achievement and strengthens the school's ability to adapt to change. By delving deeply into the issues at hand and coming up with original solutions, change becomes easier to handle (Hopkins, 2005). The key takeaways from school

improvement theory are as follows: (a) schools must be structured in a clear and precise manner; (b) feedback and assessment improve an organisation's ability to learn; and (c) schools should base their decisions on their objectives and core values (Hopkins, 2005). However, Hatch (1998) argues that school improvement efforts often create controversies and conflict through differing theories, making success difficult. Following a two year analysis of essential schools, Hatch found that despite considerable funding, initial agreements and positive relationships at the highest levels, it was found to be “extremely difficult” to carry out work in a collaborative and effective manner (Hatch, 1998). Yet, The Minister for Education and Skills has set out a challenging and ambitious programme for educational reform in Wales. Raising standards of education and improving learner outcomes is at the heart of the programme. The overall aims are raising the standards of education in relation to literacy and numeracy, while reducing the impact of poverty on educational attainment (Curriculum For Wales, 2014). Although there may be some disagreement as to how this is carried out, the process in itself is a crucial part to the development of learning and teaching in School's and a route to continuous improvement, therefore it should not be brushed aside.

The next part of this literature review will highlight research findings on my area of focus for this assignment, namely “The development of students' independent learning skills.”

Encouraging students to be independent learners, not only has huge benefits for them, but it's also a proven high impact, low cost way to improve progress (Mullings, 2023). The Education Endowment Foundation (2023) found that self-regulated, independent learning has a high impact on pupils' progress for a very low cost. They learnt that the average impact of self-regulation over 8 months' progress was found to cost under £80 per pupil per year. To put it simply, independent student learning involves students setting objectives and keeping track of and assessing their own academic progress in order to control their own motivation for learning (Mullings, 2023). In a study by Meyer et al (2008), it was discovered that pupils can gain the following advantages from independent learning: enhanced academic achievement, Enhanced drive and self-assurance, greater opportunities for creativity and intellectual creativity, promoted social inclusion and combated peer alienation, more chances to complete differentiated tasks set by the teacher (Meyer et al, 2008). Furthermore, a study by Gunde et al (2016) concurs with the work of Meyer (2008), suggesting that although self directed learning requires more skill and practise, the benefits in the learning process, goal direction, strategy making and improved reflection imply that developing students independent learning skills should be an integral part to the teaching structure. The question arises however, how are self directed learning and independent learning skills measurable? There does not appear to be any empirically validated developmental trajectories for self-directed learning (Brandt, 2020). Based on the underlying sequences of development or learning, some researchers have developed performance measures that describe various degrees of self-directed learning or features of self-directed learning (Brandt, 2020). Fisher et al (2001) defines readiness as “the degree to which an individual possesses the attitudes, abilities, and personality characteristics necessary for self-directed

learning” (Fisher et al, 2001). Readiness is a skill that teachers will need to instil in their classroom. Some pupils in a classroom setting will be ready to engage in self directed learning strategies; others will not. Consequently, teachers play an important role helping learners develop and apply self-directed learning skills (Lunyk-Child et al, 2001). Overall, independent learning skills develop crucial skills in a learners development. However, it needs to be included in the teachers' practices and curriculum and can not simply be expected of the pupils as they may not inherently possess the skills needed for self regulation and self directed learning.

Developing An Action Point

Strategic planning

The following part of this essay will outline an action plan for the chosen school. For the purpose of anonymity and confidentiality, this school will be referred to as school ‘X’. The priority target of this school was to “Further improve the teaching and the learning environment to support the development of pupils’ independent learning skills”. In school X’s SDP, they outlined three points of success criteria: Provision supports independent challenge and exploration in a variety of environments, Quality of provision is regularly of an excellent standard and for the staff to develop a good understanding of effective learning environments. It was outlined that the success criteria and progress will be analysed through IRIS, learning walks, staff meetings, training feedback, listening to learning and staff. School X constructed 11 actions in their school development plan to reach this target and outlined an intended outcome for each action, referring to a realistic time frame to achieve each and the type of monitoring that will be used.

Through this set of initiatives, attempts have been made throughout the school to address the overriding priority of improving students' abilities to learn independently. Notably, certain goals have been achieved by implementing dedicated reset times before lunch and at the end of the day, such as making sure that the learning environment is left in an orderly and conducive state for the activities that follow. Furthermore, habit formation theory—which highlights the significance of forming dependable behavioural patterns to support goal achievement—resonates with the idea of developing regular routines to enhance task completion (Duhigg, 2012). This will be monitored through learning walks

and teaching meets. It has started immediately and will hopefully be upheld through care and time of the students and teachers that occupy the classes.

Furthermore, A staff team went to a nearby school that was well-known for having outstanding learning environments. They were looking for ideas to improve their own spaces and were inspired by the school's dedication to ongoing development. This exposure spurred conversations on possible modifications within their setting, providing insightful information about how to best utilise areas for self-directed learning and student participation (Gardener, 1983). All staff members had a dedicated day to improve their learning environments. This allowed for cooperative planning and resource allocation in the creation of inclusive, engaging places that encourage student autonomy. Strategic objectives of the school were aligned with targeted interventions and comprehensive efforts to improve learning environments through collaborative talks with senior leadership team members during additional directed days (Gardener, 1983).

In keeping with the school's emphasis on independent learning, the incorporation of loose parts into outdoor learning spaces also promotes intentional, cooperative activities that encourage creativity and problem solving (Daly & Belowglovsky, 2015). The school made an attempt to offer pertinent training opportunities, giving teachers the tools they need to improve autonomous learning practices—something the school hopes to do within the next year—despite obstacles like course availability. Several staff members participated in other courses, including observation and transition training, outdoor learning, and authentic and purposeful learning, where they provided input to the school suggesting improvements and new ideas (Brown et al., 1989).

The school's strategic improvement plan outlines its goals for successful dissemination throughout the school community by providing all staff members with access to the knowledge gained via professional development courses. By paying for courses and a small fraction of the workforce, this strategy not only keeps costs within School X's budget but also guarantees that all staff members obtain necessary training.

Stakeholders

For school development planning to be most effective, it should involve all school partners and stakeholders; this is essential in ensuring that everyone has a commitment to the school's improvement agenda. As mentioned above, stakeholders play a key role in assessing, providing support and guidance through the intended actions taken for

improvement and their intended outcomes. A study by Guzman (2022) looked at the impact of stakeholders on the success of school improvement plans. The study results revealed that the stakeholders have a significant degree of involvement in the School Improvement Plan preparation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (Guzman, 2022). School X has a high degree of involvement with its stakeholders, within itself with teachers and higher staff members, also with schools in the surrounding area. However, through my evaluation of the school development plan, there seems to be a lack of involvement from parents and governors. The work of Guzman (2022) suggests that with higher stakeholder involvement, the school has a higher chance of achieving the goals set out in their school improvement plans.

Self Evaluation

Self-evaluation is the means by which schools reflect upon their performance and use it as a basis for sustainable improvement planning. The process of self-evaluation and improvement planning is central to supporting advances in school improvement, professional learning and learner outcomes (Curriculum For Wales, 2022). As an annual process, self-evaluation is a key tool in assisting a school to assess its performance. Following the Estyn inspection of School X, they immediately began the self evaluation process and began culminating sets of ideas, actions and intended outcomes. Because of this effective self evaluation process, School X has already achieved many of the targets in which they set themselves in their school improvement plan.

Reflection And Evaluation

In terms of assessing progress, the school has used an RAG (Red-Amber-Green) system. This system is utilised to evaluate progress against the success criteria outlined in the School Development Plan. Additionally, the school carries out regular observations to assess progress. This includes learning walks and also recorded observations using an online platform named IRIS. However, it is important to recognise that observations may only offer a glimpse into the true teaching practices that are taking place. Furthermore, there is also the risk of observer bias. Having a personal bias, point of view, or method of looking at things makes it difficult to draw true generalisations. The objectivity of social research is destroyed when an observer has preconceived notions about an occurrence or his own opinions about what is right and wrong (Bokyo, 2013). In this case, the observer

may have their own biases and successfully recognise what is going well, but does not recognise the unsuccessful areas. Yet, although this may be the case, School X has put all the correct steps in place in order to meet the intended outcomes for their targets. They have created individual actions with specific timeframes for the intended outcomes, all of which they are trying to achieve by the end of the school year. For the specific target which I have focused on namely “Further improve the teaching and the learning environment to support the development of pupils’ independent learning skills”, I would suggest that the school is on track to meet all of their intended outcomes for this particular area of improvement. As mentioned above, when I discussed the strategic planning the school has carried out in order to meet the targets, there is no doubt that extensive work has been carried out in order to make progress. The involvement of stakeholders, with intense evaluation and measurable targets have led to a school development plan with the highest potential of reaching its goals. Furthermore, the breadth of evidence that the school has provided and I have personally observed shows they are taking all the necessary steps to meet these targets. However, in terms of improvement, I believe that school X needs to involve governors and parents more as stakeholders for the school. Following my critical evaluation of the SDP, I have found little opportunity for involvement of stakeholders. The work of Guzman (2022) outlined the importance of stakeholders in maximising the success rate of a school development plan. Stakeholders play a massive role in a school, and also can provide a non-biased opinion which can be crucial to a schools development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this assignment has critically analysed a school development plan for a school in Wales. Throughout, analysis of targets, actions and intended outcomes have taken place. Furthermore, a review of literature regarding school development plans and of my chosen area of focus “Further improve the teaching and the learning environment to support the development of pupils’ independent learning skills” have led to a greater understanding of how a school development plan is an integral part to a school striving for excellence and continuous improvement. Furthermore, this assignment looked into the strategic planning the school has taken to meet this particular goal, the self evaluation that has taken place and the role of stakeholders in making these decisions and the support and insight they provide. Lastly, a reflection and evaluation were critically outlined, highlighting areas of success and areas for development. This assignment has provided me personally with a great level of professional development and insight. It has

given me information on how a school and teachers intend to continuously improve and develop from the prior year, something I will personally strive towards. Also, the depth and detail of each individual target and outcome has been an eye opener for me. The school ensures targets are measurable, yet challenging in order for the school to strive for excellence.

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