

How a school develops one aspect of its SDP: a report that critically reflects on the actions, impact and evidence base. (2,500 words)

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Introduction

This essay critically reviews and reflects on how a secondary comprehensive school develops one specific aspect taken from its school development plan (SDP) and addresses how theoretical understanding of the school development process has been applied to help achieve the specific target and also the school's overall vision.

The aspect in focus is how the school plans for all teaching staff to deliver excellent lessons, which personally as a trainee teacher, will make this written work extremely purposeful and impactful for my own progressive teaching and learning journey.

The school will remain anonymous throughout this work, ensuring privacy and non-traceability at all times, in accordance with the BERA ethical guidelines for education research (BERA, 2018). However, a brief outline of the school in context will be given for the reader, and is as follows:

- South Wales based English medium comprehensive secondary school, with pupil age ranging from 11-18 years old.
- The current headteacher has been in post for 7 years as of January 2020.
- 951 pupils on roll for academic year 2018/19 of compulsory school age: 474 boys, 477 girls.
- 156 pupils in Sixth Form studies: 70 boys, 86 girls.
- 92% pupils declare themselves as white British.
- Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) for 2018/19 was 7.2%.
- In terms of special educational needs (SEN), 8.6% of pupils are at School Action stage; 2.9% at School Action Plus; and 0.2% have a statement.
- Categorised as a 'green' school, showing that its highly effective and knows how to improve.

The school planning process

According to Regulation 3 of the Education (School Development Plans) (Wales) Regulations 2014 (Government, UK., 2014), it is a statutory and legal requirement for schools to prepare an SDP, adhere to national priorities in raising the standards of literacy and numeracy, and to decrease the impact of poverty on educational attainment. It is the duty of the school's governing body to do this in accordance with these regulations. This legislation requires the development plan to follow a schedule that strategically sets targets of improvement, identifies development priorities, and decides upon expected outcomes. Further to this, throughout the school year the governing body must monitor and review any on-going progress made against the SDP, and revise the SDP at least annually (Regulation 6).

In accordance with the Education (School Development Plans) (Wales) Regulations 2014, the Welsh Government created a document (Welsh Government, 2014) to provide detailed guidance in supporting educational institutions across Wales, including nurseries and pupil referral units, to help embed a successful strategic planning approach to promote high standards, and to improve educational outcomes for learners, providing them with a competitive edge beyond the classroom, both globally and within Wales (Highfield and Robertson, 2015; Donaldson, 2015). The SDP should be approached in a cyclic fashion, beginning with a clear whole-school vision of what the school seeks to accomplish, which will establish the context of the SDP. This cycle can be broken down into 4 key stages (see figure 1): stage 1 is self-evaluation, which allows the school to reflect on areas of strength and weakness through applying both quantitative and qualitative data where appropriate, and what actions are needed to allow the school to improve; stage 2 is strategic planning, where a development plan is created, involving all stakeholders for maximum effect, ensuring everyone agrees upon the school's actions and expected outcomes; stage 3 is making improvements/actions, where the school puts the strategies from the plan into action; and stage 4 is where the school reviews the current progress the school is making against the SDP, before revisiting stage 1 where the cycle begins over again. It is important

to note that the SDP should be considered a live plan, where progress is continually monitored, reviewed and improved where necessary (Welsh Government, 2014).

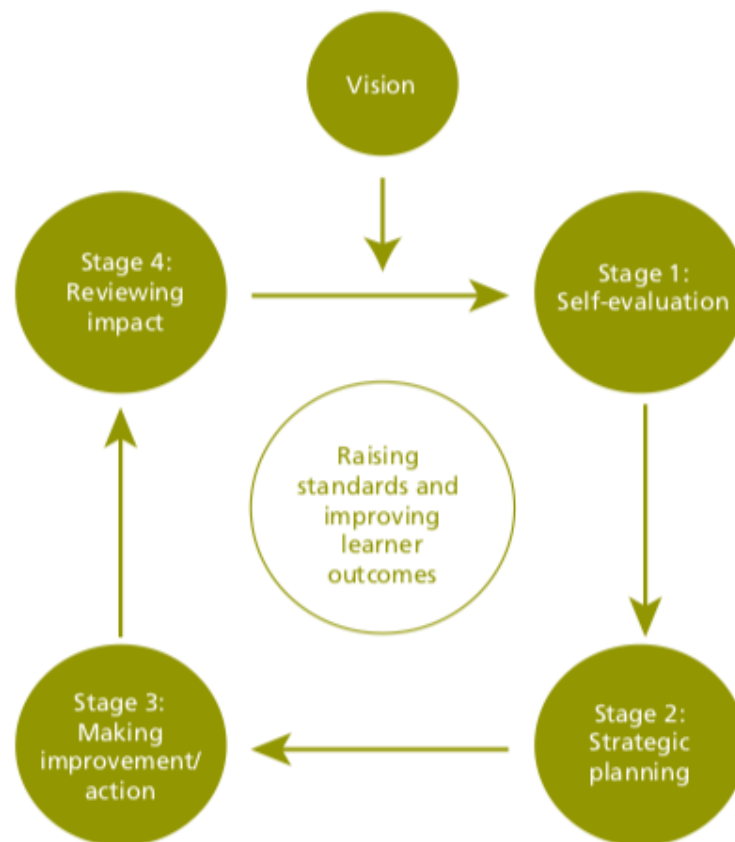


Figure 1. The school development plan cycle (Welsh Government, 2014).

As shown, the key purpose of an effective SDP is to allow a school to make sustained professional and education improvements in their measured outcomes, but it also holds educational institutions accountable for the decisions that they make to the wider community. Therefore, there is an important relationship between school leadership, and the quality of school organisation and culture (Kruger et. al., 2007; Pashiardis et. al., 2011).

As schools are made up of many different individuals with varying educational needs, from diverse social and economic backgrounds (Cook & Cook, 1950; OECD, 2018; Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019), schools must exercise good levels of social justice in their strategic planning. Excellent leaders within the school are familiar with the community that the school serves, ensuring the SDP is reflective of the school's context (Estyn, 2013). Therefore, good practice includes these wider contextual factors, and incorporates laws such as the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, "improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales" (Well-being of Future Generations (Wales)

Act 2015, 2020). Action points within the SDP can then allow for a clear whole school approach in how stakeholders, such as teachers, can plan how they aim to implement them where necessary.

Improving lesson delivery from good to excellent

Estyn, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales, concluded in their annual report that, from inspecting 106 secondary schools between 2010-2013, "the single most important" (Estyn, 2013, p. 26) and common recommendation for school improvement is enhancing the quality of teaching consistently across all departments. Estyn also observed that 'excellent' schools with strong leaders have systems in place that manage staff performance effectively by providing supportive and transparent strategies to tackle underperformance, and identifying colleagues with certain expertise to work collaboratively to coach and mentor staff to aid in improving the quality of their teaching. Reflective practice is also a highly effective tool in transcending an educator's teaching ability (Dinkelman, 1997; Pinsky, Monson, & Irby, 1998; Larrivee, 2000; Welsh Government, 2014). This demonstrates that these schools understand that teaching staff are their "most valuable resource" in improving standards (Estyn, 2013, p. 32).

Effective school leadership and excellent teaching practice can result in increased student attainment (Day et. al., 2007, 2009, 2011), especially for students from minority backgrounds, as links between ability and socioeconomic backgrounds of students can be an important cause of lower attainment (Baker, Goesling, & LeTendre, 2002; Jackson, 2013; Ressa & Azzolini, 2014; Highfield and Robertson, 2015). One approach in which a school can plan to combat this through its SDP is to develop and prioritise a focus on all teaching staff delivering excellent lessons, catering for the needs of all their pupils. With this in mind, leaders must firstly consider the needs of their pupils in an appropriate socioeconomic context, and then plan how they will implement effective pedagogical strategies through their SDP in order to produce positive effects in the classroom to maximize pupil outcomes (Pashiardis, 2011), providing necessary training and coaching where needed.

The SDP

The secondary school under analysis in this essay organises its SDP under five main headings; the five main inspection areas in Estyn's Common Inspection Framework (Estyn, 2017): (1) Standards; (2) Wellbeing and attitudes to learning; (3) Teaching and learning experiences; (4) Care, support and guidance; and (5) Leadership and management.

The school planning cycle operates from September to September, with draft versions of the plan prepared in the Summer term, before the final review of the plan is completed in August informed by new exam results. Throughout the year the plan is reported upon, monitored and revised at termly governing body meetings. The school also uses the 'schools as learning organisations' (SLO) model for Wales, focusing on seven dimensions, integral to the four purposes, with well-being at heart (Welsh Government, 2017). Some of these dimensions focus on promoting strong leadership in developing a shared vision centred on student learning, support continuous professional learning for all staff, embed team learning/collaboration among all staff, and use current research from large scale systems to inform future practice.

Self-evaluation; developing action points

This essay focuses on section (3) of the SDP (Teaching and learning experiences). The school has self-evaluated itself as 'good' in this area, in line with inspection criteria set by Estyn, further identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses using previous inspection recommendations. The self-identified strengths are: effective planning; excellent subject knowledge; transition; and development of cross-curricular responsibilities (CCR) e.g. literacy, numeracy, and digital competency, across the curriculum, including Welsh language. The area of improvement identified in the SDP, which was subsequently formed into a priority development point, is the delivery of excellent lessons by all teaching staff. In order to meet this target, and improve the standard of teaching across the school, a series of action points have been developed. Firstly, teachers are tasked with enhancing differentiation and challenge for SEN (Special Education Needs) and MAT (More Able and Talented) pupils. Differentiation, particularly for SEN and MAT pupils is an extremely important and proven strategy to help all learners access the learning, improving attainment outcomes (Tomlinson, 2003; Rock et al., 2008; Schleicher, 2016), and therefore focusing on this to be included in all classrooms will improve the quality of teaching across the whole school. Secondly, all teachers are expected to embed cross-curricular responsibilities in their lessons, to improve their teaching. Savage (2010) states that in many key respects, developing an approach to embed meaningful cross-curricular teaching and learning is a key aspect in achieving expert level teaching. Finally, teachers are asked to focus on improving questioning techniques in the classroom, a specific self-evaluated weakness which was highlighted in the SDP. Teachers often lack good understanding of effective questioning techniques, and how to use the various question types appropriately (Cavanaugh & Warwick, 2001), for example, too much emphasis is frequently placed on closed questioning (Paramore, 2017). Black, Harrison & Lee (2003) place questioning as a crucial pedagogical

skill that should be an integral part of quality teaching and learning, therefore this final action point has the potential to steer teachers towards excellent practice.

The school plans to resource these actions by offering whole school INSET days with a variety of workshops available, including: CCR strategy development; questioning, pace and delivery of lessons; and MAT/SEN sessions. Teaching staff have also been given allocated time to meet in their AoLE's (Areas of Learning and Experience), promoting collaboration between different departments, with particular focus on the new curriculum Successful Futures (Donaldson, 2015), embedding structured CCR across a range of subjects. All of these actions ensure a standard and consistent approach to the improvement in the quality of teaching needed across the whole school. However, from my observations, some points are more welcomed and made better use of by some staff than others, showing the significance on how leaders can inspire teachers to benefit learners in their classroom, and the important need for creating a culture of collaboration when making such decisions between SLT (Senior leadership team) and all staff within a school community (Brinson & Steiner, 2007).

Measuring outcomes

The impact of these areas for development have been measured in varying ways, firstly by using quantitative data taken from national test results to record school and teacher performance, which will be used to inform future teaching. Although this data is easily accessible and a common way to evaluate teacher performance (Goldstein, 2001; Schochet & Chiang, 2013), the use of such data in performance evaluation may not always lead to future improved student achievement. Test data does not fairly represent the quality of the teaching as there are many factors contributing to these test results (Baker et. al., 2010) and does not always provide a true representation of a student's knowledge (Biehler & Snowman, 1986). Secondly, pupil voice will be used to measure the success of the actions implemented to improve lesson delivery. It is important to include the student's opinion when making decisions in the classroom, as responding to pupil's opinions regarding their experiences can be an effective tool in improving teaching practice (Flutter, 2007). This bottom-up approach can be invaluable in enhancing pedagogical development, and furthermore help develop positive student-teacher relationships, enhancing well-being (Waters, 2017). Finally, formal lesson observations from SLT will measure the quality of a teacher's lessons, with a focus on CCR, questioning, and differentiation seen during the observation. Recently there has been much controversy surrounding such lesson observations, in that a search for teaching excellence in this way is mostly futile (Coe, R.,

2014) particularly where the observers are out of subject or have not been trained (NEU, 2018). Nevertheless, teacher observation continues to be used to evaluate teacher performance in the majority of schools across the country, including the comprehensive school at the centre of this essay.

Reflection and evaluation

This particular school prides itself on great results and strong leadership, and is categorised as a green school (Mylocalschool.gov.wales, 2020), meaning that it comparatively needs the least support in order to improve as an educational institution (Welsh Government, 2019). In relation to excellent leadership, the school shows great application of the school planning cycle in its SDP (Welsh Government, 2014), starting with clear school aims and vision, and obvious links to all four stages of the cycle. Understandably, the SDP has been tailored to fit inspection criteria set by Estyn. However, in my opinion, there may be an over-emphasis on this, which can cause a lack of focus on teaching, and too much on inspection outcomes.

The three action points developed in the SDP, differentiation, CCR and questioning, are all proven strategies to help achieve superior lesson quality and ultimately improving educational outcomes (Tomlinson, 2003; Black, Harrison & Lee, 2003; Savage, 2010). However, a good practical suggestion would be to include a focus on different assessment for learning (AfL) techniques across the whole school, so teachers receive instant feedback from learners in real time to inform their teaching. Black et. al (2004) suggest that there is unequivocal evidence that AfL used regularly in the classroom, particularly across the whole school, raises standards. Therefore, it would be in the school's interest to implement such techniques in order to achieve teaching excellence.

The school provides purposeful opportunities for professional development of staff during INSET days and department/AoLE meetings, with a concentrated effort to improve lesson quality linked to the actions points within the SDP. Another suggestion which may help teaching staff develop professionally even further is to join different staff on non-evaluative learning walks (Steiny, 2009; Kachur, Stout & Edwards, 2010), observing teaching across the whole school, promoting collaboration between colleagues working towards effective joint practice. Further to this, teachers could be given the opportunity to carry out action research through the medium of lesson studies which has been shown to improve future practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Dudley, 2014).

In my opinion, the methods chosen by the school to measure the impact of the action points to improve lesson quality have both positive and negative aspects. As already discussed, incorporating pupil voice is a constructive tool in measuring teaching quality (Flutter, 2007). However, the application of test data in measuring the quality of a teacher's lesson's may not be as useful, as such test results are only one piece of information about the teacher's effectiveness in the classroom, and such results may be more suited to a more comprehensive evaluation of the school itself (Baker et. al., 2010). Formal lesson observations may also not be the most fruitful way to improve lesson quality, due to observer error and the pressure of the event. Another easily accessible and proven tool for a teacher to measure their effectiveness in the classroom is to use video for lesson reflection, where a teacher can actually 'see' and measure their own practice (Fuller & Manning, 1973; Penny & Coe, 2004; Tripp & Rich, 2012).

Conclusion

This essay demonstrates how a school can use its SDP to develop a particular aspect, such as improving lesson quality from good to excellent, in order to raise standards and augment educational outcomes. It also illustrates the importance of critical reflection on not only the actions that a school aims to take, but on how the school plans to resource and measure such actions, as some decisions may be more impactful than others. Therefore, the decisions a school makes need to be evidenced based, using current research. Going forward, I plan to use this reasoning in my own decision making, and to think critically, reflectively and collaboratively with all stakeholders. Finally, I will consider the positive teaching strategies that have been discussed in this essay to develop my own teaching in the classroom, ensuring an excellent standard.

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