

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

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Introduction

In all learning organisations, the School Development Plan (SDP), sometimes called the School Improvement Plan (SIP), stands as a foundation for growth and progress. SDPs are the continuous product of the school community's reflection on practice and experience to identify and address improvement areas to benefit learners' learning and experience (Chapman & Sammons, 2013 in Goldstone, 2022; Welsh Government, 2022a). This report investigates the process of SDPs and critically reflects on how one aspect of one school's SDP was developed by examining the data utilised, the actions taken and its impact on learners. The discussed aspect is how several subject departments created a week's worth of humanities lessons to meet one of the main priorities of the SDP regarding meeting the vision of the Curriculum for Wales' (CfW) cross-curricular and Area of Learning and Experience (AoLE) approach to teaching and learning (Hwb, 2024).

The institutions and individuals involved will remain anonymous to adhere to the British Education Research Association's (BERA) ethical guidelines regarding academic research in schools (BERA, 2018, p. 21). To provide some context, School X is a mixed-gendered, English-medium secondary school with a pupil population of 1,109 aged 11-16 (Welsh Government, 2022b).

Literature review

As noted by Beach and Lindahl (2004), SDPs' origins were found in major enterprises' methods of improving their businesses during the 20th century before they were gradually adopted by learning organisations and government policy (cited in Marianno, VanGronigen and Meyers, 2023, p. 1). Despite the long history of the self-evaluation and improvement structure that SDPs follow, its surrounding literature is still in its infancy, and its studies' results are characterised by small sample sizes and the issue that correlation does not always mean causation (Meyers and VanGronigen, 2019, p. 262; Caputo and Rastelli, 2014, p. 73). This suggests that these findings may not represent the larger population and that quality may not guarantee significant improvement for all organisations.

However, from what has been observed in private organisations and emerging studies, it is clear that SDPs are a fundamental trait of successful schools (Preedy et al., 1997 in Fernandez, 2011, p. 341; Dunaway, Kim and Szad, 2012, p. 170). For example, Lloyd (2019) emphasises

how SDPs aid schools in identifying ways to improve and garner a continuously reflective approach to their actions and their impact on learners. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has also noted that SDPs are a fundamental feature of high-performing schools in all countries (Welsh Government, 2022c). This indicates that concerns about small sample sizes in SDP studies do not undermine their importance as in various cultural and geographic contexts, it is clear that SDPs are necessary for effective schools.

Although the process varies, SDP processes share similar attributes due to the influence of government and research recommendations. For example, many scholars, including Peneul and Shepard, emphasise that practitioners should not focus too heavily on academic scores but on other data and aspects of learners' experiences (Schildkamp, 2019, p. 260). As a result, the new 2022 SDP guidelines encourage schools to acknowledge a diverse range of data with a significant focus on learner wellbeing and progress when planning (Welsh Government, 2022a). Additionally, one of the concerns for scholars, like Mintzberg and Miller and Cardinal, has been that formal SDPs create 'rigid' approaches and a lack of adaptability to new developments and changes (1994 in Fernandez, 2011, p. 359; 1994 in Strunk et al., 2016, p. 263). To prevent this, SDPs must be regularly evaluated to understand their impact on learners and adjust actions accordingly (Schmoker, 2003). Furthermore, SDPs are typically focused on particular aspects to ensure that there is no strain to achieve all areas of improvement. These areas of improvement are frequently categorised according to ESTYN's inspection areas: ' Learning, Wellbeing and attitudes to learning, Teaching and learning experiences, Care, support and guidance and Leadership' (ESTYN, 2021). It is important to note that the process of constructing a SDP is often informed by schools asking themselves questions about their practice. The suggested questions from the Welsh Government to inform this process include 'How well are we doing? How do we know? How can we improve?' (Hwb, 2021).

While considering SDP literature is essential, it is also important to consider the literature surrounding the possible actions schools can take to implement improvement. As previously mentioned, School X addressed the interdisciplinary approach to learning and teaching that the CfW promotes. Although interdisciplinary teaching varies, it is commonly understood as the practice where subject boundaries significantly overlap with meaningful connections between different subject concepts (Scott and Twyman, 2018, p. 18). It remains a contested area of education as many scholars, like Young, Muller and Naidoo, have argued that blurring disciplines together can reduce academic achievement partially because the approach undermines the significance of subject-specific ideas (cited in Percival, 2018, p. 1071). On the other hand, an

increasing wealth of literature advocates for the emerging approach. One of its many supporters includes Baron, who notes how interdisciplinary teaching prompts learners to cultivate a broad repertoire of problem-solving skills by approaching topics through various disciplinary viewpoints, which more closely reflects the world that they will be entering (cited in Kukovec, 2014, p. 139). The benefits outlined by Baron and others suggest that implementing this approach as part of the SDP would positively impact learners and their learning, thus adhering to the Welsh Government's (2022a) vision for SDPs to foster optimum 'learning experiences' for students.

Despite there being no consensus, many experts recommend that only two or three subjects should be simultaneously converged, and that more success occurs when a select few subject departments collaborate during lesson planning (cited in Percival, 2018, p. 714; cited in Wilkinson, 2010, p. 6). These recommendations originate from the reflections and evaluations of numerous case studies, such as the “Living with Volcanoes” project in Northern England (Jolley and Ayala, 2015), where interdisciplinary teaching was trialled in schools.

Developing an action point

Building on the Welsh Government's self-evaluation questions (Hwb, 2021), School X evaluates its performance with four questions: 'What is working well? What could be better? How do we know? What impact is this having on the pupils and the staff and professional learning?' (Teacher X, 2024). To answer these, the school utilises a diverse set of data to inform their understanding of their progress and potential. Both educational policy and literature emphasise this approach as being vital to recognising and comprehending the needs of the school and implementing effective solutions (Hwb, 2022a; Schildkamp, 2019, p. 261; Dunaway, Kim and Szad, 2012, p. 168). The type of data that the school uses includes attendance to gauge attitudes to learning, ‘Class Charts’ to evaluate positive and negative behaviour, internal or external surveys to capture pupil voice, literature, book looks and 'learning walks' where teachers observe other lessons to see how specific pedagogies and approaches are being used and where there is opportunity for improvement (Teacher X, 2024). However, it is essential to note that parents, carers and other stakeholders are significant in the process. Some have previously argued that this external involvement, particularly from parents and carers, has hampered SDP processes due to a lack of understanding of pedagogical and general school processes (Levine and Leibert, 1987, p. 400). Despite this, recent research, such as the findings from the Education Improvement

Commission (2000), has evidenced how parents' and carers' involvement in SDPs and other aspects of school can improve student achievement (cited in Caputo and Rastelli, 2014, p. 74).

Data triangulation allows the school to identify what structures are working well, such as how a recent survey found that 94% of students believed their lessons were at the right level of challenge (Teacher X, 2024). More importantly, it highlights the areas of improvement the school needs to address. This process is how the school identified and developed the aspect of its SDP at the centre of this report. This aspect was identified through various data, including consideration of literature, learning walks and pupil surveys. The data revealed that the humanities subject lessons had seen an increase in 'off-task behaviour', that 78% of pupils wanted to explore other aspects of the humanities not currently offered by the school's Scheme of Work (SoW) and that learning walks had revealed many opportunities for the interdisciplinary approach that the CfW advocates (Teacher Y, 2024). As previously mentioned, SDPs are typically divided into a select number of categories, with a few priorities to be maintained or improved, and the school in question is no exception. In the SDP's 'Teaching and Learning' category, incorporating the CfW's interdisciplinary and AoLE approach was highlighted as a priority for all of the school's departments (School X SDP, 2024). Therefore, as a SDP priority and with the interpretations of the data, it was clear that an improvement had to be made.

As previously discussed, interdisciplinary teaching and learning have many positive benefits for learners. Recognising this, the departments that form the humanities utilised a range of resources and case studies to design how the 'humanities week' would be presented, delivered and engaged with by the learners. The result of this collaboration was a week where pupils' timetable was collapsed and they spent the week learning a skills-focused humanities topic on the Egyptians and Romans, where the final task was to answer the question 'Would you rather have lived under Cleopatra or Julius Caesar?' (Teacher Y, 2024). A question raised with this structure is how will the priority be addressed once the week is over and the pupils return to their timetabled lessons? Additionally, a week's timeframe raises concerns about how this change will impact learners in the long term. For example, many of the trials of interdisciplinary teaching were similarly conducted in one week, suggesting that, despite the positive findings, the long-term benefits and structure are still not completely understood and thus limited (Heywood and Solomon, 2012, p. 2; Tai, 2023, p. 3). However, it must be noted that this was a trial to ensure that the approach was achievable, appropriate and benefited the learners before the departments could expand on the approach and implement it more permanently within the SoW (Teacher Y, 2024). Moreover, the departments ensured that there would be a period at the end of the week

where practitioners could measure the impact of their actions by the data, such as pupil voice, book looks and 'Class Charts', collected throughout the week to determine what went well and what could be improved for the next cycle of improvement. This element of continuous reflection and improvement adheres to literature and government policy (cited in Dunaway, Kim and Szad 2012, p. 159; Welsh Government, 2014, p. 6, 17).

Reflection and evaluation

The aspect of the SDP to further integrate interdisciplinary teaching was significantly developed due to 'Humanities Week'. Reflecting and improving on previous 'theme weeks', the departments and teachers could effectively share and communicate the progress and understanding of the learners by having the lessons hosted in 'Google Classrooms' and other digital formats. However, this digital basis also allowed learners to develop their digital competency by submitting their work digitally, engaging with numerous resources online and using various digital software. Although this is not part of the humanities AoLE, the CfW and UNICEF emphasise the importance of learners possessing a robust degree of digital literacy and competency (Hwb, 2022b; UNICEF, 2019). This development of digital skills was evidenced by the end of the week's reflection, where staff and parents had observed increased confidence in learners using technology in their learning. Additionally, an analysis of 'Class Charts' data revealed a prominent decrease in negative points awarded for 'Disruptive behaviour' and an increase in positive points awarded for participation and 'Outstanding work' (Teacher Z, 2023). Building on this point, the level and quality of writing for the final question had increased. Compared to regular classwork, teachers found that 61% of learners had produced writing above their previously submitted work (Teacher Z, 2023).

However, as Lloyd (2019) notes, it is critical for schools not to focus too heavily on the positives of SDPs but also consider what may require modification in the future. As previously mentioned, the project's time frame was only a week. This limited time may have hindered the benefits of the interdisciplinary approach as learners had to produce their final answer at the end of the week, which could mean that both practitioners and learners felt 'rushed' to cover the material. Moreover, this limited time could mean that learners could not deeply develop subject-specific skills in addition to certain subject-specific concepts that could not be explored in more depth due to the breadth of the study. A possible method to improve this aspect of the project could be increasing the time to two weeks. This would give practitioners more time to explore

various disciplinary skills and concepts alongside more time for learners with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) to grasp the concepts and skills. This ALN accommodation is essential as nearly a quarter of learners in Wales have a form of ALN (Education Wales, 2020).

Another suggestion for the future is increasing pupil and stakeholder participation. Although pupil voice had partially inspired the week's creation, they had little to no involvement in choosing the topic or theme of the week. The literature indicates that involving pupils and other stakeholders allows them to feel valuable in the school, thus creating a more positive relationship within the school community that fosters higher achievement (Goldstone, 2022; cited in Strunk et al., 2016, p. 272). Moreover, granting pupils a sense of ownership in their learning gives learners the confidence to be responsible for their education and significantly contribute to the SDP (Gautam, 2021). Considering this, the school could have pupils and stakeholders submit different topics they want to learn before a final vote is held far in advance in Humanities Week to ensure adequate preparation time.

Conclusion

In summary, this report has explored how SDPs are created with frequent reference to literature and Welsh Government policies. It focused on how a priority of a school's SDP to further integrate interdisciplinary and cross-curricular learning was developed by using various data and critical consideration of their actions and impact on the school to facilitate future improvement.

The experience of exploring the SDP process was insightful and highlighted numerous considerations to enhance future practice. It has exhibited how SDPs are a continuous process with various aims that cannot always be achieved in the first term or year of being on the SDP. As the humanities project showed, there is always an opportunity to improve and enhance practice for the benefit of learners. Furthermore, it has revealed how SDPs involve everyone, not just teachers. This universal involvement requires clear, professional communication and productive collaboration to ensure effective teaching and learning. These considerations and familiarity with the SDP process have emphasised the necessity for me to comprehend the aims of the SDP, collaborate with various individuals and critically reflect on its actions and impact to ensure that the vision of the SDP is achieved and that all learners receive the best possible learning experiences.

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