ECAD7003 – Learners, schools and communities: Where am I learning?

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

Word Count: 2709

	Target	**What I have done in this assignment.**
Target 1	Improve accuracy in referencing	As per the feedback provided, the issue with my previous assignment was my reference list. I have used Harvard referencing throughout and adhered to in reference list, making multiple checks to ensure each type of document is referenced correctly.
Target 2	Explore the limitations of what you investigate more by looking at contrasting arguments to create more sophisticated judgements.	Contrasting arguments used to explore approaches to SIP construction, self evaluation and quality of teaching to improve standards.

In order for any business to succeed it must have a strategy, a plan of action to move forward in order to improve, develop and enhance its existing attributes. Schools are no different, and as Day and Sammons (2014) explain, the notion that a school can generate a positive impact on pupil outcomes is a fundamental instigator in the growth of interest in research and practice on school's improvement. It is the 'School Improvement Plan' (SIP) that collates these concepts and ideas, providing a high level map of the activities needed to realise the school's vision. The SIP under review here belongs to what will be referred to as the 'placement school' (BERA, a single-form entry primary with on average, 45% of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM), well above the national average (18%) and 30% of pupils are identified as having additional learning needs (ALN), again, well above the national average of 21% (Estyn, 2015). One of the SIP objectives; 'to improve the quality of teaching to improve standards', triggers an interesting question relating to the school context, if quality of teaching and standards improve, will this result in greater attainment? Is there a correlation between this SIP priority and the acknowledged link between FSM pupils and lower levels of attainment? (Welsh Government, 2014).

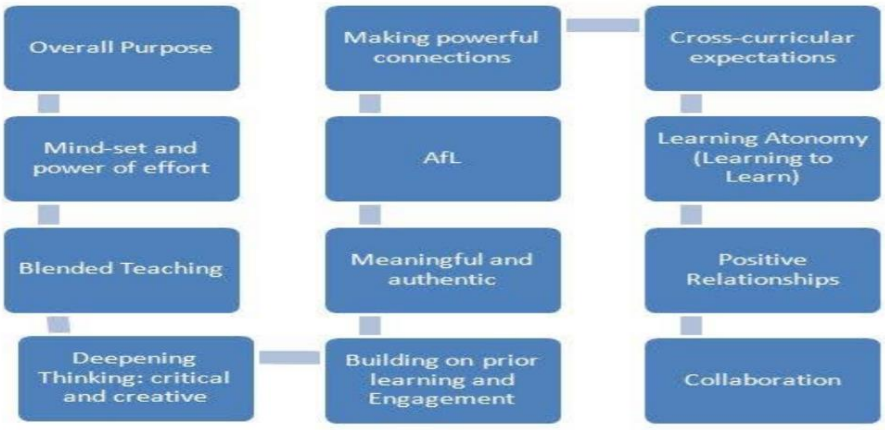
Since the introduction of the Education Act (1992) and the formal introduction of school inspections, schools in England and Wales adopted the approach of self-evaluation by creating and maintaining development, or, improvement plans. Boshier and Dauncey (2019) advise that since devolution in Wales in 1999, the Welsh Government has made significant changes to the education system as new socio-economic challenges arise, but this support alone is not enough. Schools must take ownership and accountability for their own progression, highlighting the necessity for strong leadership, with the headteacher at the helm of a proactive senior leadership team (SLT). As Brighouse and Woods (2017) explicate, the SIP enables the school to identify key priorities that they need to address, the actions the school will take to address them, along with, who is accountable for the action and the budget/resources required to achieve it.

It is this accountability and ownership that MacGilchrist et al. (2004, p17) suggest is where the power lies, professing that "corporate intelligence" equates with effectiveness, as who better to identify, plan then implement changes to a school, than the school itself? How has the placement school utilised what MacGilchrist et al. (2005) call the vital input of pupil voice? In the placement school, five core areas were initially identified through a combination of self-evaluation, an Estyn inspection and pupil test results. There is noticeably a lack of pupil voice here, but an overt consideration of pupil needs. The core areas listed are; developing the outdoor learning areas, improving ICT skills across the school, improving standards of boys writing and reading across the school, greater involvement of pupils in self-evaluation processes and to improve the quality of teaching to improve standards

(Placement School SIP, 2019-2020). These areas, including the aforementioned priority of improving the quality of teaching to improve standards, are all great ideas on paper, but as Morgan (1992) argues, for fundamental changes to take place, major breakthroughs are required, particularly in regard to efficiency and effectiveness. This requires divergent and dynamic thinking to take place, to almost be seen to challenge what has gone before.

Improving the quality of teaching in order to improve standards seems like a very generic target, isn't this something that all schools should be doing as the norm? Research from a study, relating to how teachers identify personal areas of improvement, their motivators and the steps they take to address them, by Poet et al (2010), concluded that all teachers were committed and motivated to improve their approach to teaching. They also concluded that teachers held a strong urge to inspire and help pupils achieve their potential, and in turn contribute to the school improving and meeting or surpassing its targets. The research also found that the methods used by teachers to identify their improvement needs varied, with the majority using feedback from colleagues or self-reflection. As Donaldson (2015) reports, the delineation between effective learning and good teaching is important and critical to pupil progression and elucidates this through twelve pedagogical principles (Fig 1).

Fig 1



(Donaldson, 2015)

These principles are embedded in research and evidence, which when implemented in practice, Headteacher Judith Davies (2020) attributes to attitude and cognitive tools melding together to generate a thinking approach from both a teaching and learning perspective, gelling with Art Costa's seminal 'Habits of Mind' framework. 'Habits of Mind' are intrinsically a set of sixteen problem solving attributes that can be used throughout life to support strategic thinking, solutioning, inspire perseverance and creativity as well as encourage insightfulness (Costa, 1996). As the placement SIP explains, when teaching is found to be

less than good, this impacts on pupils' learning. Adopting these 'habits of mind', Murray (2020) explains, encourages pupils to think critically, make connections, remain focussed and positive when faced with adversity. By adopting components of this framework, it is evident that the quality of teaching will improve as positive behaviours and attitudes are promoted, including a questioning mentality and applying prior knowledge to new experiences.

When a school has an above average FSM cohort, the spotlight exponentially shifts to the quality of teaching, as Allen and Sims (2018) explain, this is the most important determining factor of pupil attainment. Through research, they were able to conclude that social inequalities in England resulted in schools in deprived areas inclined to have inexperienced or unqualified teachers, and that more experienced teachers are allocated to classes where attainment is higher and pupils are less disadvantaged. Data from the Welsh Government (2014) states that, three times more pupils from deprived backgrounds fail to achieve expected levels, than their more prosperous peers. Critically, Welsh Government believe that no child should be educationally disadvantaged by their social standing, whether through poverty or inequality, every child should be given an equal opportunity to access the same levels of education. Through its 'Rewriting the Future' programme (2014, 2015), Welsh Government set expectations that, irrespective of socio-economic status, high expectations should be set for all learners with the promotion of a 'growth mindset' (Dweck 2006), driving a 'can do' mentality.

This approach set out by the Welsh Government, links to Donaldson's vision of a fluid teaching and learning continuum throughout the curriculum. In conjunction with high standards being sought by all, there is a view of minimising the attainment gap between non and FSM pupils. Aaronson et al. (2007) evidence that high quality teaching results in a disproportionate increase in pupil progress, narrowing attainment gaps, generating higher standards and negating what Brophy (1983) sees as a deep-rooted self-fulfilling prophecy of pupils from a lower socio-economic standing. It is somewhat inevitable that a school in Wales, with on average 45% FSM pupils, prioritises improvement of the quality of teaching to improve standards as part of their SIP. There is a sinuous cohesion with Welsh Government's (2017, p5) national mission in its ubiquitous education reform, which is focussed on "raising standards and reducing the attainment gap."

There are a variety of ways a school can approach the creation of its SIP; two particular models are the top-down and bottom-up approach. The top-down approach relies on SLT deciding what is best for the school and delegates tasks and responsibilities as they see fit, whereas the bottom-up approach invokes full employee engagement and opinion in order to

reach conclusions. Both approaches have their benefits and disadvantages, as Eby (2018) outlines, the top-down approach provides clear lines of authority and enables tasks to be streamlined so that objectives are met as quickly as possible. However, as Schoolology Exchange (2017) advise, the hierarchical approach may alienate staff as the autocratic process can suppresses creativity and reduce the opportunity for discussion and feedback, particularly if SLT is inflexible in its management and delivery of the plan created. In parallel, Daggett and Daggett (2012) commend the bottom-up method due to its collaborative and holistic approach as all staff are able to input and share expertise and ideas, in turn, working toward a vision agreed by all, not just SLT. This is the approach adopted by the placement school who meet regularly to formally discuss their SIP in order to identify where the school is now, where they want to be and the steps that they are going to take to get there.

Through the engagement of all school stakeholders, the headteacher within the placement school contrives a 'whole school evaluation report', which is the foundation from which all improvements stem. School stakeholders are responsible for completing a 'subject development plan' for each area of learning and experience, providing factual information regarding how each is managed and delivered, also providing recommendations as appropriate. Hanover Research (2014), explain that this initial input helps to map-out what is needed, but then must be blended with a prioritisation process, where around two to five areas of high priority focus are agreed. Too many areas of focus can result in an ineffective SIP, as staff are spread too thinly, costs outweigh benefits and attention is lost. Hanover Research (2014) also advise that as long as schools are adopting a continuum of improvement, which the placement school is, then all of the peripheral ideas will be resumed and addressed over time.

The importance of self-evaluation during SIP creation, was reinforced by Welsh Government's 2014 School Development Plan Guidance, where it is identified as one of the characteristics of effective school development planning. A pre-requisite to an Estyn inspection has been the completion of a 'self-evaluation template' (Estyn, 2017), the aim of which is for schools to critically assess their strengths and areas for improvement. One question worth considering is, how honest are schools when they complete this template? Surely there can be no benefit to fabricating the reality of a school's performance, in fact, an inauthentic self-reflection Ball (1996) contests, can do much more harm than good. He attributes this 'fabrication' to the pressures of inspections and school development planning, as the work and results of teachers and SLT are scrutinised. The placement school has critically assessed their performance and results through a process of self-reflection, as well as taking the feedback from their Estyn inspection (2016) on board to conclude that they need to 'improve the quality of teaching to improve standards'. As Learmonth (2000)

explains, this blend of external and internal assessment should, in essence, inform one another and almost dovetail to highlight key areas in need of focus and attention.

Based on feedback relating to the bureaucratic, cumbersome and timely aforementioned pre-inspection self-evaluation template, Estyn have been piloting a new approach. Since September, Estyn (2019) have been hosting professional discussions regarding a school's improvement journey with the head and another nominated staff member. Similarly to Ball's (1996) earlier point, Estyn acknowledge that the previously used template allowed schools to circumvent references to any shortcomings that may be overly challenging. It also didn't always encourage head's to focus on what was right for their school, but rather just treat it as mandatory exercise for inspection purposes only. This approach enables knowledgeable external stakeholders to be able to contribute to important discussions, holding a mirror up to the school in order for open and honest discussions and debates to take place.

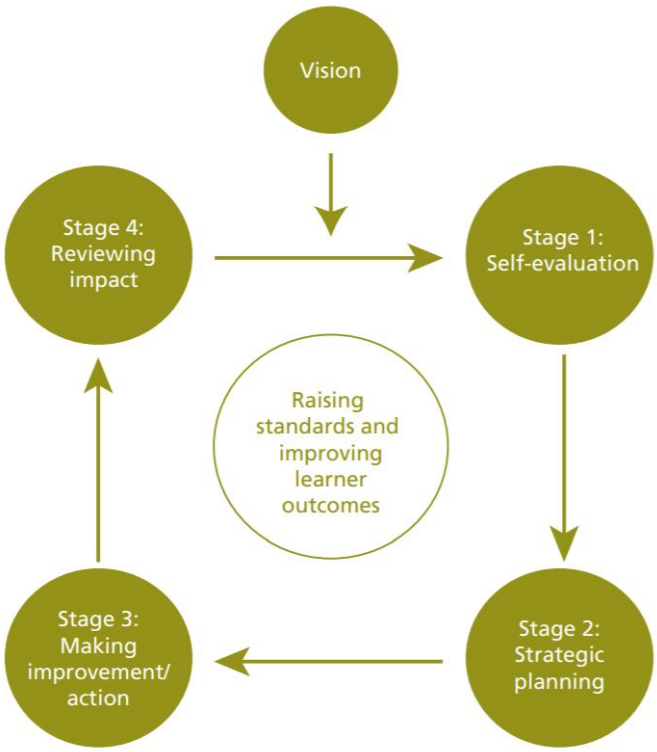
It are these open and honest discussions with internal staff that enabled the placement school to prioritise its SIP objectives by reviewing each and determining quick wins, next steps, ideas – capitalising on experience and best practice and creating high level plans. As MacBeath (1999) extols, including all staff as contributors to the school's developmental journey is a key component in it being a successful one, as everyone is bought in to the concept and subsequent plans. Once prioritised, each objective was subject to a 'deep dive' in conjunction with both qualitative and quantitative data (obtained from, but not limited to; test results, teacher observations, statistics provided by the local authority) and full stakeholder engagement. A bespoke template was used to extrapolate success criteria and a series of key actions, owners, budget allocation, timescales and a detailed list of steps that the governing body should undertake to review each objective (Placement School SIP, 2019). Chapman and Gallannaugh (2008), support this concept of a 'framework', which they explain, allows the SIP team to reflect on what it is that needs to change as well as laying out the improvement plans set out to achieve their vision.

This 'framework' creates a structure, enabling progression to be both formally and informally tracked as each completed template is regularly updated by the 'objective leader', with verbal notifications provided ad-hoc at staff inset meetings. This could however be enhanced by introducing more formal quarterly meetings to discuss each particular objective. As Armstrong (2014) and Ellis (2016) suggest, creating a structured agenda which is circulated prior to the meeting, outlining a specific purpose for each item will generally lead to successful outcomes as stakeholders understand what is expected from them. Holding smaller working group meetings each month with all of the key stakeholders who have responsibilities for delivering against the objective could also add value, as this

keeps the objective fresh and everyone accountable. These two recommendations support the principle requirement instilled by Welsh Government, that SIPs are regularly monitored and continually reviewed (Fig2).

(Fig 2)

School Development Planning Cycle



(Estyn, 2014)

As Estyn (2014) clearly illustrate through their four cyclic stages of development planning, making the improvement then reviewing its impact, is critical. How is the 'objective leader' progressing against the key actions that were set? One example of a key action against the 'improve the quality of teaching to improve standards' objective is, 'improve the quality and impact of pupil's progress meetings' (Placement School SIP, 2019), which is shown below (Fig3). By examining the actions, it is evident to see that there are logical steps agreed in order to contribute to the improvement of teaching standards, with teacher autonomy at the forefront. Lopez (2018) advises that pupil progress meetings can help teachers and SLT get an understanding of what is happening within their school and consider the best ways to manage any issues. The actions demonstrate the high expectations of the school in progressing pupils, by focussing on those deemed 'more able' and utilising teaching assistants to support pupils' learning, as well as investing in training to ensure all staff are able to use the 'Incerts' system. With a lead time of a full school year and budget to cover

staff as they take time out of the classroom to develop their knowledge and analyse their data, there would appear to be every opportunity for this key action to be successfully achieved as long as the 'objective owner' keeps all staff accountable and disseminates a lower level plan of action.

(Fig 3)

Key Actions	Personnel Involved	Start & Completion Dates	Budget
Improve the quality and impact of pupils progress meetings • Expectations clearly communicated - teachers to have 'ownership' of their data and be able to lead discussions on the progress made by their pupils • Progress of the more able pupils to be the lead focus of PP meetings. Where appropriate, teaching assistants to provide additional input • Update training for all staff on accurate use of Incerts	All Staff	December 2019 April 2020 July 2020	£1,500 main budget for supply cover

(Placement School Improvement Plan, 2019)

Taking the opportunity to review a SIP has enabled me to understand the wider, more strategic responsibilities that schools have, along with the broad spectrum of stakeholders that play a part in delivering these goals and objectives. One particular component that I am interested in exploring further is how pupil voice can be utilised by schools; how can pupils be engaged in order to contribute to the SIP? Grey et al (1999) believe that schools who take time to listen to pupils' opinions in conjunction with improvement ideas, will achieve their goals quicker than those who do not. This is one key area that must be explored when developing a SIP, as Chapman and Sammons (2013) explain, pupils are diametrically affected by all decisions made by schools and that research purports that their views are key, because they have valuable knowledge and understanding about what happens in their classrooms. Whole school engagement in developing a SIP by taking a bottom-up approach, appears to create positive outcomes as the NUT (2005) conclude, if school staff are given the opportunity to own evaluation, standards inevitably rise. By including pupils in the SIP journey, could result in an even greater set of standards being achieved as staff and pupils work in unison for the good of the whole school.

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