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

Introduction

A school improvement plan (SIPs) or a school development plan (SDPs) is a central document created by the school's advisory council. The SDP is a strategic plan, individual to the school, that is used to drive school improvement (Curry, 2007). This assignment will focus on how a local school develops one aspect of their SDP. After a recent ESTYN inspection, it was highlighted that there was a necessity to develop Welsh oracy across the school to progress along the language continuum and work towards to Welsh Government's goal of having a million Welsh speakers in the country by 2050. (Welsh Government, 2018). Therefore, this target has been listed as priority 1 on the school's SDP. The observed school opted to trial a 'token economy system' to promote the use of incidental Welsh throughout the school.

The information and material used in this assignment was gathered from a local school observed whilst on placement. In line with BERA guidelines, the identity of the school context will remain anonymous and therefore will be referred to as school X (BERA, 2018). To provide context, school X is located on the border of Swansea. In terms of socio-economic status, the school is described by Estyn (2022) as 'neither prosperous nor economically disadvantaged'. In total, there are 353 pupils enrolled aged between 3-11 years old. Approximately 93% of these pupils speak English as their first language and so very few pupils require additional support for learning English as an additional language. A scare number of pupils speak Welsh at home. Most pupils identify as White British (88%) the remaining 12% of pupils come from minority ethnic groups. Around 13% of pupils have additional learning needs and very few are statemented. The listed statistics were required from Estyn's most recent inspectional report of the school (Estyn, 2022).

Firstly, this assignment will investigate the relevant literature around the chosen strategy of a token economy system as a tool for promoting the use of incidental Welsh phrases throughout the school. Following this, the assignment will critically reflect on how the school developed this target as a part of their SDP and how the school monitors, reflects and reports the effects of this intervention. This will be followed by a reflection and evaluation of the intervention in practice. The assignment will then conclude with a summary of the assignment and how this will inform future practice.

Literature Review

To encourage children to practice their Welsh oracy skills, the school introduced a token system of reinforcement strategy, also referred to as a 'token economy' system in the literature. A token economy involves a person being rewarded with a token (or another meaningful reward) when a desired behaviour has been demonstrated (Ayllon and Azrin, 1968). When a member of staff heard a child speaking Welsh, they would award the child with a Welsh token to add to their class token collection. The main difference between token economies and alternative token reinforcement strategies is

that the collected tokens hold ‘pecuniary’ value and so can be exchanged for something that the individual values (Maggin *et al.* 2011). Therefore, at the end of each term, the class with the highest number of tokens would be allowed to choose a Welsh themed reward such as a ‘Barti Cymraeg’ which translates to ‘Welsh Party’.

The token economy approach is a conventional evidence-based strategy used in classrooms, usually to reinforce positive behaviour. However, it is a particularly customisable system of reinforcement and so it can be adapted accordingly to compliment the specific needs of a class. Because of its flexible nature, various studies have shown that token-economies can be applied effectively across different populations, such as varying gender, age and disabilities (Doll *et al.* 2013, Klimas and McLaughlin, 2007, Soares *et al.* 2016 and Ivy *et al*. 2017) Conversely, it is because of its flexible nature that it can be difficult to compare the literature as token economies are utilised in different ways depending on the type of classroom (Kim, *et al.* 2021). It is also important to note that many studies report the use of token production and exchange rate in different ways. This could perhaps cause difficulty when comparing the application of token economies system in each retrospective classroom as there is not a consistent method when implementing this approach as the intervention can be adapted where appropriate; perhaps making replication and application of this intervention difficult for educational practitioners. Ivy *et al.* (2017) emphasises this point as they explain that the descriptions of the token economy components to be absent or unclear in the studies they reviewed. This could perhaps suggest that the key components of token economy systems need to be clearly identified to develop an optimal and universal token economy system to compliment several populations and educational settings.

Traditionally, most studies focus on utilising a token economy to improve or manage behaviour. Alternatively, authors such as Shepley *et al.* (2016) and Alter (2012) directed their studies to investigate the effects of a token economy on academic skills, specifically reading and maths problem solving. These studies were deemed to be effective by the authors; suggesting that there is warrant for the use of a token economy system in supporting academic skills in the future. However, further studies would be needed to consolidate these findings as recording the use of token economy systems is subjective process and so there is the potential for researchers to observe the use of the intervention differently. Additionally, it is important to highlight that these studies were undertaken in a special educational environment. A study by Kim, *et al.* (2021) found that token economies were marginally more successful in special education classrooms in comparison with general classrooms. There is a possibility that the effects of a token economy in improving academic skills could not be directly transferable to a general classroom setting as the needs of the pupils could be different. Future research into the impact of a token economy intervention on the development of academic skills could potentially widen the use of token economy systems in schools.

Ultimately, the literature suggests that token economy systems yield large effects across various educational settings, particularly special education classrooms. This literature review has also highlighted that the use of token economies varies depending on the needs and demands of the class, suggesting that there is not a consistent or clear way of applying this intervention into practice. Therefore, a more detailed description of the components of a token economy could aid educational practitioners when replicating this strategy into practice and help identify the most effective way to introduce an optimal token economy into practice. Additionally, there is a gap in the literature to investigate the effectiveness of a token economy system in promoting the use of Welsh oracy in primary aged children. Therefore, further research would be needed to draw a clear consensus on the influence of a token system reinforcement strategy in promoting Welsh oracy in children.

Developing an Action Point

Thus far, the assignment has established the target areas for development and the strategies adopted to achieve this. The assignment will now shift its focus to discuss the process behind creating this plan.

The advancement of SDPs has become an essential aspect of progress within many schools' reforms process. A school improvement plan (SIPs) or a school development plan (SDPs) is a central document created by the school's advisory council. The SDP is a strategic plan, individual to the school, that is used to drive school improvement (Curry, 2007). The SDP should consider factors such as the school's context and culture, demographic and academic performance when designing their specific SDP. After investigating any problems faced within the school and examining what is causing these issues, the staff will create a strategical plan identifying the school's short, mid and long-term goals and describe the strategies that will be implemented to achieve their targets (Gonzalez Escobar, 2019).

The first stage of devising a school development plan is self-evaluation. Whilst external inspections drive improvement throughout schools, there is increasing emphasis placed on the school's self-evaluation process as a part of their inspections. Self-evaluation refers to the process of reflecting on the school's performance and using the findings to drive a plan for improvement (Welsh Government, 2018). Schools should review how well they are performing and celebrate good practice as well as identify areas of weakness and devise action plans accordingly. Across the UK, a school's self-evaluation process is becoming a leading factor of the inspection process. As a part of the pre-inspection report, headteachers must complete a written account of their self-evaluation process. Ouston *et al.* (1997) suggests that the preparation for upcoming inspections is more influential for school development than the feedback provided after inspection. Perhaps this could suggest that it is important for the schools to recognise and devise their own targets for development as they have immediate experience of the individual needs of the school and potentially have a better understanding of which improvement methods could be implemented more effectively. This point is supported by Ofsted (1999) who suggest in their inspection

handbook that ‘a school that understands itself is on its way to solving any problems it has’. Therefore, it is important for all stakeholders of the school community to understand the vision for the school’s improvement plan.

Once a self-evaluation has taken place, a strategic plan can be created to drive future practice. Cuckle *et al.* (1998) highlight that the planning process has significantly changed through the inclusion of more staff in the process. For example, roles such as the LEA advisor are now supporting target setting as well as increased support from governors. The Welsh Government (2018) suggests that for school development planning to be effective, all stakeholders and members of the school community should be engaged in the process. This could perhaps suggest that adopting a ‘whole staff’ approach to planning might improve each staff member’s understanding of the school’s vision in terms of progress and the role they have in the process. Following the creation of a strategic plan, the actions and strategies outlined in the SDP must be implemented into practice by all members of staff.

After employing the listed strategies into practice, the next stage of the school development planning cycle is to review the effectiveness of these interventions. Paterson, *et al.* (1986) suggests that the SDP document is dynamic or ‘live’, meaning that the plan should be continually reviewed to check the school’s progress in achieving their targets and assess how successful the strategies are being implemented. It is worth noting that the plan may be altered where appropriate to match the up-to-date changing demands of the school. Within the observed school, to review the impact of introducing a token economy system to promote Welsh oracy, (as discussed in the previous section) teachers monitor and report progress using various techniques. Such techniques include reporting digital portfolio evidence, learning walks, listening to learners and informal phase meetings. At the end of each school term, the phase lead provides a RAG rating to indicate how they are progressing in that area. One issue regarding the reliability of a RAG rating is that it is subjective and so it is prone to different interpretations. Therefore, there is the potential for optimism bias as the reporter may over or under-estimate their level of progress. It is also worth noting that the current copy of the SDP does not provide reasoning as to why the progress has been marked as ‘red’ or ‘orange’ indicating slow progress, nor does it describe any changes to the chosen strategies which have shifted progress to a ‘green’ RAG rating. Due to the lack of analysis and explanation for the score given, there is warrant for a key description of each colour score to give more detailed reasoning for the chosen RAG rating.

<u>Reflection and Evaluation</u>

Currently, the school has given this strategy a ‘green’ RAG rating, indicating that the school is showing promising progress and the token economy strategy is proving to be effective. When observing the strategy in practice, it was evident that most children responded well to this strategy and so were encouraged to use incidental Welsh. Using incidental Welsh phrases when interacting with staff and peers utilises the social-cultural theory (SCT). SCT reinforces the idea that language development is facilitated

through social activity as it encourages human cognition to be formed (Lantolf & Johnson, 2007). This could perhaps suggest that urging children to use Welsh phrases to communicate with others will promote their knowledge and understanding of the Welsh language, thus developing the school's priority of improving the children's Welsh oracy skills and contributing towards the Welsh Government's goal of having a million Welsh speakers by 2050 (Welsh Government, 2018).

However, one issue that presented itself on practice was that staff members did not always have Welsh tokens to hand which would result in staff awarding 'points' instead of physical tokens. Whilst the older children understood this idea and were able to use a tally chart to record the number of tokens collected, early years children were less familiar with the concept and consequently were disappointed when they did not receive a tangible reward for their efforts. A token economy system is underpinned by Skinner's (1963) operant conditioning theory. One fundamental aspect of this theory is that positive reinforcement or a 'reward' is given when a desired behaviour has been displayed. Behaviour that is not reinforced is often terminated (Skinner, 1963). This could suggest that not providing younger children with a tangible reward could weaken their motivation, both intrinsically and extrinsically, to perform the desired behaviour which in this instance is using Welsh phrases. This point could emphasise the importance of positive reinforcement in younger children in encouraging Welsh to be spoken. Whilst it may be unrealistic to ensure that all members of staff are always carrying tokens with them, not rewarding children for using Welsh phrases could possibly have detrimental effects to the development of Welsh oracy within the school. A solution to this problem could be introducing Welsh token boxes around the school so that tokens are easily accessible when needed. Or alternatively, teachers may reward children with Welsh points which can be exchanged for tokens from the class teacher. However, both strategies will be reliant on the trustworthiness of the children to not take tokens from the box and to reliably inform the class teacher when they have received a point.

Conclusion

This assignment has highlighted the importance of an SDP in driving a school's development and reflected on how a local school has followed their SDP to reach their target of improving Welsh oracy and contribute towards the Welsh Government's goal of having one million Welsh speakers in the country by 2050 (Welsh Government, 2018). It has explained the importance of all staff members being committed to recognising areas of improvement, devising relevant strategies to aid progress and regularly reviewing the effectiveness of these strategies. This process has been very useful as I now have a better understanding of the steps involved in creating an SDP. I am now aware of the responsibility I will have as a teacher in the future to ensure that the chosen interventions are regularly implemented into practice and are frequently reflected upon to assess their effectiveness. The process has also highlighted that whilst in theory a strategy might be appealing, it is not until it has been

implemented into practice that you can fully assess its effectiveness and make appropriate refinements to meet the demands of the classroom environment.

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