

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

Introduction

This report will critically explore one aspect of a School Development Plan (SDP) and reflect on the analysis of the chosen aspect. The way that the school sets out their SDP, the way that it is used and how it is monitored will also be discussed throughout this report. This will be supported by evidence from literature to confirm understanding and build on knowledge in relation to an SDP and the chosen aspect focused on in this report. The development plan that will be discussed in this report is from a one form entry, medium sized primary school which holds on average two hundred and forty pupils. The primary school is located in the North Western outskirts of Cardiff and serves a wide and mixed catchment area, with families from various backgrounds and ethnicities. Within the primary school, there is a percentage of 45.1 percent of pupils who are eligible for free school meals (FSM), which is proportionally higher than the national average for Wales (Estyn, 2015). In addition to this high percentage, the school also has a resource base for those diagnosed with the autism spectrum condition which supports 30 percent of their pupils who mainly spend their education in this resource base as well as being encouraged to participate in the mainstream setting.

Literature Review

According to the Department for Education, an SDP is a strategic plan that entails the appropriate ways of improvement that the school feel is necessary (Department of Education, no date). Each school has an SDP which is specific to them and their priorities of what is needed in order to increase the quality of their school. It should highlight the key focuses that they aspire to achieve and those which they have already met to enable a clear identity of the progress (Department of Education, no date). Research suggests that an SDP is set out for schools to identify their targets in which they need developing. An effective SDP is supported by effective short- and long-term planning, which is linked to challenging targets. The thought of planning for improvement, is a disciplined process involving honest self-evaluation using qualitative and quantitative data (Welsh Government, 2014). It also sets out the actions a school will take to improve learner outcomes. An SDP is planned by self-evaluating on its own performance, contextual data that will contain the schools' improvement priorities together with both short- and long-term targets (Welsh Government, 2014). The SDP is discussed between all members of staff to ensure that the focus is relevant and has a significant purpose and which are achievable by them all working towards their goals.

Moreover, the SPD will also include all the relevant and appropriate ways that each target should be met. For example, it will list any resources that would be necessary to meet a target, any additional funding that may be needed and will include key staff members' roles in working towards the end goal. Most SDP's are set out over a three-year period, so will set their goals to be met in three years' time. The SDP will contain sufficient detail to enable

actions to address the priorities for the current school year to be identified and implemented, along with high level priorities and targets for years two and three (Welsh Government, 2014). The SDP is a live document that should be regularly discussed and looked at in detail to determine and record their progress accordingly in staff meetings. This provides an opportunity to consider their data from their experience so far in regard to meeting the final goal. The document should be easily accessible to all staff members and governors and should be available for them to use as a common reference to reflect on their work and identify how they are continuing to improve their goals.

From this schools' SDP, I have chosen to explore their focus on the development of outdoor learning areas and the quality of outdoor learning. Outdoor learning creates an experiential approach towards pupil learning and offers pupils to become more independent in their education (Welsh Government, no date). Having the opportunity for children to learn outdoors can enhance their creativity to move around and explore their surroundings. Also, it allows them to be free in the sounds they make and enables them to take risks. The outdoors is full of special stimuli such as weather, sounds, smells and textures which can enrich and enhance a child's learning environment (Welsh Government, no date).

Further to this idea, research suggests that learning outdoors can improve on pupils' education overall. Estyn (2011) states that learning outdoors promotes children's engagement and enjoyment in learning. This in turn impacts positively on children's personal and social development, general behaviour, and wellbeing. It is apparent that Welsh Government (no date) agrees with this statement in the benefits that outdoor learning has on pupils' education by suggesting that "placing greater emphasis on the use of the outdoor environment as a resource for learning benefits children in so many ways: their health and fitness benefit from running, jumping and skipping outside and using toys and equipment that cannot be used inside; they can experience nature at first hand - how the weather changes and how plants and animals react to the different seasons; problem solving can relate to real experiences such as, how to move logs from one area to another; children can experience aspects such as conservation and sustainability at first hand and develop a love of nature" (Welsh Government, no date). Further research implies that learning taken place outside of the classroom is not seen as subject on its own, but as a new approach to teaching, as a new strategy. Therefore, this strategy can be utilised across all subject areas and all age groups for a number of purposes.

A main factor of outdoor learning in Wales, is the opportunity of Forest Schools. 'Forest School is a way of facilitating learning outdoors' (Knight, 2013). Research implies that forest school can be used to enhance the outdoor environment experience within a child's education. 'Forest School is an inspirational process that offers all learners regular opportunities to achieve, develop confidence and self-esteem, through hands on learning experiences in a local woodland or natural environment with trees' (Knight, 2013). Forest School offers children a range of activities that can support in developing various skills such as balancing, safety and outdoor awareness. Children having the opportunity to these learning experiences allows them to engage with their environment and to encourage habits of exercise that can be sustained (Knight, 2013). Children also learn how to co-operate and apply their thinking skills to real problems, such as making a water-tight den for characters in a story. This usually shows levels of enjoyment are high and children take pleasure in what they do (Estyn, 2011). Agreeably, Waite (2017) believes that it can be used to improve engagement in learning by making it active and fun and can be used to improve children's

knowledge and understanding on the development of culture and the environments around them.

In a report written by Estyn (2011) it is believed that children persevere with activities for longer periods outdoors and will attempt new things more readily and this applies to all children. Although, research suggests that the majority of practitioners feel that boys gain the most out of learning outdoors as it suits their active-learning style. Within this, a few practitioners feel that children with special educational needs also benefit from a less pressurised and freer outdoor environment. Generally, practitioners report that all children are benefitting from experiencing their learning outdoors. In most instances, practitioners can identify how individual children have benefitted. For instance, there are quiet, reluctant and anxious children who have learned to use 'big voices' outside and children with behavioural difficulties who have settled better in class after undertaking outdoor tasks (Estyn, 2011). This research from Estyn is evident in practice. From experience in various schools where outdoor learning and Forest School have occurred, it most definitely has an impact on children with all abilities. It really engages all children, in many different ways.

Developing and action point

The schools' SDP shows the highlighted key priorities that have been chosen to focus on by the school itself. The SDP is broken down into three sections; first section stating what the key priority is; second section identifies where the school currently stands on that priority and the final section explaining the ways on how they can improve the priority. In detail, it explains how each key priority can be achieved and improved. The school set their targets for a three-year period, but still meet up and discuss their progress regularly. As the time goes on and the progress is being made towards the end goal on the SDP, each element can be marked off as complete as the school feels when appropriate to do so.

The SDP explains how the school aims to develop the outdoor learning areas and improve on the quality of the outdoor learning that they can provide for all of their learners across the whole school. Outdoor learning is known to have a much stronger importance to children and young peoples' education and can have a significant impact on their holistic development. As Welsh Government (2011) suggests that having a greater emphasis on the use of outdoor environment for learning can aid in their health and fitness and widen their experiences. Additionally, Welsh Government (2011) states that "being outdoors enhances all aspects of children's development: social, physical, creative, cultural and personal. Children with these skills well-developed are better able to learn and to retain that learning."

When looking into the current situation in the school as a recommendation, I would suggest that the school could consider retrieving more resources for their outdoor learning areas. Having more resources may encourage pupils and even teachers to engage with it much more. As well as this, I think the pupils should have more time than they currently have at Forest School. The school has an exceptional woodland area which they occasionally use for Forest School but unfortunately, each class can only use it for one hour every fortnight. Alternatively, if they upped their time that they had in the woodland area, utilising the Forest School activities, they might see a positive impact on pupils' engagement to their learning. This would also meet the goals set in their SDP by increasing and developing their outdoor learning for the children.

Reflection and Evaluation

In regard to reviewing the development of the SDP it is identifiable that the staff members and pupils work considerably hard in their efforts to meet all of the recommendations and support the needs for every single pupil. It is inevitable that specific target setting as well as appropriate planning is of the up most importance when creating and adhering to an SDP. From the research taken in the school, it is clear to see that all members of staff within the school have increased the use of and taken many opportunities to continue their learning outdoors as well as increasing their professional development.

After researching the school and its SDP, it is clear to see that the school has already made appropriate progress towards meeting their goals and recommendations. In order to fully meet their goals within the SDP, the school has increased the amount of time their pupils spend completing tasks and activities outdoors. Most teachers (although not all) have made appropriate alterations in adapting some of their lessons that were originally planned to be taken place in the classroom, to now be able to be done outdoors. This is extremely beneficial to the pupils (as previously discussed) but it is also excellent pedagogy as teachers are increasingly changing routines in order to ensure that all pupils learn and make excellent progress within their classroom.

Furthermore, when making suggestions for the school so far, it is noted that most teachers are working significantly hard in achieving the goal of meeting this target. However, there is still room for improvement. The Welsh Government (2011) states that, 'outdoor learning is not just taking indoor activities and doing them outside or letting children play outside for longer'. I agree with this statement, as there is much more to outdoor learning that perhaps some practitioners are aware of. Outdoor learning enhances children's ability to become more independent and use the outdoors to discover their surroundings for themselves, and to allow the children to be imaginative with their ideas (Welsh Government, 2011).

Conclusion

To conclude this report, it has been found that an SDP is a clear and understandable tool in which schools use to set out their aims and achievable targets for the upcoming year. Additionally, it is noted that an organised school who keeps on top of their SDP and continuously makes progress in developing their targets and significantly utilises their SDP well will become more successful overall. Whilst working on this assignment, I have learnt that it is vital that a school most definitely works best when everyone is working together, which will then result in challenging their abilities and exceeding in their developments.

For my future practice, I will be sure to take part in all things necessary relating to the SDP and to offer my input in making a difference to the education that I can offer to the children. Whilst working on this assignment I have had the opportunity to broaden my experience and widen my knowledge on the other aspects of teaching, 'behind the scenes' sort of speak, the other roles that a teacher does other than simply teaching their pupils. This has confirmed the importance of the variable skills that are required in teaching and has enlightened me to the practice that I aspire to work in.

References

Department of Education (no date) *School Development Planning*. [online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/school-development-planning>

