

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

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	Targed / Target	Yr hyn yr wyf wedi'i wneud yn yr aseiniad hwn / What I have done in this assignment...
Targed / Target 1	Provide greater clarity regarding some of the choices that you have made. For example, the criteria used for the judgement tool used for writing.	I have attempted to link all my arguments with literature.
Targed / Target 2	Revise Harvard referencing - page numbers are not required unless using a direct quotation.	I have removed all page numbers unless they are for a direct quotation.
Targed / Target 3	Further engagement with literature specifically related to Lesson Study.	I have engaged with literature that specifically focuses on the school development plan process.

Introduction

Since 2015, all schools in Wales have been required to create and implement a school development plan (SDP) (Welsh Government, 2017) with the aim of creating a self-improving system of high standards and educational achievement (Welsh Government, 2014a). This critical reflection will focus on the development and implementation of a single aspect of an SDP. The school to which the SDP belongs will be referred to as School X in accordance with BERA guidelines (BERA, 2018). The role of the Science department in addressing the school's target of improving pupil attainment will be the main point of interest for this review (School X, 2018). To better understand the challenges faced by the school in implementing this aspect of the SDP, it is important to understand the context of the school. School X is an 11-16 comprehensive school which caters for 428 pupils, 29% of which are eligible for free school meals (FSM) and nearly 33% of the pupils have additional learning needs (ALN), with 13% having statements. Furthermore, 40% of the pupils live within the 20% most deprived areas of Wales (Estyn, 2019).

Literature review

The general aim of an SDP is to promote continuous improvement through regularly adapting practices to reduce the gap between the school's current performance and the school's vision (Hanover Research Group, 2014). Hanover Research Group (2014) suggest that schools frequently focus only on the measurable outcomes rather than the process of improvement and therefore often fail to sustain and continuously improve their performance. SDPs have the ability to address this shortcoming by setting out shared targets for improving learner outcomes as well as the actions needed to achieve those targets (Welsh Government, 2014b). As a result, the SDP can essentially be considered the roadmap for school improvement (Hanover Research Group, 2014) which consists of both short-term and longer-term targets (Welsh Government, 2014b). This detailed plan should include the intended strategies to deliver the improvement, expected timescales, methods of measuring the impact, and the members of staff responsible for the implementation. The SDP should also include details of the available resources, funding and any necessary professional development of the staff (Welsh Government, 2014b).

SDP production can be managed using two different approaches, one of which is the top-down approach. In this approach, authoritative figures such as the senior leadership team (SLT) and governing bodies formulate a series of targets and provide detailed steps for teachers to follow. This allows for organisation and streamlining of tasks and can result in a more efficient achievement of the desired goals. However, using this approach may also lead to a lack of voice amongst the staff and a lack of motivation as a result. The alternative bottom-up approach addresses this by increasing collaboration and taking into account the staff's visions and contributions (Kezar, 2012). However, this approach can result in a reduced pace of progress and increased pressure on the teaching staff (Harris, 2002). A combination of both top-down and bottom-up approaches has been shown to lead to more meaningful improvements within shorter timeframes (Kezar, 2012). As a result, schools often use a blend of approaches in developing the SDP where governing bodies are held responsible for overseeing the SDP and all stakeholders including the staff and senior leadership team (SLT) play a vital role in developing, monitoring, reviewing and revising the SDP (Welsh Government, 2014a). The pupils and the parents/carers are also often consulted during the preparation of the SDP (Welsh Government, 2014b). Putting an SDP into action is a complex process and involving all stakeholders within the planning process has been shown to be key for success. This is because the successful implementation of an SDP is highly reliant on a sense of ownership amongst all stakeholders resulting in a unified effort in a clear direction. Schools widely differ in their capacity for implementing change owing to the context of the school, financial, political and staffing constraints (MacGilchrist and Mortimore, 1997). In view of this, each school's SDP will be unique according to the school's context, however all SDPs should provide a clear description of the strategic plan that addresses both the school's priorities and the national priorities such as literacy, numeracy and the reduction of the gap in attainment between pupil groups (Blandford, 2012).

Improving pupil performance is often one of the most prioritised aspects of SDPs where pupil achievement data is used as a measure of the school's performance (Hanover Research Group, 2014). When School X's SDP was written, the principal benchmark used by many schools to measure performance and educational achievement was the level 2 threshold (L2) (Dauncey, 2018). The L2 threshold is a measurement of the number of pupils achieving 5 or more A*- C grades at GCSE or the vocational equivalent. PISA tests in 2012 showed that roughly one in five pupils in Wales were failing to achieve this, making the improvement of L2 performance a national priority (OECD, 2014). However, Duff (2019) on behalf of the National Foundation for Educational Research argued that this accountability measure has encouraged schools to place a disproportionate focus on pupils at the C/D borderline rather than the value

added to each individual pupil. This was supported by an accountability review carried out by the Welsh Government which stated that the L2 measure leads to a lack of recognition of the achievements of pupils both below and above the C/D borderline (Welsh Government, 2019a). This in part played a role in the introduction of the Capped 9-point score where each pupils' best nine results are taken and converted into a point score. Not only does the Capped 9-point score eliminate this disproportionate focus on the C/D borderline but it also addresses three out of the seven goals for the sustainable development of Wales. These are the development of a prosperous Wales, a more equal Wales and a Wales of vibrant culture and Welsh language. It does this by encouraging the development of quality education for all, gender equality, work and economic growth and a reduction in inequality (Welsh Government, 2019c). Furthermore, this measure focuses on the achievements of each pupil whilst also focusing on the best interest of the learners by giving schools greater flexibility to enter learners for the most appropriate qualifications according to their needs (Welsh Government, 2019b). As a result, this measure is more fitting with Curriculum 2020 for which inclusivity and well-being are the major drivers (Donaldson, 2015).

Developing an action point

The production and implementation of an SDP can be summarised into four critical stages that are built around the school's vision for raising standards and improving learner outcomes (Figure 1). These are self-evaluation, strategic planning, implementation and review.



Figure 1: A schematic representation of the school development planning cycle.

During the self-evaluation phase the school identifies both strengths and areas for development by reflecting upon their current performance and comparing their findings against benchmark data, often from their family of schools. Schools utilise a range of qualitative and quantitative data such as Estyn inspection reports and pupil progress and attainment data during this phase to identify where and how performance can be improved (Welsh Government, 2014b). School X used both of these forms of data to identify a target based on the national priority of improving L2 performance. This target was supported by their most recent Estyn inspection report where raising the standards achieved in the level 2 threshold was identified as a recommendation (Estyn, 2013). The Capped 9-point score, being an inclusive measure, was also added to this target (Welsh Government, 2019c) to avoid purely focusing on the C/D borderline pupils (Duff, 2019). This was done in line with School X's ethos of being an inclusive community allowing each pupil to maximise their own potential (School X, 2019). As a result, specific targets to improve the average point score for each pupil and improve the curriculum provisions to meet the needs of all learners, maximise engagement and improve individual learner outcomes were created (School X, 2018). According to an OECD review (2014) providing suitable curriculum provisions is a particular area where many schools in Wales struggle.

During the strategic planning phase an action plan to address the school improvement targets and the expected outcomes are developed (Welsh Government, 2014b). The school should

set clear and appropriate targets along with a clear route for addressing them. This detailed planning avoids the creation of goals that are irrelevant, unattainable or undemanding allowing for sustainable change and a continuous cycle of improvement (Hanover Research Group, 2014). The Science department utilised the Year 10 GCSE results to identify how well the pupils were performing and the areas requiring improvement. It was identified that a cohort of pupils were failing to achieve a Science qualification after receiving U grades in 45% of the Double Award course examined in Year 10. As a result, strategies to improve these outcomes were developed. The plan purely focused on the improving the average point score per pupil aspect of the target and included a review of the Year 11 entries and the introduction of alternative course provisions for underperforming target groups. The alternative course provision that was collaboratively decided upon as a suitable alternative was the Entry Level Science qualification (School X, 2018). This course was chosen on the basis that it aims to provide experiences for all pupils that are meaningful and enjoyable whilst also contributing to the Capped 9-point score (WJEC, 2016). Clear success criteria were also developed to ensure that the outcomes of the action plan were measurable (Welsh Government, 2014b), these were to eliminate the large number of pupils not achieving a Science qualification and to improve the average point score per pupil in Science (School X. 2018). However, the action plan failed to identify any professional development required to introduce the new course provisions or the timescales for implementation and review which are all important factors of an SDP (Welsh Government, 2014b).

The responsible staff subsequently take the appropriate action, putting into practice the strategies outlined in the SDP, whilst simultaneously reviewing the impact. The SDP is often considered a live document where progress should be frequently monitored and appropriate revisions made (Welsh Government, 2014b). Monitoring, evaluating and reviewing the implementation of the action plan to ensure the effective realisation of the targets is an integral part of the SDP process. This ensures that the suitable adjustments are made in adequate time to keep the targets and success criteria realistic and attainable (Hanover Research Group, 2014). School X, implemented their action plan by removing groups of pupils from the Double Science qualification and placing them on the Entry Level course. However, there was no clear plan of how to regularly monitor and evaluate the success of the intervention other than the end of topic assessments which all contributed to the final Entry Level qualification. Nonetheless, the Science department at School X achieved their targets of eliminating the large number of pupils not achieving a Science qualification and improving the average point score per pupil. This was confirmed by the outcomes meeting the success criteria with all

pupils achieving A*- G grades within Science and as a result improving their average point score.

Reflection and evaluation

The success of creating and securing a self-improving system is highly dependent on the quality of the improvement process. This is influenced by the quality of the planning, the clarity of the purpose and intended outcomes and the quality of the evaluation (Harris, 2002). The SDP cycle of self-evaluation, strategic planning, implementation and evaluation provide a framework for schools to adhere to in order to ensure the school improvement process is consistently of a high quality. Throughout the SDP cycle, School X utilised a combination of the top-down and bottom-up approaches whereby the SLT and teaching staff worked collaboratively to create and monitor action points within the SDP. This resulted in a unified effort to promote an improvement in learner attainment where overarching targets of improving L2 performance and improving the average point score per pupil were developed alongside more specific and attainable targets for each department (MacGilchrist and Mortimore, 1997). Whilst the Science department placed more focus on the improving the average point score per pupil aspect of the target, other departments placed their focus on the improving the L2 performance aspect. This was partly attributed to the individual ownership that was given to each department to develop their own action plans. Nonetheless, each approach was taken with the vision to promote an improvement in pupil attainment.

School X effectively utilised the available data to identify this target as a priority and to develop an action plan (Welsh Government, 2014b). Drawing upon both qualitative and quantitative data, the school was not only able to identify the need to improve pupil performance as a target but they were also able to identify target groups of pupils. The Science department effectively used pupil attainment data to support their decision to provide suitable alternative course provisions for a select group of pupils for whom the Double Award GCSE was deemed inappropriate (WJEC, 2016). This was done in an effort to meet the clear success criteria which was to give the pupils an opportunity to succeed by improving their average point score and to ensure that all pupils were able to achieve a Science qualification (School X, 2018). However, although the success criteria were clear there was no direction regarding timeframes for evaluating and measuring the impact of the new course provision on the pupils' attainment. To ensure a holistic approach in measuring the improvement of pupil performance,

pupil achievement data should be repeatedly collected using various methods, evaluated and acted upon to ensure efficient and continuous improvement. Adhering to this frequent evaluation strategy enables adjustments to be made as needed, increasing the probability of meeting the success criteria. A lack of clear and regular evaluation leaves no time for revisions and could potentially be problematic as appropriate adjustments to the action plan are unable to be made in an efficient manner (Hanover Research Group, 2014). This potential problem could be seen within School X's action plan where the only method of measuring the outcome was end of topic assessments which all contribute to the final grade (WJEC, 2016). That said, the Science department was successful in meeting their intended target of improving the average point score per pupil. However, to mitigate this risk in the future the school could make use of periodic assessment data coupled with ongoing classroom assessment to track the pupils' progress throughout the course of the school year. Using ongoing classroom data such as assessment for learning and regular in-class testing will allow for frequent real-time evaluation of the pupils' progress and will allow for data driven decisions to be made regarding the implementation of the action plan (Hanover Research Group, 2014).

Conclusion

The aim of this critical reflection was to evaluate how School X developed one aspect of their SDP. The aspect chosen was the target of improving pupil attainment by improving L2 performance and improving the average point score per pupil. Overall, the school utilised the available data as a clear evidence-base for the development of these targets. The school also developed a clear action plan with measurable outcomes. However, the school omitted to provide clear and frequent timeframes for reviewing the implementation. Despite this limitation the school was successful in improving pupil attainment. Throughout the reflection it became clear that the success of implementing an SDP and creating sustained and continuous change is highly reliant on quality of the self-evaluation based on the available data, planning, implementation and evaluation (Harris, 2002). Not only will this critical reflection inform any future involvement in developing SDPs but it will also inform future practice. Moving forward in the teaching profession it would be beneficial to apply this approach in a continued attempt to promote self-improvement within the day to day classroom practice. A cycle of continuously self-evaluating, planning changes, implementing the change and evaluating the impact will be used to ensure continuous improvement and to consistently adapt to meet the learners needs.

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