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ECAD7003 Assignment: Part B

	Target	What I have done in this assignment….
Target 1	* Aim to add your own critical comments to the Lit. review with more regularity.	In this assignment, I have ensured that regular critical comments are made.
Target 2	* Aim to make more critical links between Lit. perspectives.	In this assignment, I have ensured that more links are made between the perspectives in the literature.
Target 3	* Summaries are generally a more effective reference than a quote.	I have ensured that quotes are not used, and instead, summaries are given throughout.

In 2011, the Welsh Government embarked on a large-scale school improvement reform in response to the demands of a rapidly changing world. Conceptualising schools as 'learning organisations' was central to the development of the new Curriculum for Wales. Establishing a culture of enquiry, where a need is identified and addressed through a clear set of strategies, and then the outcomes are evaluated based on their impact. This process is vital for the new curriculum to succeed and to support the development of evidence-based practitioners.

Every school in Wales must now develop a 'school development plan', the school's strategic plan for improvement (Welsh Government, 2014, P.3). Every school is required to finalise their school development plan 'SDP' at the start of each academic year (Central South Consortium, 2017, P.6). This report will evaluate and critically reflect on the cyclic process of an SDP. It will also analyse a chosen action point of a school's SDP. This school will be referred to as school ‘X’.
School 'X' is an English medium school in South Wales with approximately 1,721 students registered. The latest Estyn report states that school 'X' serves a catchment area with high social and economic disadvantage levels. Moreover, 32.7% of pupils qualify for free school meals, considerably higher than the national average of 17.4% (Estyn, 2017, P.1). Reviewing the school SDP, I chose to discuss the specific action point focused on increasing the average reading age of its students.

Literature Review

School Improvement Planning

Since devolution, Wales has developed a distinctive set of education policies, consistently focusing on collaboration between educational partners (Reynolds, 2008, P.753). The SDP requires the school to self-evaluate and consider their specific context, culture, and environment. It allows them to adjust according to the needs of their students. Research conducted by the Welsh government in 2022 found that SDPs will have the most success if trust is placed in school leadership to identify the needs of their specific school (Government, 2022a, p.15). However, it could be argued that teachers in the classroom are best informed on the needs of students. With this in mind, a different timeline for SDP

submission could be in a student's interest, as teacher involvement across the summer term may be of more benefit than leadership writing it in the summer ahead of September.

Pilot schools have been pivotal in experimenting with the new reforms since 2015, including the implementation of SDPs as a key requirement of every school in Wales. The most recent OECD report found that most schools in Wales are well on evolving into learning organisations. However there are still areas of concern, particularly in the area of self-evaluations and development planning. This is especially evidenced in secondary schools where perhaps the separate department structure does not lend itself to a collaborative culture necessary for the school development planning process to work effectively (OECD, 2014, p.28). If this collaboration does not occur, this is likely to diminish a sense of whole school ownership, with teachers more likely to experience the plan as rigid and determine that the aim of the plan is more about their compliance than them being seen as the bridge to better student outcomes (Bell, 2002, P.8). As teachers have the most impact on student outcomes, implementing an SDP through collaboration is fundamental and should improve teaching and learning (Shrouder, 2022, p.1). The literature highlights how change lies with the teacher. Linking back to my previous point, this demonstrates the importance of developing the SDP alongside teachers to ensure their approach is bottom-up.

A study focused on short-cycle planning has shown that regular and frequent internal reviews of the SDP using shorter review cycles (every term) can positively impact outcomes for underperforming schools (Vangronigen and Meyers, 2020, p.12). These frequent reviews may bring the initiatives to the forefront and create a greater sense of ownership through a consistent review process. However, the study found that changing the frequency of internal reviews had little impact if leadership had not engaged in intentional root cause analysis before implementing their plan. The literature suggests that every school should engage in identifying the root cause of an issue facing their school during self-evaluation to improve outcomes (Connolly et al., 2018, p.676). This is vital, as teachers already have demanding workloads. The literature makes clear that the need for a considered reflection during self-evaluation is paramount, or the process maybe be viewed as a very unproductive use of time.

Lit Review on Reading Attainment

The minister for education, Jeremy Miles, is resolute in improving reading attainment in schools across Wales, with an updated oracy and reading toolkit published in November 2023 to support schools with implementation (Welsh Government, 2023a, Para.7). Estyn's recommendations also focus on increasing reading attainment (Estyn, 2023, P.3).

International research shows that students in OECD countries are, on average, reading below their chronological age (PISA, 2023, P.3). From the most recent Estyn report, "The average PISA reading score for Wales in 2022 was 466. This was significantly below the OECD average of 476" (Ingram et al., 2023, p.17). The gap between reading attainment and reading age will harm a student's ability to access the curriculum and the rigorous demands of secondary school (Didau, 2016, Para.3). This supports the Welsh Government's efforts, including its focus on the transition for pupils moving from primary to secondary school. Secondary schools liaise with their feeder Primary schools to ensure they use similar literacy teaching methods. This provides consistency for pupils and assures consistency in teaching standards (Welsh Government, 2002, P.3). This consistency is vital to close this gap. The difference between reading age and chronological age may impact a student's engagement, leading to disruptive behaviour, where they miss further class time, placing them even more behind across all subjects, which may affect their future academic success.

This will continue to impact health and well-being well into adulthood and can result in lower employment rates (Main, Hill and Paolino, 2023, P.2). This outcome has a knock-on effect within society regarding unemployment (Lal, 2015, P.665). Which may, in turn, create a continuous cycle and further widen the gap. This is why equity in education is core to implementing the Curriculum for Wales.

A London School of Economics report analysed the data and demonstrated that Wales, out of the four UK nations, is the most equitable in relation to the socio-economic reading gap between students of parents from higher or lower-status jobs (Chzhen and Rees, 2018, P.1). It is positive to see progress in this area so that all learners have the opportunity to achieve (Welsh Government, 2023b, p.8). However, the report highlights how this may mean that higher-achieving students are not being pushed enough, as they are held back

by their peers (Chzhen and Rees, 2018, P.1). The research identifies that a student's socio-economic background can impact reading achievement and that students from disadvantaged backgrounds score lower on standardised assessments.

To explain these results, more work must be done to understand what factors are at play (Romeo et al., 2022, P.9). As mentioned, school 'X' has a higher-than-average number of disadvantaged students. This also supports their focus on developing reading age in students so that the equity gap will close further. This focus will also drive attainment in other subjects, such as maths (Sullivan and Brown, 2015, P. 972) and will positively impact this group of students. Ensuring, therefore, that teachers receive the necessary training to support these improvements in reading skills cannot be overestimated (Quigley, 2020, P.10).

Developing an action point

Self-evaluation

As mentioned, improving students' literacy skills is a national priority set out by the Welsh Government (Welsh Government, 2013, P.2). However, before setting this as a priority, school 'X' conducted a self-evaluation to understand what was required in their specific school context. As mentioned previously, self-evaluation is vital for establishing the root cause of an issue. The research suggests that high-quality self-evaluation can enhance pedagogical approaches and curriculum delivery, increase attainment levels, and produce more engaged students and teachers (Hofman et al., 2009, P.64).

School 'x' started its self-evaluation process by collecting two data sets: the NRT and STAR tests. The results showed that, on average, students were below their chronological reading age. The widest gap is present in year 7 students.

For School 'X', the data has predominantly driven these goals. Schildkamp supports this strategy and suggests that data-driven policy can promote accountability and transparency throughout school improvement processes as they are based on objective evidence rather than subjective opinions (2019, P.1).

However, assessing data is only one element of self-evaluation, as school processes and practices also need to be reviewed (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2021, P.5).

Stakeholders, most specifically governors, regional consortia, and the National Academy for Educational Leadership, are engaged in this review as they support teachers and leadership in improving their processes and strengthening program implementation (Welsh Government, 2022b, P.4). Estyn notes that school ‘X’ has a robust and effective process when engaging their governors (2017, P.7). Regarding external accountability, school ‘X’ may benefit from providing more opportunities to gather the views of pupils and parents to inform their self-evaluation at a whole school level.

Strategic Planning

Based on the evaluation outcomes, a school's strengths and areas for improvement are identified. Strategic planning can now take place, and schools can begin to decide on a manageable number of improvement goals (Oideachais and O'Lear, 2010, P.8).

Within the SDP, school 'X' has decided to address the gap in reading age by implementing the following three initiatives:

First, introduce a book that the year 7 students will read daily during form time.

The teacher will read the book aloud during the session, and students will listen and follow along with their copy. This strategy is supported by Oxley and McGeown, as the exposure to diverse literature and varied vocabulary allows students to access books they may struggle to engage with independently (2023, P.377).

Secondly to promote reading for pleasure and enhance students' access to fiction and non-fiction texts. This is achieved through the reintroduction of the accelerated reader program amongst the Year 7 and Year 8 cohorts.

Finally, the pedagogy around teaching reading skills will be enhanced by emphasising the implementation of tier 2 and tier 3 vocabulary sets across all departments.

All three strategies require daily input from teachers for progress to happen.

The concern here might be the potential for ‘reform fatigue’ on the part of the teachers. The OECD Improving Schools in Wales report noted that stakeholders felt that the number of policies and often short implementation times lead to a risk of partial implementation or a complete lack of engagement with the reform due to the constant changes (OECD, 2014, p.34).

Measuring Impact

The effectiveness of these strategies in impacting reading age will be measured by retesting students using the same NLT and STAR tests. The retest results will be compared to the previous outcomes, and conclusions will be drawn. This will build a reliable picture of the effectiveness of the initiatives introduced. These retests will likely occur at the beginning of each year, allowing stakeholders to continue targeted provision.

School ‘X’s long-term goal is to close the reading gap identified through standardised assessments. However, creating short-term targets within this long-term goal would more likely encourage sustained focus.

Consequently, more frequent SDP reviews would potentially encourage a greater level of involvement and ownership on the part of the teachers who are the implementers of the plan. A shorter target might be based, for example, on a teacher's observation of an increase in the use of tier 2 and 3 vocabulary in their classes, or engagement with pupil’s opinions and perspectives on the initiatives.

Keddie supports connecting with pupils' voices and encourages engagement with their opinions throughout the process (2014, P.1).

Reflection and evaluation

The senior leadership at school 'X' conducted a self-evaluation in December 2023. They concluded that they were on track to meet their target of reducing the gap in reading age across years 7 and 8. However, they identified the following issues: some departments within the school have underdeveloped curriculums, and there are inconsistent levels of teaching across all departments. These could potentially undermine the effectiveness and success of their three literacy initiatives.

As I consider my critical analysis of the SDP, informed by the literature and in light of the above, I have formulated the following reflections and evaluations of the school's initiatives.

SDP Process

As highlighted in the literature review, more time for whole school involvement in the SDP process would ensure that teachers are at the centre of identifying problems. This would also give time for them to highlight what support or extra training they may require to implement new initiatives.

As already highlighted, this could be supported by adjusting the timeline for submitting and reviewing the SDP. This would allow for more teacher and whole-school involvement during the summer term prior to its submission. In addition, conducting more frequent SDP meetings where short-term targets are reviewed will help maintain focus and potentially encourage a greater level of whole-school ownership.

Initiatives

The initiative for Year 7 form reading, where students can listen and follow along with a story read by the form teacher, may positively engage students from backgrounds where their exposure to literature has been limited.
Cremin states that a teacher reading out loud to a class can be incredibly efficient in developing their student's vocabulary but that an independent choice would be a bridge to more challenging literature (2023, P.5). Considering this, school 'X' could also allow for some opportunities for independent reading within form time, which could also support positive outcomes (Prasetyaningrum and Ruminar, 2020, P.160).

Promoting reading for pleasure is another key focus, and a core component of this strategy is the use of the accelerated reader program. The effectiveness of this program is debated within the profession. It is suggested that initial studies undertaken had a vested interest, and the few independent studies needed a standardised methodology to make any definitive conclusions.The program is a reward-based system; therefore, it is argued (Biggers, 2001, P.74) that low-ability children could be disadvantaged. Thompson et al. echo Biggers's views that the program creates students addicted to points, which could undermine the fostering of a lifelong love of reading, even if it does increase a student's exposure to the written text (Thompson, Madhuri and Taylor, 2008, P.552).

In light of the above, School ‘X’ might take the opportunity during its review process to open a dialogue with other schools, the national academy, and regional consortia to explore alternatives to the accelerated reader programme.

A whole school approach is also fundamental when implementing the tier 2 and 3 vocabulary levels, which is the third initiative introduced by school ‘X’.
Every school department is involved in this initiative and are required to take responsibility for increasing literacy levels in their classrooms. In Estyn's latest literacy report guidance, they encourage entire school engagement and a focus on vocabulary across all subjects to improve outcomes (Estyn, 2023, p.18). Quigley and Colemans' report for the Education Endowment Foundation encourages focus in this area, proposing that when departments meet and have clarity on tier 2 vocabulary, it supports a student's ability to access the curriculum more confidently (2019, P.13). As suggested previously, having more time at the self-evaluation period would help with cross-departmental engagement.

In conclusion, the SDP process plays a vital role in bringing the teacher's voice, as well as that of other stakeholders, to the forefront to enable progress. The SDP plan process is one that has great value for improvement and enables schools to become learning organisations. I understand the importance of engaging in this work and will participate fully throughout my working life.
Moving forward, if secondary schools can be a place of collaboration and sharing good practice, we will be on our way to seeing those improvements. As a trainee teacher, I know the value of this. I will continue to share with colleagues the good practice I have seen throughout my training, and the importance of this is seen in collaboration being a teaching standard for all.

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