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Module: Cycle 3: Learners, Schools & Communities: where am I teaching?

Module code: ECAD6009

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

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The pursuit of excellence in education requires a strategic and systematic approach to school improvement (OECD, 2012; Welsh Government, 2022). As educational institutions strive to achieve their goals and aspirations, the School Development Plan (SDP) emerges as a vital compass, guiding them on their journey (Estyn, 2016). Whilst it is important to recognise that implementing a SDP may encounter challenges, such as adapting to diverse educational contexts or addressing funding limitation (Bowman, 2012; Warren, *et al.*, 2019), SDPs remain an invaluable tool for guiding schools towards improvement (Central South Consortium, 2022). By adopting a proactive and intentional approach to improvement, schools can navigate the complex educational landscape and foster meaningful change (Welsh Government, 2021).

Within this context, School Z, located in rural West Wales, stands as a Primary School committed to fostering a culture of continuous learning and development. School Z comprises a dedicated team of fourteen teachers serving a diverse body of three hundred and twenty pupils in an English medium setting (Council X, 2023). With a strong emphasis on professional growth, the school has set a specific aspect within its SDP: to become a learning organisation that promotes and engages in relevant research and evidence-based practice, ultimately aiming to professionally develop its staff (Appendix One). This report delves into the critical exploration of the actions, impact and evidence base associated with this particular aspect of School Z's SDP. To maintain confidentiality and comply with ethical research guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), the school will be referred to as School Z.

The SDP is a comprehensive and strategic document that serves as a roadmap for schools, guiding their improvement (Harris, 2001; Welsh Government, 2022; Kotilainen, *et al.*, 2023). Within an SDP, schools identify key strategies for improvement and set specific targets aligned with their overarching vision and values (Welsh Government, 2022). These targets encompass various aspects of school functioning, including curriculum development, teaching practices, staff development, and community engagement (Welsh Government, 2014).

However, central to the core of school improvement lies the ultimate goal of providing learners with exceptional learning experiences, irrespective of their

background or circumstances (Estyn, 2016). The primary objective is to ensure that all learners have equitable access to high-quality education, enabling them to reach their full potential whilst fostering positive values, outcomes, and aspirations for all (Estyn, 2020). This pursuit is driven by the adoption of a learner-centred approach firmly rooted in constructivism, where learners actively construct knowledge and meaning through interactions with their environment (Vygotsky, 1978; Daniels, 2017). By embracing this pedagogical philosophy, schools prioritise the creation of inclusive and nurturing environments that foster equity and holistic development, enabling learners to flourish in alignment with the four purposes outlined by the Welsh Government (Welsh Government, 2022).

The application of Ludwig von Bertalanffy's (1950) systems theory provides valuable insight into the interconnected nature of school improvement within a SDP.

Bertalanffys' systems theory emphasises the intricate relationships and interdependencies among various components (Bertalanffy, 1950; Hammond, 2019). Unlike Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which primarily focuses on the impact of external systems on individual development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Smith, *et al.*, 2003; Gray & MacBlain, 2015), the application of systems theory in a school context involves understanding the broader interconnectedness of elements within the school environment. When viewed through the lens of systems theory, the SDP becomes a crucial mechanism for aligning, facilitating, and integrating the different aspects of elements connected to the school environment, such as curriculum development, staff development and community engagement (Bertalanffy, 1950; Mwangeka, 2020).

This holistic approach recognises that changes in one aspect of the system can have ripple effects throughout the entire school ecosystem, impacting student learning, teacher collaboration, and overall school culture, thus emphasising the need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to school improvement (Luhmann, 2017). By harnessing the principles of systems theory, schools can maximise their endeavours to enhance learner experiences and achieve desired outcomes, fostering a sense of synergy and coherence across all facets of school operations. Moreover, the dynamic and collaborative nature of the SDP ensures that it remains responsive to the evolving needs and aspirations of the school, supported by regular

updates that are informed by the latest performance data (Welsh Government, 2014).

While SDPs are widely recognised as a valuable tool for guiding school improvement (Darling-Hammond, *et al.*, 2020), it is important to acknowledge the prevalence of descriptive studies that primarily focus on documenting the implementation process of the SDP rather than assessing the impact on student outcomes or long-term school improvement (Welsh Government, 2014; Education Endowment Foundation, 2019; Cambridge University, 2022). This lack of empirical research limits our understanding of the direct relationship between SDP implementation and desired educational outcomes (Ross and Zaidi, 2019). Moreover, the existing literature often lacks a comprehensive examination of contextual factors that can influence the effectiveness of a SDP. The impact of factors such as school culture and leadership capacity on SDP implementation and success remain relatively understudied (Xaba, 2016). A more nuanced understanding of these contextual factors is crucial for tailoring SDPs to the specific needs and challenges of individual schools to effectively drive positive change in schools (Husbands and Pearce, 2018). To address these limitations, future research should prioritise rigorous evaluations that explore both the process and outcomes of SDP implementation, while also considering the various contextual factors that influence its success.

An approach launched by the Welsh Government in preparation for the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales, schools as learning organisations (SLOs) represent a paradigm shift in educational thinking, emphasising continuous learning and development for all members of the school community (Welsh Government, 2022). In Wales, the SLO model encompasses seven dimensions that school strive to realise in their pursuit of improvement (Welsh Government, 2022). These dimensions serve as a framework for enhancing the learning experiences and outcomes of all learners and shaping the overall vision of the school. The SLO model highlights the importance of a shared vision that not only enhances learners' outcomes but also engages all staff and stakeholders, fostering continuous improvement through collaborative efforts (Fullan, 2007; Welsh Government, 2014).

Conversely, the concept of a school community was conventionally seen as a relationship primarily limited to school staff (Barker, *et al.*, 1991; Miller, 2018).

However, in the contemporary era, the notion of a school community encompasses a broader scope, involving various individuals and groups closely connected to the school, including teachers, students, community members, governors, and relatives of the learners. The Welsh Government recognise the significance of this interconnected community through their concept of Cynefin, which underscores the fusion of personalities, histories, and cultures that shape the collective identity and environment of a community (Welsh Government, 2020, p. 241).

Beyond Wales, the concept of SLOs has gained recognition as an innovative approach to educational improvement (Harris and Jones, 2019). The principles of SLOs resonate with the broader educational landscape across Europe, highlighting the importance of continuous learning for all stakeholders and reflecting current educational trends to drive educational reform (UNESCO, 2021). In countries such as Sweden, educational institutions have been forward-thinking in promoting similar principles, although they may not explicitly refer to them as SLOs (OECD, 2016; Reinhard, 2016; Tholin, 2019). Such countries have embraced the importance of continuous learning for all stakeholders and have been proactive in fostering collaborative learning, social interactions, and shared experiences as integral components of their educational systems (OECD, 2018).

Additionally, the principles of SLOs closely align with the social learning theory, further reinforcing their effectiveness in promoting education improvement. The social learning theory posits that learning occurs through social interactions, collaborative learning, and shared experiences, influencing both the individual and collective learning processes (Vygotsky, 1978; Bandura, 1997; Rumjaun and Narod, 2020). In the context of SLOs, this theory emphasises the importance of schools as dynamic entities that prioritise learning, innovation, and adaptability (Welsh Government, 2014). For instance, within SLOs learners engage in peer-to-peer learning and the exchange of ideas. Teachers facilitate this interaction by creating opportunities for cooperative learning and encouraging learners to reflect on their work (Coe, *et al.*, 2020). By creating a supportive and engaging learning environment, schools foster active participation and mutual learning among students, teachers, and other members of the school community. This integration of the social learning theory enhances the potential of SLOs to drive educational excellence and

facilitate continuous growth and development within the school community (Welsh Government, 2022).

SLOs represent a transformative approach in educational thinking (Harris and Jones, 2019). However, a notable critique of the SLO model is the potential for increased workload and demands on educators (Jomuad, *et al.*, 2021). Effectively implementing the various dimensions of SLOs may necessitate additional time, resources, and professional development for teachers, thereby straining an already burdened educational system (Cover, 2020). Moreover, the accomplishment of SLOs heavily relies on the unwavering commitment and collaborative engagement of all stakeholders, further adding to the workload (Jomuad, *et al.*, 2021). Despite these challenges, the imperative lies in engaging in critical introspection, perpetual evaluation, and continuous adaptation to refine and optimise the implementation of SLOs, thus maximising their potential benefits for the entire school community.

In their pursuit of becoming a learning organisation that promotes and engages in relevant research and evidence-based practice, School Z undertook several key processes in the development of their comprehensive SDP. Their SDP was carried out with a critical lens, effectively aligning with the school's overarching goals and vision to happily learn together in a fair and caring school community (School Z, 2023).

School Z demonstrated a proactive approach to self-evaluation by embracing recommendations highlighted by Estyn in a previous annual review, which identified the need for improvement in self-evaluation practices in many Welsh schools (Estyn, 2018). School Z critically assessed their current practices and performance through a comprehensive process that included examining qualitative and quantitative student achievement data, gathering feedback from staff, and considering external evaluations (Cohen & Manion, 2013; Denscombe, 2014). This process provided valuable insights into the school's strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. It served as the foundation for their School Development Plan, forming the basis of School Z's first action point, to become a learning organisation.

Building upon the insights gained from self-evaluation, four sub points were created to support the action point. The creation of sub-points within an action point allowed

for a more targeted approach in fostering research culture and promoting opportunity for evidence-based instructional practices, ensuring that these practices were not only valued but actively embedded within the school's daily operation (Welsh Government, 2021). Furthermore, by explicitly linking the sub-points to the broader action point of professional staff development, School Z demonstrated a comprehensive approach to improvement that recognised the pivotal role of ongoing growth for all staff members (Ziechermen and Liston, 2015; Coe, *et al.*, 2020).

Recognising the importance of stakeholder involvement, School Z demonstrate a strong understanding of the significance of diverse perspectives and expertise in driving improvement (Siraj-Blatchford, *et al.*, 2013). By actively engaging teachers and support staff in their 'Distributed Leadership Target Overview' (DLTO) (Appendix Two), a sense of shared responsibility towards reaching the action point was fostered (Briggs, *et al.*, 2016). However, it is important to note that School Z's stakeholder involvement predominantly focuses on internal stakeholders within the school community. While this level of engagement is valuable for creating a collaborative and inclusive learning environment within the school (Coe, *et al.*, 2020), there is potential for the school to broaden its scope and actively involve external stakeholders from the wider community. By embracing the wider community, School Z can create meaningful partnerships and leverage the expertise and resources available beyond the school's boundaries (Fiore, 2013; Estyn, 2020). Involving community members or local businesses could infuse fresh perspectives for collaboration as School Z work towards becoming a learning organisation.

Furthermore, involving external stakeholders could provide valuable real-world context to inform their research and evidence-based practices. By linking the action point of promoting research and evidence-based practice to the broader community, School Z can create opportunities for collaborative research projects, internships, and community-based initiatives that align with the school's goals (Harris and Jones, 2019). Nevertheless, the creation of the DLTO provided to be valuable in measuring of the impact of the action point as it provided a clear framework, enabling School Z to assess the progress made in becoming a learning organisation against the set of defined targets and indicators (Welsh Government, 2014).

This commitment to planning was further highlighted in the development of School Z's 'Strategic Steps' (Appendix Three). The strategic planning process allowed School Z to outline clear steps and allocate specific responsibilities to ensure effective implementation of their action point (George, *et al.*, 2019). School Z displayed a methodical approach to accomplishing their goals by breaking down their action point into strategic steps. Each stage was meticulously planned to address critical issues and engage essential parties, ensuring that resources were used efficiently (Fidler, 2002; Kotilainen, *et al.*, 2023).

While School Z demonstrated a methodical approach to accomplishing their goals, it is important to acknowledge that the implementation of any plan can encounter challenges and obstacles (Foorman, 2016). Despite careful planning, unforeseen circumstances such as limitations in funding may pose challenges and hinder the complete realisation of School Z's intended goal of becoming a solidified SLO. These challenges can potentially create gaps between their aspirations of professionally developing staff and the actual outcomes achieved (BERA, 2022). It is crucial for School Z to remain flexible and adaptive, continuously reassessing their strategies, and making necessary adjustments to navigate these obstacles effectively. By maintaining an ongoing reflection and review process, School Z can ensure that the SDP remains a dynamic and responsive tool (Kotilainen, *et al.*, 2023).

While School Z has demonstrated a proactive approach to strategic planning and stakeholder involvement, there is room for improvement in their monitoring system. The current monitoring process involves lesson observation, pupil interviews and staff questionnaires, providing a general overview of the school's progress. While these methods can offer valuable insights (Denscombe, 2014), they may not capture the full impact of the strategic steps undertaken by School Z. To strengthen their monitoring system, School Z could consider incorporating specific outcome measures aligned with each of the strategic steps outlined in their SDP (Appendix Four). Defining clear and measurable outcomes for each step can promote effective tracking of progress and identify areas for improvement. Furthermore, School Z could benefit from establishing a culture of continuous reflection and improvement such as regular review meetings and collaborative discussions to create spaces for ongoing dialogue and shared learning among staff members (Coe, *et al.*, 2020). This

approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of their actions and allow for targeted adjustments to be made as needed.

It could further be beneficial for School Z to exhibit their commitment to learner-centred teaching and the comprehensive approach to school reform that comes with being an SLO by specifically declaring the expected impact on learner's standards and well-being in their action point (Appendix Five). By modifying the action point to emphasise the positive impact on pupil standards and well-being, a clearer focus would be provided that aligns with the principles of the Welsh curriculum and the overarching aim of SLOs to promote learner-centred education (Harris and Jones, 2019; Welsh Government, 2022). Incorporating this change within the SDP would also act as a guiding concept for decision-making and resource allocation. It would assist School Z in prioritising actions and projects that directly contribute to increasing student standards and well-being, ensuring that all efforts are directed towards the ultimate aim of improving student outcomes (Harris and Jones, 2019). It would further solidify a clear message that being an SLO is about putting the needs and well-being of the students at the forefront of all initiatives, reiterating the integration of the social learning theory to facilitate collaborative development within the school community.

This report has examined School Z's journey towards becoming a learning organisation and the role of stakeholder involvement, strategic planning, and monitoring in driving improvement in relation to their SDP. The findings underscore the significance of a methodical approach to school improvement and the tangible advantages it can bring to students, teachers, and the school community (Welsh Government, 2021). By continuing to reflect on this experience, I will cultivate a comprehensive understanding of educational practices, refine pedagogical strategies, and foster a collaborative learning environment, all of which will contribute to my ongoing growth and effectiveness as an educator as I strive to attain excellence against the teaching standards (Welsh Government, 2020).

Word count: 2,750 words

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Appendices

Appendix One

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SDP: Action Point

Appendix Two

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SDP: Distributed Leadership Target Overview

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SDP: Strategic Steps

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Recommendation: Monitoring for Action Point

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Recommendation: Revised Action Point

Appendix One*Extract from School Z SDP September 2022 – July 2023*

<u>2022-2023</u>	<u>Priority One</u>
	To become a learning organisation that promotes and engages in relevant research and evidence-based practice that professionally develops staff.
	1. Cluster leader of learning to provide training session on effective research practices.
	2. Phase leaders to meet with phase and agree a collaborative research project and lead the process
	3. Performance Management lesson observation to focus on independent speaking skills.
	4. Teachers to make action plans for their new Area of Learning and disseminate pedagogy and ideas throughout the school, with advanced oracy presentation activities throughout the school.

Appendix Two*Extract from School Z SDP September 2022 – July 2023*

Distributed Leadership Target Overview – School Development Priority 2	
<u>SDP Target Number 2`</u>	To become a learning organisation that promotes and engages in relevant research and evidence-based practice that professionally develops staff.
<u>Head teacher PM Target</u>	To maintain and develop a constructive and relevant attitude to study in colleagues and to ensure that evidence deriving from innovative practice is collected.
<u>SMT PM Target</u>	To be role models for engaging and disseminating relevant research to both learn from and contribute to evidence-based practice in our school, the cluster and beyond.
<u>Teacher PM Target</u>	To engage in professional learning carefully framing professional growth within the context of the four purposes and a commitment to leading development for colleagues within and beyond the school.
<u>TA Staff review target.</u>	Support staff have an informed understanding of the contribution of research.
<u>Monitoring</u>	Lesson observations Pupil interviews Staff questionnaires

Appendix Three*Extract from School Z SDP September 2022 – July 2023*

<u>Priority One</u> To become a learning organisation that promotes and engages in relevant research and evidence-based practice that professionally develops staff.		
Link Governor: To be decided.		
Strategic Steps	Persons Leading	Resources Including time & training
1. Deputy head to present research informed evidence-based training on No more marking Principles of assessment.	RJJ	ADDS x1 Deputy Head Monitoring day x1 (£150)
2. Phase leaders to meet with phase and agree a collaborative research project and lead the process	Staff	PPA organised in phases
3. Performance Management lesson observation to focus on reading and element of Great Teaching Toolkit identified.	PW SLT	Monitoring day x4 (£600)
4. Research budget to purchase relevant educational research books	PW, RJ	Research budget (£400)

Appendix Four*Created by student 1605158.*

*School Z to insert applicable staff member

Monitoring								
Strategic Steps	Outcomes	Monitoring – How?	Who?*	When?	Red-Amber-Green Rating of outcome			
1. DH to provide training session on effective research practices	To ensure staff have the prerequisite skills to research their desired area efficiently and effectively impact on pupils' standards and wellbeing	Staff Training	Staff	Autumn 2022	Au	Sp	Su	
2. Phase leaders to meet with phase and agree a collaborative research project from the GTT and lead the process	To be role models for leading, engaging and disseminating relevant research to both learn from and contribute to evidence-based practice in our school, the cluster and beyond.	Monitoring of phase planning Listening to Learners	Staff	Autumn 2022				
	To ensure phase accountability to evidence impact of research							
3. Performance Management lesson observation	To ensure staff accountability to engage in research and to see a variety of reading approaches and the GTT training menu.	PM Lesson Observations	Staff	Spring 2023				

to focus on reading and GTT.											
4. Research budget to purchase relevant educational research books	To facilitate and promote the relevance and importance of knowledge and understanding about pedagogic reading and research.	Monitoring of phase planning PM Lesson Observation Analysing data	Staff	Spring 2023							

This should be developed by School Z and followed by a monitoring progress table stating the impact of the action to date, and the next steps for improvement.

Appendix Five

Created by student 1605158.

Original Action Point:

To become a learning organisation that promotes an engages in relevant research and evidence-based practise the professionally develops staff.

Revised Action Point:

To become a learning organisation that promotes and engages in relevant research and evidence-based practice that professionally develops staff, and in turn impacts positively on pupil standards and well-being.