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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Word Count: 2571

	Target	What I have done in this assignment...
Target 1	Make sure I know what I'm talking about by engaging with a wide range of literature.	I have used a wider range of literature within my assignment in order to more strongly support my ideas and arguments.
Target 2	Use less direct quotes, try to emphasise key ideas.	I have paraphrased key ideas throughout my assignment, particularly within my literature review.
Target 3	Ensure my research is up to date by engaging with current literature.	I have ensured that the literature I have chosen to engage with is up to date and relevant.

Introduction

Within this assignment I will be looking at one of the strategic targets identified in my placement school's development plan. I will be exploring how this target is being addressed by the school, and the impact this target has had. The school is a faith school with a cohort of 1,263 pupils, 295 of these are in the sixth form and 8.3% of the cohort have free school meals. The strategic target I have chosen to be the focus of this assignment is titled teaching for learning. This strategic target has been broken down into four subheadings:

- The five principles of excellence seen across all subject areas that consistently leads to good or better learning;
- The quality of learning experiences, through a dynamic curriculum, will lead to high quality outcomes;
- Each subject will make the best use of strategies that lead to students developing high quality skills; and
- Teaching will stretch and challenge students of all abilities to achieve their full potential

Within the scope of this assignment I will primarily be focusing on the first of these four subheadings, 'the five principles of excellence'.

Literature Review

The 'five principles of excellence' suggest that 'good' or better learning is developed through training, observation, and innovation. This section will examine the corresponding literature to each of these three themes, suggesting that these strategies do offer benefits to both teachers and learners, but that the impact of these measures is sometimes difficult to measure.

One focus described in the School Development Plan (SDP) was to provide staff the opportunity to participate in professional learning opportunities to develop practice. The SDP documents that this will be implemented by providing teachers with a calendar of training opportunities. Yet the literature on the uptake of professional development opportunities is mixed, with some scholars suggesting clear benefits to such collaboration (e.g. Maloney and Konza, 2011), while others comment on the limitations espoused by the National Curriculum and a general lack of time available by teachers to participate (e.g. Tarnoczi, 2006). Further studies suggest that professional development is unsuccessful when mandated, but instead requires teachers to have a desire to participate and be willing to reflect on what they have

gained from the opportunity (Teddie and Reynolds, 2000). As demonstrated by the varied findings across the literature, the benefits of training via professional development opportunities may seem self-evident, when in reality, much depends on the teacher, the context, and the timeliness (Desimone et al., 2002). One aspect that generally seems to be consistent within the literature on professional development is the ease (or lack thereof) of measurement by schools. These are qualitative, countable opportunities where schools can acknowledge that teachers have, or have not, attended. Presenting increasing numbers in these types of activities makes it easy for schools to demonstrate that they are actively seeking to improve teaching. Numbers, however, often fail to tell the whole story, and questions surrounding the impact of these types of opportunities on actual practice are much less apparent.

While external professional development opportunities are acknowledged to have challenges in areas of value and impact for teachers, so too are challenges presented in observations of lessons. Observations can take two forms, mentoring practices and 'expert' observers observing 'novice' teachers. The SDP takes this a step further, introducing somewhat draconian measures of monitoring when they suggest that a leadership team will visit *every* lesson, *every* day to share most effective practices. Despite this level of influence, there is extensive research on the impact of mentoring beginner teachers, and this literature generally suggests that the mentoring process offers value for both the mentor and the mentee (Parise and Spillane, 2010). Mentoring opportunities appear to be most effective when the mentee feels as if they can gain support with their teaching difficulties without being judged for their questions (Bullough, 2012). Authors are quick to point out that the mentoring process is not necessarily a structured set of requirements, but instead requires a level of fluidity that is both realistic and meeting the needs of the situation. From a planning perspective, this flexibility in a relationship is problematic because, again, it is difficult to measure. Impact of such interventions generally takes time, and extensive research would be required to fully assess the qualitative elements. In the UK, such research is generally not conducted at the primary and secondary levels.

Observations by 'experts' is also problematic, as it is difficult to determine who constitutes an expert teacher. In some cases, 'experts' may be those with the longest teaching career, but there is no indication that time spent in the classroom equates to being an expert (Mena, Hennissen and Loughran, 2017). The SDP has taken this a step further, suggesting that a 'teaching for learning' team would be developed for coaching staff, but this raises concerns about power. Novice or contract teachers may face excess levels of stress if they feel their job is at stake (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). Furthermore, it has been documented in several

studies that the simple act of putting an observer in the classroom changes the way that the individual (and in this case the students) might act (Allwright, 2014).

This leads to other questions surrounding student outcomes, specifically through the use of innovative teaching practices. Innovation comes in many forms; it can relate to the implementation of new forms of technology, the introduction of the flipped classroom, or new ways of teaching material from the National Curriculum. There are certainly challenges to innovation; one of the most prevalent themes in the literature is on the increased demand on teachers who choose to implement innovative strategies in their classroom (Arnold-Garza, 2014). Furthermore, there is no sure way to determine if an innovative strategy will work until it is attempted, and this can mean that teachers may be unwilling to attempt something new for fear of failure and the corresponding repercussions. There are also financial implications, especially in public schools, to technological advancements that are available and equitable among students (Avalos, 2011). In the development process, innovation is both difficult to quantify and to assess; certainly one way that this can be achieved is through determination of whether the teacher is still meeting the requirements for the National Curriculum. Impact is also difficult to measure as changes may not be recognized until time has passed, making implementation of this, into an SDP, particularly challenging.

While the literature on training, observation and innovation is substantially mixed in terms of the findings, it is apparent that there are benefits to each of these interventions. The problem that seems to be most consistent, however, is how to assess whether the modifications made actually have an impact on either teaching and learning because outcomes may not immediately be realized.

Developing an Action Point

Within this section I will be directly discussing the school development plan. I will explore how the school monitors progress, and the processes that the school is going through with a high degree of criticality. The criticisms I emphasise will be picked up later within the assignment, and will be used to develop possible points for improvement.

The first action that the school had taken in order to ensure ‘the five principles of excellence’ were being met, was to fully induct all new staff members into the school’s framework for teaching. This was done by having all staff members who had joined the school within the past year, take part in weekly after school development sessions. This sounds like a good idea on paper, however there are negative elements that I must address. As I discussed in my

literature review, (Teddie and Reynolds, 2000) suggests that mandatory participation in professional development can be unsuccessful. (Tarnoczi, 2006) also suggested that teachers may not have the time to participate in such sessions due to the current workload they already have.

The school decided on having the leadership team visit every lesson, every day. During my time at my placement school I experienced this myself within the lessons I taught and observed. Members of the leadership team would taker turns walking around the entire school, briefly entering every single classroom. The idea behind this is that the leadership team would be able to constantly monitor the classroom teaching. This also had the added benefit of aiding teachers with classroom management, as pupils could expect another member of staff to enter the classroom at any point. This is essentially the same idea as lesson observation but on a much smaller scale individually. Because of this it shares some of the same drawbacks as traditional lesson observation. I discussed in my literature review how (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009) suggest that teachers may get stressed from lesson observation. The same concept applies here, possibly to an even further extent given that it is a member of the leadership team. To add to this, the school also incorporated learning walks between the middle leaders. The purpose of this was too capture and share excellent practice captured across the school. This took place daily; hence it did not happen as frequently as the leadership team visits did. However, this meant that some staff members could expect to be visited twice within the same lesson. This could further add to the negative effects of lesson observation discussed within my literature review.

The school's development plan has several key points within 'the five principles of excellence' category, that are used to monitor the progress of improvement. The first of these key points says that standards at all key stages were compared to that of other schools. It was found that standards at all key stages placed the school in the top 25% of similar schools in nearly every indicator. One of the indicators that the school used to compare itself to other schools, was the overall percentage of high GCSE results. (Goldstein, 1997) suggests that this is a problem as the schools could be differentially effective. What this means is that one school could be excelling in a subject area like mathematics but may not be as effective in another area like English. Because of this, my placement school would not benefit from comparing itself to this school to justify its improved results in another subject area. This concept applies to all subject areas, and all other schools which my placement school compared itself too.

Reflection and Evaluation

This section of my assignment will cover practical suggestions based on my knowledge of theory and practice. These suggestions are aimed to develop the negative aspects of the processes my school used, along with the ways in which they monitored progress. The negative aspects that I will be suggesting improvements for, were outlined in the previous section.

Within this assignment I have used literature to show how mandatory participation in professional development can sometimes be unsuccessful. I have also mentioned that many teachers may not have the time to participate due to other commitments in the school. To combat this, I would suggest that staff members be given a set amount of days, that they can use to pursue professional development on their own. Staff members would be able to choose when they take this time, and will hence be bypassing the compulsory aspect. This would also enable staff to freely work around their own schedule's, which solves the issue of compulsory professional development clashing with work commitments.

Observation is massive within my placement school. However, there are several disadvantages to observation which I have outlined within my assignment. (Bullough, 2012) suggests that observation is best when the observed practitioner feels that they can receive quality feedback, and hence benefit from observation without being judged. I also mentioned how (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009) suggest that observation can lead to stress. To combat both of these things, I would recommend having staff members choose the second member of staff that is to observe them. The results and points for improvement could then be passed on to the appropriate middle leaders, as opposed to middle leaders carrying out observations themselves. This would have the benefit of making the observed practitioner more comfortable, hence fully displaying their skills and leading to more beneficial feedback being made.

Comparing schools using key indicators can be particularly misleading if used incorrectly. I believe that comparing the percentage of high GCSE grades is a bad indicator to use as schools can be differentially effective. To combat this, I would suggest continuing with the current method, while simultaneously comparing the average GCSE grade obtained for each subject area, to the average grades obtained 3 years ago. This has the benefit of being in sync with the rotation of the school's development plan, and allows the school to measure its own improved performance. This also allows the school to continue comparing itself to other schools to get a general overview, as well as allowing more investigation into the different departmental areas.

Conclusion

Within this assignment I have explored one aspect of my school's development plan in great detail. I have used a wide range of literature to show my understanding of the school development process, and the aspect I had chosen to focus on. I have explored some of the negative aspects to the development plan, and have offered possible solutions based on my knowledge of theory and practice. From this assignment I have learned how the school operates at the higher levels, with decisions and responsibilities being passed down and delegated appropriately. I have also learned that both observation and professional development have positives and negatives that must be considered. I have learned how to effectively use these practices to my advantage, and will be sure to incorporate them into my pedagogy moving forward.

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