

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

Word Count 2699

Target 1	Read the Overall Comments for your PETs (on assignment) and consider how to develop deeper reflection in Q2. Use your literature to show theory to practice links.
Target 2	Link your readings to your practice. This will prevent a more generic and descriptive discussion and will provide opportunities for greater critical engagement with concepts.

Introduction

This essay will explore the process of school improvement plans (SIP), what influences their creation and how they are reviewed and evaluated. The school in question will be referred to as School X. The demographic of School X is relatively deprived compared to the rest of Wales, with just over a quarter of the school's pupils qualifying for free school meals (Gov.Wales, 2023). As of 2023, there are 199 pupils, 5% of which are statemented for additional learning needs, and 29% on some form of intervention plan, the reasons for these plans are varied but undisclosed. Its last Estyn inspection (2018) received a good report with no follow-up inspection required. School X's SIP is currently in the process of being reviewed as a new headteacher has been appointed at the end of 2023, as it stands, the SIP had 4 broad targets, each with their specific action plans. The target focused on in this essay is target four; "Ensure that learners experience an education that promotes wellbeing, equality and inclusion".

Literature Review

Most modern legislation for education draws inspiration from the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was adopted in the UK in 1992. The most prevailing right within education surfaces from Article 29, stating that education's core purpose is to develop a child's talents, abilities and personality. Schools have been responsible for themselves since the Balfour Act of 1902, which introduced the state school system (Ward and Eden, 2009). The Education Act (1992) introduced a state-funded inspection agency to ensure all schools were teaching to an acceptable standard through the organisations Ofsted in England, and Estyn in Wales. Estyn independently inspects schools at least every seven years to ensure that they are in accordance with current governmental standards (Estyn, 2024). Under the Education Act (2005, Article 20) they have an obligation to keep the Senedd informed of the current state of the country's

schools. Interestingly, this most recent amendment adds something neglected from the 1992 act, the Chief Inspector must inform the government on the state of morality, well-being and health of its pupils, as opposed to just their attainment (Gov.UK, 2005). This was a welcomed update to legislation, it is vital for the development of education that multiple stakeholders and a great deal of collaboration are involved (Evans, 2022; Donaldson, 2015). The involvement of certain stakeholders, however, was met with some resistance. Michael Gove's (2016) infamous statement of being "tired of experts", is just one example of the argument that we live in a post-factual era (Andrews, 2017), where individuals can disregard evidence in order to suit their own agendas. Andrews (2017) emphasises that this is a dangerous precedent, as ministers, like himself, have to rely on evidence and trust those who gather it in order to make informed policy decisions. Education is politics (Ward and Eden, 2009), and the shifting perspectives in Wales' Labour government have spurred a massive change in the expected pedagogy in Wales. The Successful Futures Report (Donaldson, 2015) is a significant and highly respected piece of evidence in modern education, it was eventually used as the framework for the Curriculum for Wales overhaul. It is common for the values of schools to largely be determined by the government (Ball, 2006), and in this case, the progressive Curriculum for Wales officially came into effect fully in 2019, it had a notable shift to valuing the development of well-being and transferable skills. The subjects mandatorily became six areas of learning experience to ensure collaboration between subjects, the three core cross-curricular subjects are now literacy, numeracy and digital competency. Guardians can no longer opt out of their children learning about religion, values and ethics, Welsh and sexual education (Hwb, 2019). The primary conclusions drawn from the Successful Futures Report are that children should be able to take responsibility for their learning and that they should have opportunities to be exposed to a variety of experiences (Donaldson, 2015). The change has been met with some resistance, with Wales' poor PISA results gaining notable media traction, performing the worst in each of the three subjects compared to the rest of the UK (Senedd, 2023). However, the test itself could be

criticised given the small sample size, only 2568 pupils to represent the whole of Wales. It is also important to note that despite the Senedd target of a PISA score of 500, Wales has taken a lower-pressure approach to education since devolution, choosing to focus on life skills and learning through play (Evans, 2015). The PISA results drawback by only looking at raw data, surveyed teachers argue that academic attainment is important, but should be looked at in terms of progress rather than raw scores (Blanchard, 2002). Marketisation should not take priority at the expense of a student's well-being and emotional development (Ward and Eden, 2009).

The process of developing a plan begins with gathering data, and then the targets eventually become future data (Blanchard, 2002), hypotheses and plans arise from the data, which lead to action plans that can be evaluated, this evaluation will produce data that influence future plans. When creating targets there is a balancing act, deciding to assign limited resources to improved schooling or improved justice (Ball, 2006; Campbell, 2002). Targets tend to fall into the more coercive competitive approach, or the incorporative process target (Cooper et Al, 1994; Blanchard, 2002). Incorporative and inclusive schools tend to shift their targets towards increased pupil engagement and well-being (Campbell, 2002), school X has favoured this line of thinking, an incorporative approach. When taking into account the needs of pupils, either consciously or not the vast majority of SIPs will take Maslow's hierarchy of needs into account in their planning. The base of this metaphorical pyramid holds physiological and social needs, such as food and a secure home. More emotional needs develop further up the pyramid; love, belonging, morality and self-esteem (Maslow, 2000). Children living in poverty are often deprived of the most basic physical needs, meaning their likelihood of accessing needs further up the pyramid is even slimmer. Impoverished children are less likely to have access to cultural capital from their immediate social network, meaning that they aren't as likely to prioritise or value education, be able to motivate themselves or have access to a lifestyle that supports

learning (Ward and Eden, 2009). A case study conducted on a pastoral care team found that many of their pupils were deprived of sleep and food, and a high proportion was from abusive households. Staff began to take a more patient and reward-central focus, which resulted in settled behaviour, improved confidence and a sense of belonging (Hughes, 2010), showing that there is value in working towards emotional needs, especially in those who are most likely to be deprived of them.

Developing an Action Point

For inclusion to be fully understood, it can't be focused on as a single goal but is made up of multiple aspects all embedded in the context of the school (Clough and Corbett, 2000), the formulation of school X's target encompasses equality and well-being alongside inclusion. The target chosen for this essay has acknowledged the frequent absences of its pupil's needs on all levels, it aims to address them in an all-encompassing target, with specific action plans to tackle each aspect within. The key action plans for the target focus on accommodations for additional learning needs (ALN), emotional literacy and general well-being, with most of these points aiming to tackle the issues that commonly occur concerning the areas of deprivation. This target does conflict with the concept of marketisation, inclusive schools tend to shift focus away from attainment (Campbell, 2002). However, a counterpoint that inclusivity is not a new concept in British schools, the UK adopted the UNCRC in 1991, with articles specifically referring to education (Casey, 2005; United Nations, 1992). It has been decades since schools have legally had to be inclusive, we have long passed the buffer and implementation period (Chemenais, 2006), meaning schools shouldn't need to sacrifice other areas to keep up. The ALN plan looks heavily into neurodivergence given the relatively high percentage in the school, staff were

involved in training influenced by an ALN conference one member of staff attended. The main takeaway was for staff to build up their tolerance and how they can make minor adaptations to help the children day-to-day, one example of this is printed, broken-down instructions. Part of this tolerance showed itself in the behaviour policy, as a limited framework of acceptable behaviour, ALN children will likely resort to disruption as good behaviour feels unattainable (Cooper et. Al, 1994). This initiative will also benefit neurotypical children, as students learn best in an inclusive and disruptive-free environment (Macbeth, 1999). Children with ADHD and Dyspraxia can often grasp ideas, but struggle to retain them, especially when multitasking (Hudson, 2015), this simple accommodation ensures these children can maintain their independence and be included in instructions. Another notable accommodation, two of the on-site LSOs are able to cover teacher planning as opposed to external supply cover. This is because ALN children tend to dip in attainment if they are frequently taught by unfamiliar adults (Evans, 2015). This form of cover will ensure that the pupils will generally have a familiar adult in class and not be too overwhelmed by change. Emotional literacy is developed through the Jigsaw lesson scheme, positive affirmations and values repetition. The Jigsaw scheme takes a holistic approach to developing a child's emotional literacy and overall well-being (Jigsaw, 2024). The general well-being of the children is targeted in two ways, one looking at the mesophysical needs and the other looking at emotion and security (Maslow, 2015). Physical well-being is addressed through poverty-tackling schemes such as the daily mile, a free scheme aimed at reducing health risks and obesity, showing the greatest impact in more deprived areas (Venkatraman et. Al, 2019) and initiatives offering free necessities such as toothbrushes, milk and free school meals (Gov.Wales, 2017).

Callaghan (1973) argued that stakeholders need to be involved in the evolution of education, not just the school itself (Ward and Eden, 2009), School X aligns with this as they involve a range of stakeholders in their SIP development and reviews. Given the high percentage of

pupils with free school meals and interventions, the school worked with safeguarding experts when devising plans for safeguarding procedures, mainly with the general well-being section of the target. It is important to work with agencies that consider the child's well-being as a whole, not just during school time (Hughes, 2010). A great deal of focus also went towards cooperation with the parents, it promotes equality amongst the cohort and makes the development process more inclusive (Blanchard, 2002). Work to make the school more adapted to additional needs served to further increase parental involvement. Parents with ALN children are often exhausted fighting for provisions for their child, if the school already provides those provisions then they are less likely to harbour feelings of discontent and be willing to cooperate with the school (Ripley et. Al, 2001).

As previously stated, the plan is currently being reevaluation, so the impact is still being weighed. How they are evaluated, however, is consistent, using data, pupil voice and monitoring the changing interventions. The pupils were quite comfortable offering feedback and were recently given a platform where they could share news and opinions about the school on a Spotify podcast, the podcast had four Year 6 hosts and rotates guests from each year group weekly. Students have an opportunity to publicly share what they found most beneficial that week, the variety of students makes the process inclusive of pupil voice (Chemenais, 2006). Measuring the inclusivity and well-being of ALN children was notably difficult, partly because of the confidentiality of their intervention cases, and partly because measuring behaviour can't be standardised. Through observation and feedback, pupils seemed to receive the implementation of universal provision well, which is an inclusive approach that benefits all pupils, but particularly benefits ALN pupils without singling them out (Swansea Council, 2023). This was a strategic choice, it was acknowledged that teachers subconsciously treat disabled children with an assumption that they need to be singled out for care (Casey, 2005), as a result, it was noticed that the confidence of ALN children to use classroom provisions such as wobble cushions or

easier challenge sheets. There were counterarguments that several pupils were seen to be taking advantage of the universal provision, holding resources when they were not needed or as a way to antagonise pupils who needed them.

Reflection and Evaluation

Schools should celebrate their achievements, but there are always aspects that can be reflected and improved upon (Blanchard, 2002). On evaluation, there is one glaring factor that the school had to confront in the context of their evaluation, following the loss of nearly 100 pupils after the opening of a nearby school, the financial reserves are in a deficit of £116,000 (Gov.Wales, 2023). However, despite this deficit, there is still a budget of £4352 per pupil annually, which is considerably higher than the local average. Likely because of the statement assigned one-to-one staff, which has also brought up the student-teacher ratio to 19.2:1. If funding were to be available, the problems in the implementation of universal provision could be addressed by purchasing more resources to avoid classroom conflict. It's also worth noting that there are a great deal of accommodations that promote inclusion with little or no cost. ALN children are highly impacted by their environment, with noise levels, calming classroom decoration and a neutral temperature (Hughes, 2010). While this was done well in some classrooms, some traditional members of staff were hesitant to fully adapt their classrooms in this way, meaning pupils across the school had drastically different levels of accommodation, going against the aim for equality. Further training is needed as adapting one's pedagogy to accommodate differences will aid in making students more accenting (Trifonas, 2003). A potential recommendation is the Well-being in the Classroom work by Bethune (2023), who lists strategies and reasoning to implement student wellness in the primary classroom, examples include positive postcards and allowing children to dictate music and classroom setting. A whole school staff training course would only cost £395, or the book with a large chunk of the content costs a mere £14.99 (Teach

Happy, 2024), making this a realistic and affordable option to upskill staff who require further training to meet this target.

A more fatalistic aspect of reflection notes parental engagement, which came alongside addressing the 94.4% attendance (Gov.Wales, 2023). Although parental engagement had notably increased over the years, as well as a willingness to work with the school if the child was missing some of their more basic level needs (Maslow, 2015), the pupils most in need of these interventions or those with the lowest attendance tended to have poor engagement guardians. It's not uncommon for those who would benefit most from parent programmes to not engage with them (Evans, 2015), but steps still need to be taken as there are pupils who require parent cooperation for their development plans. As vital stakeholders in this issue, social workers will likely take the lead on this issue, pushing information and supporting the guardians involved. The school can facilitate this by increasing the range of communication, most of it digital, including the replacement of the newsletter with a podcast. Paper communications or arranged informal meetings could increase engagement for some of the guardians.

Conclusion

To conclude, given the significant challenges School X faces, great strides have been taken towards its target of promoting well-being, equality, and education. Great focus has been dedicated to tackling the challenges impoverished or ALN pupils commonly face in their education, which is an approach most schools would benefit from adopting. Students have shown a recent increase in confidence, and behaviour outbursts have become more manageable. But as with all SIPs, there is room for further improvement, the concerns mentioned will likely be addressed during the plan's current reevaluation. The primary recommendations offered from this report are for staff to engage in further training to ensure

their pedagogy is more inclusive, and to increase the provision of physical aids within the classroom.

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