

	Target	What I have done in this assignment...
Target 1	Avoid narratives and be more critical	I have aimed to avoid being merely descriptive, and aimed to show criticality in my discussion.
Target 2	Use a formal range of literature	I have avoided using informal sources of literature, and instead based my research in books, journal articles, and documents from government and reputable sources.
Target 3		

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

In 2014, the Welsh government published guidance on school development plans (SDP), in which they stated that “key to school improvement is effective school development planning” (WAG, 2014, p.5). As part of my professional teaching experience, I have examined and analysed the school development plan of one school. This report aims to analyse the school development process, and I will look in depth at one action point from a SDP: in particular I will discuss the school’s motivation for targeting this area for improvement, the actions taken by the school, and their impact and evidence.

This report is based on information from a small primary school in a small village in South Wales. According to their most recent Estyn report (2016), there are 187 pupils on the school roll. Around 26% of pupils are eligible for free school meals: this is above the average for Wales of 20%. The school has identified about 28% of pupils as having additional learning needs: this is slightly higher than the national average of 25%. All pupils speak English as their first language at home. This contextual information will be referred to later in the report, in order to consider how such cultural, linguistic and socio-economic factors may impact on learners’ progress and achievement.

In Wales, the emphasis on school improvement followed Estyn’s annual report for 2012-13, which reported that in over a quarter of schools, self-evaluation and planning for improvement were recommended as areas for improvement. Since October 2014, school governing bodies in Wales have been required to produce a school development plan, in accordance with the Education (School Development Plans) (Wales) Regulations 2014 legislation.

We can identify many purposes for a school development plan. First and foremost, an SDP provides schools with a focused document which details the areas in which a school is succeeding, where they could improve, and guides the decisions and actions of the school. This method of critically reflective practice also enables schools to “take account of a range of factors at the personal, cultural and structural levels” (Thompson, 2011, p. 223). The Estyn report mentioned above highlighted the importance of gathering first-hand evidence and data in order to inform an honest self-evaluation. This emphasis on evidence-based policies is noted as important at any time, but especially in an age where school-accountability is so prevalent (Slavin, 2002). Indeed, the SDP, and particularly the way a school approaches the process of self-evaluation, serves as the starting point for inspections by Estyn and a reference point LEAs and regional consortia can look to for schools’ intended actions.

Furthermore, Welsh government guidelines underline the importance of involving all stakeholders in development planning in order that everyone be committed to the school's vision and improvement agenda (WAG, 2014). Chapman et al. further emphasise the importance of this 'bottom-up' approach to school development planning, stating that "improvement and the capacity to improve come from within rather than beyond organisations...thus putting students and teachers at the core of improvement efforts" (2012, p. 6). Therein lies the ultimate goal of the school development process: raising teaching and learning standards, with a view of having a positive impact on learner outcomes. However, it must be noted that student achievement should not be the sole focus of improvement activities. Within the new curriculum, great emphasis is placed upon pupil well-being and family and community engagement, therefore a school development plan must also consider these factors.

Welsh government guidelines provide a clear model for an improvement cycle consisting of self-evaluation, strategic planning, action, and reviewing impact, all set against the school's vision for their future. The importance of having the school's vision and ethos as a backdrop lies in the basis that, of course, every school has a unique context: therefore the content of the SDP must be determined by the character of the school and the unique needs of the school.

The process of school development planning links well with the aspect that I have chosen to explore in the SDP of my placement school: 'developing the school as a learning organization (SLO)'. Indeed, one viewpoint is that effective and collaborative school development planning can, itself, establish a school as a learning organisation which "focuses on meeting the professional needs of teachers in order to meet the educational needs of pupils" (SDPI, 1999, p.14). It is necessary first to establish a definition of a learning organisation. According to Senge, a learning organisation is one where:

...people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. (2006, p.3).

The Welsh Government considers the development of schools as learning organisations to be pivotal for the successful realisation of the new curriculum for Wales (OECD, 2018). This is because SLOs are more capable of adapting to new circumstances, and exploring new approaches in order to improve learner outcomes and realise their vision. This supports

Senge's view that in a learning organisation, "adaptive learning", which is necessary for an organisation to survive, is joined by "generative learning", that is, learning that enhances their capacity to create its future (p. 14, 2006).

The Welsh government created a model for schools as learning organisation in Wales, based on one created by the OECD and UNICEF (2016). The model for Wales (see appendix 1) details the way that a school and its stakeholders must focus their efforts into realising seven core dimensions, in order to achieve the four core purposes of the curriculum. The new Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership also support these seven dimensions in terms of highlighting the importance of collaboration, effective leadership professional learning.

Furthermore, the dimensions encourage the efforts of all stakeholders and the community to strengthen the school. Society as a whole has a stake in the education system, so therefore should be involved in determining the way in which education is delivered.

The Welsh government's ambition is that all schools will develop as learning organisations. Therefore, it is clear why this was included in this school's SDP. However, beyond it being a national priority, the school also identified that 'developing as a learning organisation' is pertinent to their school mission, with clear links to the school vision and context. In the school's mission statement of "together we care, share and achieve," the school identified the aspect of developing as an SLO to come under "achieve", and specifically linked it to "excellence in teaching and learning".

The SDP provides a rationale for why this target is a priority. It states aims of: teaching staff to develop their skills of action research; support staff to begin to fully engage in their own professional development; school 2 school working; family engagement and parent training program. These aims can clearly be linked to three of the core dimensions of the SLO model for Wales: "creating and supporting continuous learning opportunities for all staff; establishing a culture of enquiry, innovation and exploration; learning with and from the external environment and larger learning system" (WAG, 2016, p.1)

However, Welsh government guidance on SDP states that new targets should be developed from the self-evaluation stage of the cycle. When analysing the SDP, it is not clear where this new target links to their self-evaluation of the previous year. That being said, as previously stated, there are links to the overall school mission.

The action plan for this target shows clear and strategic planning, giving details of the personnel involved, timescales, budget, the intended impact of the actions, and the evidence that is to be produced.

It is important to note, that this target evolves over three years. In the first year, the target is to 'begin to develop as a learning organisation'; the second year is 'develop further as a learning organisation'; while the third year, and beyond, involves 'establishing the school as a learning organisation'. This shows that the target requires strategic and sustained action, further evidenced from the varying timescales and dates of the current year's action points.

The success criteria gives guidance of the data that is to be produced by the successful execution of the action plan. For this particular target, there is no quantitative data to be collected, there is only qualitative data. It could be argued this makes the impact of the actions difficult to measure, since, as Cohen et al. state, "qualitative data analysis...is often heavy on interpretation, and one has to note that there are frequently multiple interpretations to be made of qualitative data" (2011, p. 537). For example, one point of the success criteria states, 'parents engaged in professional development'. This could be made quantifiable by targeting a specific number or percentage of parents. Similarly, another point states 'pupils' outcomes improved'. Again, this could be more detailed in order to be more measurable. For example, which outcomes specifically are they aiming to improve? By how much are they aiming to improve? This lack of definitive targets make the impact of these actions in particular more challenging to measure, and therefore, more challenging to deem a success, as there is no data to compare it to.

When it comes to the intended impacts we can clearly see how the school has related these to the rationale for the target, and how they relate to literature and Welsh government guidance. Indeed, many of the intended impacts are the core dimensions of the SLO.

One action point stated: 'staff to receive training on carrying out small scale action research in school'. This training was to be led by a member of the SMT. It could be argued that by not welcoming an approach from an external partner, the school was not being open to benefitting from the expertise of another. However, without knowledge of the expertise of the SMT member who delivered the training, this is not a clear conclusion to be made. Furthermore, as Joyner argues, "drive-by staff development" provided by external trainers, is often ineffective as they do not know the staff background, the context of the school, or the unique challenges that the school and staff face (Joyner, 2000).

In order to reflect and evaluate on the action taken by the school, I will consider data and evidence, as well as what I observed in relation this target during my PTE.

Firstly, I will consider the point of 'action research carried out by the teaching staff'. I observed that the areas of focus that the teachers chose were not only areas of interest to them as individuals, but were also pertinent to the context of the school. For example, one member of staff chose to research the utilisation of outdoor areas as learning environments.

Since the school has a large and varied outside area, this action research was especially relevant and useful, as the results will have a direct impact on the school and improve how the school use their own outdoor environments.

Secondly, in order to address the action point of developing a parent training program, the school brokered an accredited Food Hygiene course, based on the suggestions of the parent council. The school feedback from this course states that the course was well attended by parents and that two attendees went on to gain employment as a direct result of achieving the accreditation. Therefore, this action point achieved the intended impact of providing parents with the opportunity to undertake purposeful qualifications to support employment opportunities. Furthermore, Smith (2012) describes the strong link between severe child poverty and their parent's education level. Therefore, by providing parents with opportunities for learning and training, the school is addressing the educational attainment of the parents, and could potentially be contributing to reducing social inequality. In order to develop this initiative further in the future, the school could open such training courses up to the wider community, rather than just to parents. This would create deeper links with the local community, and contribute to a learning society, a concept which is encouraged by Coffield (1998, cited in Smith, 2012).

In this report I have looked at the process of school development with regards to theory and practice. I have looked at the school development plan of one school in order to reflect on the way they develop one target by following the school development process. This experience has allowed me to analyse the way one school approaches the process of improvement. I have also been able to compare the document with actions that I had witnessed first-hand in order to understand how the SDP looked in practice.

Furthermore, by looking at the target of 'developing as a learning organisation', I have come to understand the difference between a school, and an SLO: that is to say an SLO aims to develop and grow through self-evaluation, research, innovation and collaboration. It seems reasonable, therefore that all schools should aim to become SLOs.

I have a deeper understanding of the importance of collaboration among school staff and the wider in school development. I also have a greater understanding of what will be expected of me in my role as teacher in order to contribute to the school improvement process, and this will influence my professional practice.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: SLO Model for Wales

(Online) Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/storage/f87e720f-8568-4a60-9383-55e20b9a1bb7/schools-in-wales-as-learning-organisations.pdf>

