

ECAD7003

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

Word Count: 2747

Introduction

The purpose of this assignment is to explore school improvement in practice/reality, critically examining the process through which a particular school develops one aspect of their school improvement plan (SIP). Such school is an English medium, mixed-gender comprehensive school located within South Wales (Estyn, 2019). With a pupil roll of 1,521; including 335 sixth form students, 4% of the school's pupils are eligible for free school meals; a figure that lies considerably below the national average of 16.4% (Estyn, 2019). Similarly, less than 4% of the school's pupils reside within Wales' 20% most deprived areas (Estyn, 2019). However, of particular importance to this assignment, during its most recent inspection, the school was ranked 'excellent' across all areas of scrutiny, with a '*strong culture of evaluation and improvement*' highlighted as central to its success (Estyn, 2019 pg. 2). The Welsh Government's revised professional standards for teaching and learning position research-informed, evidence-based pedagogical practice at the centre of effective school improvement (Estyn, 2018). Therefore, for the purpose of this assignment, I have focussed my attention upon how the schools' Geography department are implementing the recently identified, whole-school priority of improving self-regulated, independent learning; a central tenet of Donaldson's (2015) 12 pedagogical principles.

Literature Review

School Improvement Planning

The Welsh Government has expressed its commitment to the establishment of a self-improving education system that is wholly committed to delivering inclusive, high-quality education to all Welsh citizens (OECD, 2018). At the heart of this nation-wide mission is the schools' re-conceptualisation as a learning organisation whereby a culture of continuous learning enhances the capacity of individual schools to realise the vision outlined within the New Curriculum for Wales (*See Figure 1*) (Kools *et al.* 2020; OECD, 2018). However, closely connected to this re-conceptualisation is Wales' new arrangements for school improvement planning, a process exemplified by every schools' creation of an individualised action plan outlining their strategic plan for improvement, their key targets/priorities and finally, how they intend on addressing/achieving them (Welsh Government, 2022). At the centre of this process is a cycle of continuous, evidence-based self-evaluation whereby contextualised data of a qualitative and quantitative nature is utilised to support a school in critically reflecting upon their performance (*See Figure 2*) (Demetriou & Kyriakides, 2012; Welsh Government, 2014).

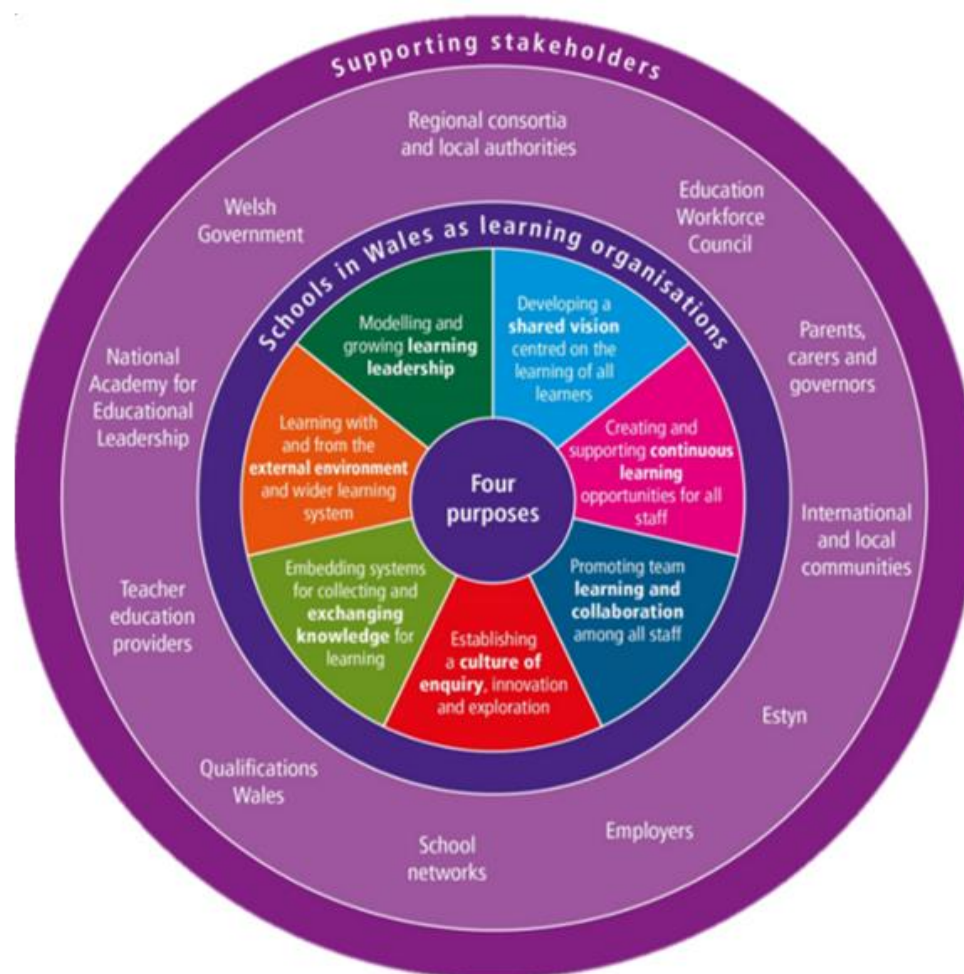


Figure 1: Schools as Learning Organisations Model (OECD, 2018).

Involving all key stakeholders and partners; whilst simultaneously prioritising the pupil's voice, according to BERA (2022), effective self-evaluation should be an inclusive and collaborative process, undertaken 'for the school', with the sole purpose of delivering exceptional learning experiences and outcomes for all; as opposed to satisfying external accountability (Welsh Government, 2022). However, for such improvement planning to be meaningful, it is pivotal that the school has a clear understanding of what 'success' looks like and thus, what they should be aspiring to achieve under the new Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022). In addition to being an opportunity to share best practice via school-to-school collaboration (Estyn, 2018; Welsh Government, 2014), by identifying areas of both strength and development, such self-evaluation enables each individual school to identify an array of short and long-term targets/priorities, following which, appropriate action can be taken so as to improve the quality of teaching and learning and therefore, progress as an learning organisation (Welsh Government, 2022).

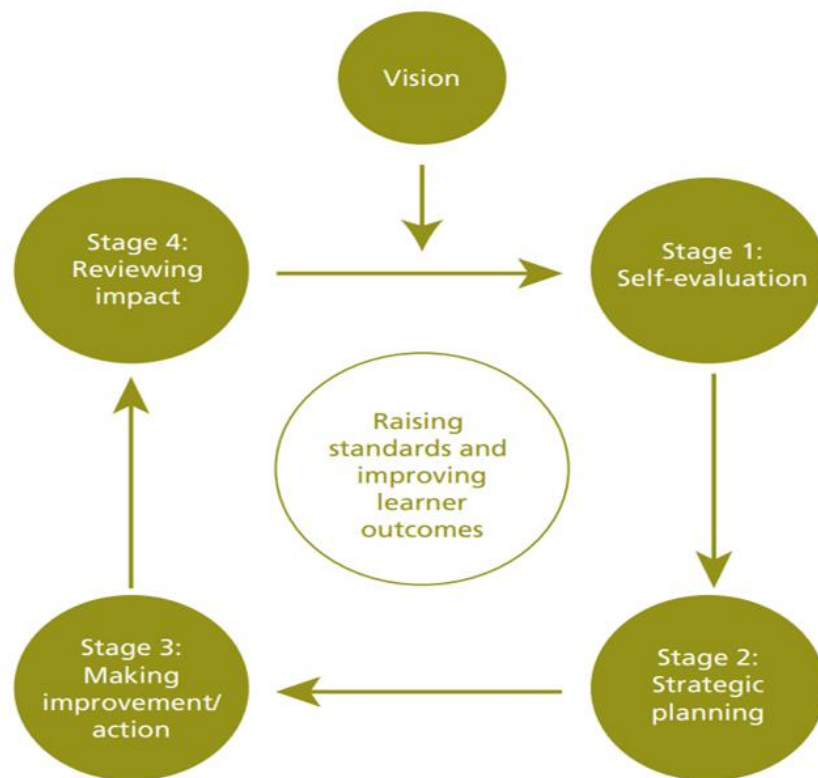


Figure 2: The School Improvement/Development Planning Cycle (Welsh Government, 2014)

The Whole-School Priority of Self-Regulated, Independent Learners

Due to the continuously evolving, ever-changing nature of today's modern society, there is growing pressure upon educational systems to create ambitious, enthusiastic, life-long learners who possess the ability to adapt, respond to change and ultimately, continue acquiring new skills and knowledge throughout the entirety of their adult, working life (Dignath & Buttner, 2008; Ho, 2004). Educational reform currently underway in Wales is in no way immune to society's changing demands and consequently, a resurging interest in student-led learning and the instruction and practice of self-regulated learning (SRL) has occurred (Schuitema *et al.* 2012). Positioned at a theoretical crossroad whereby various research domains intersect; each characterised by distinctive paradigms and terminology (Denta & Koenka, 2016), the concept of SRL has historically lacked conceptual clarity (Schuitema *et al.* 2012). However, originating within the field of Educational Psychology; commonly conflated with constructivist theories of development that emphasise the agency of the learner (Voskamp *et al.* 2012), Zimmerman's (1986, 2001) 'profile' of SRL encapsulates '*metacognitively, motivationally and behaviourally*

active participants in their own learning [who] self-generate thoughts, feelings and actions to attain their learning goals' (as cited in Dignath & Buttner, 2008, pg. 233). Thus, SRL is comprised of three core elements; motivation, cognition and meta-cognition, that interact with one another in complex, multi-faceted ways, enabling the learner to 'take charge' of their own learning (Panadero, 2017).

Described by Dent and Koenka (2016) as its 'propeller', SRL's meta-cognitive component has historically been ascribed a higher status, with such academics arguing that priority should be given to developing the meta-cognitive skills of for example effective planning, goal setting, self-control, self-evaluation and monitoring of progress if SRL's widely documented benefits are to be realised. Defined as 'thinking about thinking'; a process whereby learners monitor and purposefully direct their learning (Jaleel, 2016), research conducted by the EEF (2018) highlights the significant impact that the meta-cognitive strategies outlined above can have upon academic achievement, translating to up to 7 months of supplementary progress when applied effectively. However, the EEF (2018) also argue that pupils can only progress meta-cognitively if they possess the various cognitive strategies/skills for effective learning and further to that, the motivation and self-efficacy to engage meaningfully in the learning process. Therefore, whilst the EEF (2018) recognise the role to be played by meta-cognition, they also emphasise the importance of giving equal attention to the fostering of all SRL's components.

The potential impact of SRL upon academic achievement, motivation and learner efficiency is largely undisputed (Dent & Koenka, 2016; Ho, 2004), whilst intervention studies conducted across a plethora of primary and secondary-school settings provide empirical evidence in support of the argument that it is achievable for pupils' SRL 'capability' to be developed (Dignath & Buttner, 2008, 2018). However, as noted by Artelt *et al.* (2003), the research findings of international, comparative studies that examine learners' academic performance indicate that learners of various ages; across numerous countries, are largely characterised by a lack of competence in relation to their self-regulating abilities (as cited in Dignath & Buttner, 2018). Further to this, and of particular importance to this assignment, academics such as Peetsma *et al.* (2005) identified an international trend of a noticeable decline in learners' aptitude for self-regulation upon transitioning to secondary school, raising concern regarding the extent to which SRL's benefits are being realised in practice (as cited in Van der Veen & Peetsma, 2009).

Taking all of the above into account, as noted by Dignath & Buttner (2018), there are many questions that remain unanswered regarding SRL, largely centring upon whether and how teachers are encouraging SRL, developing our understanding of the type of learning environment and associated classroom culture that facilitates progression in this domain and finally, better understanding how educational practitioners can be supported to teach the fundamentals of SRL more explicitly (Dignath & Buttner, 2018; Schuitema *et al.* 2012). Where research has been conducted, initial findings suggest that whilst teachers are employing instructional practices that possess potential in fostering SRL, evidence of self-regulation being explicitly taught is less prominent (Dignath & Buttner, 2018). Thus, although further research is needed, such findings are indicative of the significant role to be played by evidence-based training programmes moving forward, targeting this area of effective pedagogical practice (Dignath & Buttner, 2018).

Developing an action point

Self-evaluation

At the end of the 2021/22 academic year, the school that forms the focus of this assignment attained the highest GCSE and A-Level results in their history. However, when examining their pedagogical practice in light of such results; utilising a programme of lesson observations to do so, the pedagogical priority of developing self-regulated, independent learners was identified. In comparison to their neighbouring schools, this particular school does not experience to the same degree, the educational challenges that are commonly conflated with a pupil population characterised by a high percentage of eligibility for free school meals and therefore, high levels of socio-economic deprivation (Assistant Headteacher, 2023). However, according to the senior leadership team (interviewed March 2023), staff at various levels regularly give feedback on the challenges they experience in association with educating a high number of results-driven pupils who consequently, have a tendency to approach their academic studies from the position of '*just tell me what I need to do to pass the exam*'; an approach far removed from the vision of the New Curriculum for Wales (Donaldson, 2015). Thus, prior to their most recent Estyn inspection (2019), the school placed significant emphasis upon student-led learning and more specifically, the development of self-regulating pupils with strong meta-cognitive skills.

As evidenced within their Estyn (2019) report, a high degree of progress was achieved in relation to this aspect of their pedagogical practice. However, progress made was largely

impeded by the Covid-19 pandemic whereby a teacher-led, didactic approach to learning resurfaced under the circumstances that transpired. A programme of lesson observations during the summer term of the 2021/22 academic year alongside informal feedback/input from the key stakeholders of both parents and pupils confirmed the senior leadership teams' concern regarding the resurgence of such an approach to teaching and learning that whilst was effective in yielding strong academic results, did not support learners to develop the skills, attributes and qualities of a life-long learner, as required in today's modern world (Donaldson, 2015). Thus, beginning with honest, evidence-based self-evaluation, informed by the triangulation and contextualisation of a varied collection of data; including for example observations, parental and pupil feedback and achievement scores (BERA, 2022), the development of self-regulating, independent learners returned post-pandemic as a whole-school priority within their 2022-'25 SIP, similarly featuring strongly within every departmental improvement plan.

Strategic Planning

When critically examining how the Geography department is implementing this whole-school priority, as noted within their departmental improvement plan (*See Appendix A*), their overarching target is to develop pupils' meta-cognitive skills and knowledge via the employment of SRL techniques within the classroom, focussing their attention upon year 7 and 8 pupils. Whilst the reasons as to why the department targeted this age group are not explicit, as noted above, research suggests that this is a pivotal period of time whereby a significant decline in learners' aptitude for SRL can occur and therefore, the importance of targeted intervention to address this (Van Der Veen & Peetsma, 2009). When examining the specifics of how they intend on developing pupils' metacognitive skills, the department are undertaking small-scale, action research that entails trialling and evaluating the effectiveness of a diverse range of strategies and/or interventions that as advocated by academics, are designed to more explicitly teach pupils how to manage their learning independently (EEF, 2018).

As part of this process, the members of staff selected to oversee such research attended training with an organisation called 'Thinking Matters', the purpose of which was to develop their practical knowledge and understanding of firstly, the 'science of learning' and secondly, how meta-cognitive strategies can meaningfully and effectively be integrated into their pedagogy (Thinking Matter, 2023). Thus, the department appear to be adopting a research-informed approach, acknowledging the importance of high-quality training for staff whereby researchers and practitioners work in collaboration with one another to develop their instruction

of SRL within the classroom (Dignath & Buttner, 2008). Equally, as noted by Estyn (2018), engagement in research of this manner is pivotal when developing strategies and/or interventions that have the purpose of improving a particular aspect of the school's teaching practice, ensuring that any pedagogical practices implemented long-term are evidence based.

Making Improvements/Action

Having identified a 'plan of action', the next phase of improvement planning is ultimately, to implement the strategies outlined within the department's improvement plan (Welsh Government, 2014). In addition to outlining the members of staff who are responsible and therefore accountable for overseeing such action research; the head of department and a purposively selected member of staff who expressed explicit interest in undertaking such action research, as advocated by the Welsh Government (2014), the department have established clear success criteria, providing an operationalised framework that in turn, enables the department to evaluate and monitor their progress (*See Appendix A*). However, upon critical examination, the departmental plan lacks a clearly outlined timescale for the completion of such action-research and therefore, the associated reviewal of progress. This is argued by the Welsh Government (2014) to be of significant importance if a school is to prevent duplication of work and therefore, guarantee an effective deployment of their resources.

Reviewing impact

With regards to the reviewal of progress, whilst not explicit within the improvement plan, according to the Head of Department, standard practice is for bi-annual reviews to be conducted whereby a RAG (red-amber-green) system is used to evaluate and review progress against the previously discussed success criteria (*See Appendix A*). However, in this instance, a formal review of progress; incorporating a further programme of observations to triangulate the key findings of the action-research undertaken, will be conducted at the end of the academic year. According to the head of department, when measuring impact and more specifically, whether the strategies and interventions trialled have impacted learning in the way intended, the pupils' voice will feature most strongly; as encouraged within the learning organisation model (OECD, 2018) and in turn, feedback/input from arguably the most important stakeholder will inform a further cycle of improvement planning in this area. Thus, the department are adhering to Welsh Government (2014) guidelines regarding the revising of their improvement plan on an annual basis. However, according to Estyn (2018), in the most effective schools, reflection upon

improvement strategies and the extent to which they are having a positive impact on pupil outcomes should take place on a more frequent basis.

Critical Summary

Having critically examined the department's implementation of a whole-school priority, the school appears to be embracing what BERA (2022) describe as a 'dispersed approach to leading', empowering members of staff from within the Geography department to take ownership of the school improvement process, working collaboratively with the senior leadership team in order to become 'experts' in this particular area of pedagogical practice. Equally, and in accordance with the School as a Learning Organisation Model (*See Figure 2*), the adopted approach enables staff the opportunity to be enquiring, experimental and innovative within their teaching, engaging in continued professional learning for the benefit of their learners' progress and well-being (OECD, 2018). Further to this, as advocated by the OECD (2018), the action point examined provides clear evidence whereby teachers and senior leaders are reacting effectively to the ever-dynamic context/society within which their school lies and therefore, the continuously evolving needs of their pupils. However, whilst all departmental staff expressed explicit commitment to the whole-school priority of developing self-regulated, independent learners, they were equally transparent regarding a lack of understanding as to how the priority had come to be identified and therefore, the underlying self-evaluative process that acts as the foundations for and therefore, contextualises its identification. Thus, as noted by the Welsh Government (2014), in order for sustainable improvement to be realised; and if the school is to maintain its '*strong culture of evaluation and improvement*' (Estyn, 2019 pg. 2), the whole-school priorities, their purpose and underlying rationale must be wholly understood by all (BERA, 2022).

Conclusion

The assignment's purpose was to critically examine the process through which a particular school develops one aspect of their SIP. Having examined a departmental approach to implementing the whole-school priority of developing self-regulating, independent learners, engagement with this assignment has equipped me with a more comprehensive and informed understanding of what sustainable school improvement 'looks like' in practice and in turn, has encouraged me to reflect upon my responsibilities as an individual practitioner/teacher in contributing to the development of a culture of continuous improvement (Welsh Government,

2022). Looking forward, I intend on ensuring that my practice within the classroom is informed by the improvement priorities of my school and in turn, that I take the necessary steps to understand strategies I can adopt both within and beyond the classroom to support their realisation. However, most importantly, engagement with this assignment has reinforced the importance of taking responsibility for my own professional development and therefore, the value of working collaboratively with colleagues as ‘change agents’ (Brown *et al.* 2021), enquiring, experimenting, and remaining innovative in our teaching, doing so to develop our pedagogical practice for the benefit of the learner (OECD, 2018).

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Appendices

Appendix A – Geography Departmental Improvement Plan (relevant section).

Priority: To improve quality and standards in the Department and achieve the 3 SIP Key priorities.

EVIDENCE FOR ACTION: Lesson observations; student engagement in lessons; behaviour logs; minutes; internal assessments; FFT							
Key priority 1: Develop Confident, Successful young people							
Target for Improvement (Where do we want to go?)	Actions/Tasks/Strategies (How will we make it happen?)	Led by	Resources inc. Costs (£)	Monitoring Timeline & Evidence	How will we know if we have been successful?		
					INTENDED OUTCOMES (What will it look like when we get there?)	Progress Review 1 Colour code comments accordingly	Progress Review 2 Colour code comments accordingly
						No action/ progress	No action/ progress
						Some / good progress	Some / good progress
						Embedded	Embedded
1. Improve self-regulated, independent learning Develop pupils' metacognitive skills and knowledge by implementation of self-regulated learning techniques and application of metacognitive strategies in Y7 and Y8 Develop pupils' understanding of how to revise successfully, act upon feedback and adopt strategies to take responsibility for their success in learning in senior school.	Metacognition training to be undertaken. This will inform the development of action research and development of SOW. Collaboration between HOD and Mr X to develop the strategies. Feedback to be gathered from others in the Department. Further details on the strategies to be developed following the research and implementation. SOW is being developed at KS3 which will incorporate these strategies (alongside literacy, numeracy, AFL, differentiation etc.) so as to promote independence in pupils' learning. Specific strategies to be discussed in Departmental meetings.	HOD & Mr X			Nearly all Y7 pupils in the subject begin to reflect and develop as self-regulated learners and demonstrate that they are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and can motivate themselves to engage in, and improve, their learning Nearly all pupils understand and apply strategies to achieve or exceed desired progress Nearly all pupils understand themselves as independent, confident and successful learners and make		

<i>(Need to add specific learning strategies in the 'actions/strategies' column) for Middle, and Senior schools e.g. concentrate on introducing SRL and metacognition by removing some of the curriculum content in Middle school and concentrate on improving pupils' ability to revise using already defined subject content, which cannot be reduced in senior school.)</i>					strategic choices about how to study and learn and meet or exceed their potential Nearly all pupils in senior school know how to revise successfully and apply research-based techniques to embed knowledge into memory Nearly all pupils (across all ages) act upon feedback and demonstrate responsibility for their learning, manage their time effectively and organise themselves so that they are ready to learn and show respect for themselves and others The very few learners who are unable/ fail to engage are provided with deep support and appropriate challenge and pathways		
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