

Reflecting on a Strategic Change Initiative: Maximising the Capacity, Value and Impact of Support for Learning Workers

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Abstract

This study was conducted as a key component of the Into Headship programme which I completed in 2022. The study examines the deployment of support for learning workers (SFLWs) in a Glasgow secondary school, while also addressing challenges that hinder effective collaboration between teaching staff and SFLWs that could enhance young people's learning experiences and outcomes. The study examines the feedback gathered to identify views and experiences of all stakeholders working with and alongside SFLWs in the school community. It then reflects on the strategies employed while setting timelines and regularly reviewing progress with key staff responsible for leading and managing the SFLW team. The self-evaluation tool from the Education Endowment Fund (EEF), focusing on effective classroom assistant practices, and the Scottish Government 2020 review *Support for Learning: All Our Children and All Their Potential*, served as the foundation for this work. Both documents supported the exploration of structures and routines to better meet the needs of learners.

So far, the study has been valuable in fostering dialogue and reflection on how we can collaborate to improve outcomes for our young people while leading strategic changes involving SFLWs' responsibilities. Some viewed this effort as too aspirational, given that it involves one of the lowest paid (UK Government, 2023) and often underappreciated (BBC, 2025) roles in the education system. As strategies were implemented, reviewed, and refined, a self-reflection journal emerged to help guide and sustain positive progress. Despite the challenges, this ambitious undertaking sheds some light on the untapped potential of SFLWs, offering a compelling vision for transforming the interrelationship of SFLWs and teachers for driving meaningful and lasting change.

Keywords: strategic change initiative (SCI), support for learning workers (SFLWs), collaboration, Education Endowment Fund (EEF)

Introduction

I began my study on the deployment of support for learning workers (SFLWs) during my role as link depute head teacher for the Pupil Support department, where I reviewed the existing arrangements for SFLWs within my current context.

In my school context, we have two teams of SFLWs, one specifically for the co-located provision for young people with moderate learning difficulties, and the other team that works with the young people with additional support needs (ASN) as part of the mainstream cohort. Although none of the

approaches used by SFLWs could be considered ineffective, the absence of measurement of their impact was apparent. When planning for next steps we evaluated specific interventions designed to support individual learning. This proved challenging due to the non-existence of a formalised system for tracking or monitoring outcomes specific to the young people being supported. As a result, there was limited evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness or value of SFLWs' deployment or specific support strategies. This lack of impact was highlighted during a post-Covid Education Scotland Recovery Visit to our school where it was reported that although strategies used to support our young people were commendable, there was insufficient evidence to gauge their impact or effectiveness. Furthermore, Sosu and Ellis (2014) argue that having tangible measures as part of the implementation process would be most valuable. The significance of this finding was clear in that it does not follow the recommendations of the Scottish Government 2020 review *Support for Learning: All Our Children and All Their Potential* (Scottish Government, 2020), which highlights the importance of "measuring the investment in Pupil Support Assistants" (p. 22), who play a key role in supporting learners. This underpinned the need for better evaluation.

The need for increased attention on the deployment of SFLWs for measurable positive impact was further substantiated by data provided by Insight, the Senior Phase benchmarking tool funded by the Scottish Government (2024a) to aid evaluation and improvement. Insight indicates that the attainment of our young people with a recognised additional support need is lower than our virtual comparators¹. This, together with the necessity of a measure of impact, resulted in what seemed a natural focus point for the strategic change initiative that I would lead through the Into Headship programme.

Literature Review

Achieving Excellence and Equity (Scottish Government, 2022a) is a key principle underpinning Scottish education policy. Central to the equity agenda is the theme of inclusion, which, although sometimes controversial due to conflicts in understanding of the term (Riddell, 2009) is fully supported by the *Additional Support for Learning Act* of 2004 (Scottish Parliament, 2004). This is further supported by a core principle of *The National Improvement Framework* (2022a) being improving outcomes for young people, regardless of their economic background or social status (Scottish Government, 2022c).

It is widely recognised that disparities in learning outcomes due to differences in household income are evident (Scottish Government, 2022a). Sosu and Ellis (2014) highlight that this inequality in Scottish households is more marked than that of many similar nations, reinforcing the Scottish Government's commitment to narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap within Scottish education (Scottish Government, 2022c). While excellent teaching and effective leadership are undoubtedly cornerstones of achieving equity in schools, as emphasised in *Putting Learners at the Centre* (Scottish Government, 2022b). I would also argue that the well-organised deployment of SFLWs plays a significant role in meeting this objective (Scottish Government, 2022a).

Supporting students with additional support needs (ASN) is crucial to closing the attainment gap (Scottish Government, 2017). In fact, the attainment gap between students with ASN and their peers is twice as large as the gap between students eligible for free school meals and their peers (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020). This stark reality further emphasises the importance of structured and effective support systems, such as SFLWs, in achieving equity for all students. It was through this observation that the Scottish Government boosted funding specifically for SFLWs particularly in view of the post-Covid effects on young people (Scottish Government, 2022c),

¹ Virtual Comparator is a sample group of pupils from other parts of Scotland who have similar characteristics to the young people in the school (Scottish Government, 2024a, p.5).

indicating the value of SFLWs and the predicted impact on outcomes and raising attainment. With the noticeable rise in the number of young people with additional support needs in recent years (Riddell & Weedon, 2017) which are inherently complex to define, the Scottish Government has acknowledged this trend and committed to supporting the most disadvantaged young people (Scottish Government, 2022c). However, contradictorily it was also acknowledged that SFLWs can be susceptible to cost-saving actions (Scottish Government, 2017).

While raising attainment and closing the attainment gap in Scotland remain high priority, national policies aimed at improving outcomes are increasingly challenged by declining resources (Torrance & Forde, 2017). Recent budget cuts, along with further announced reductions, threaten the supports available for our most vulnerable young people. This reduction stands in plain contrast to the growing need for support, given the sustained increase in the number of young people with additional support needs (Scottish Government, 2023, p. 17).

Following extensive consultation, the review *Support for Learning: All Our Children and All Their Potential*, (Scottish Government, 2020) points to the strategies employed, and their effectiveness in embedding the Additional Support for Learning Act, 2004 (Scottish Parliament, 2004). This Scottish Government 2020 review is a practical read and guide for any teaching professional looking to support young people with barriers to their learning and maximise effectiveness of SFLWs and their interventions. It is also a document that was, at times, overlooked, perhaps due to the timing of its launch and the post-Covid necessities that education establishments were grappling with. That said, Professor Ken Muir, who advocated for a comprehensive reform of the Scottish education system (Scottish Government, 2022b), endorsed the Scottish Government 2020 review while speaking at the 2022 conference of the professional association School Leaders Scotland. Guiding the audience to it for advice and practical assistance, Professor Muir cited the review of ASN as “one of the most important documents in recent times” (Muir, 2022).

The recommendations from the review (Scottish Government, 2020) are reflected in the key drivers and justification that underpinned the focus of the work with the SFLWs in this study. These are:

1. “Review the deployment of Pupil Support Assistants, which takes account of recommendations from the current national research Education Endowment Fund” (p. 22)
2. “The investment in Pupil Support Assistants must be measured for impact and improvement on children and young people’s experiences and achievements” (p. 22).
3. “The development of clear specifications for how classroom teacher and pupil support assistant roles interact and complement each other” (p. 45).

Work being undertaken by Education Scotland simultaneously with this study, involves rolling out the *Pupil Support Staff Engagement Programme* nationally (Education Scotland, 2022). This Scottish discussion focusses on the Pupil Support workforce, aiming to gather input from all stakeholders involved in aiding learners to influence future direction of the personnel involved. Additionally, it aims to devise a full learning and development programme while extending supportive measures (Ross, 2022). This investment must coincide with the deployment of SFLWs if they are to be empowered and be highly capable of working closely with young people who can, at times, present the most challenges. The role that SFLWs have in eliminating barriers to learning and consolidating the inclusive approach in classrooms is through the understanding they have for the learner they are working with (Scottish Government, 2020). Young people prefer the notion that their SFLWs have a knowledge of them as individuals therefore the support was implemented appropriately and received more readily (Scottish Government, 2020). Moreover, young people note that involvement in their planning to improve their attainment is something they also seek (Ross, 2022). SFLWs often feel that their sense of being valued is not reciprocated in ways beyond solely their wages, including aspects of their roles such as training and investment (Scottish Government, 2020).

It is clear, then, that effective management of SFLWs, whether by senior managers or principal teachers, is essential for their successful deployment (Basford et al., 2017). Equally, the seamless partnership between SFLWs and classroom teachers is what is desired to promote the positive impact of their work (Jardi et al., 2022). However, time is a significant barrier that can hinder meaningful planning and collaboration between class teachers and SFLWs in addressing learner needs. Wilson et al. (2003) emphasise this practical challenge, noting that the lack of time for planning leads to limitations in the support provided. It is apparent that amidst the political agenda of raising attainment regardless of socioeconomic factors, some practical fundamentals are lacking consideration, which would ultimately aid steerage and increased positive outcomes for young people who need it most. There are inherent difficulties in addressing these issues (Scottish Government, 2020).

Methodology and Method

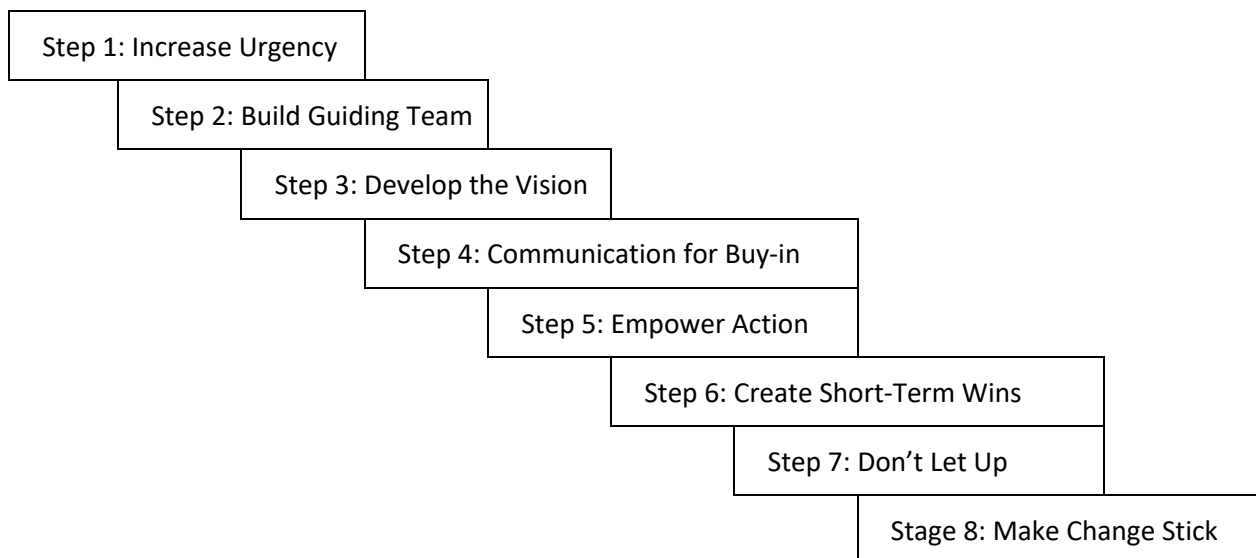
Kotter’s 8-Step Change Model (Kotter, 1996) was used for the strategic change initiative. First, this section outlines the steps in the model and how they were used. Second, this section goes on to describe and discuss the process of gathering feedback from all stakeholders.

Using Kotter’s 8-Step Change Model

The strategic change initiative used Kotter’s (1996) 8-step change model (Figure 1), which guided the planning steps and enabled a focussed approach in terms of the strategic direction and methods to be employed.

Figure 1

Kotter’s 8-Step Change Model (adapted)



Step 1 – Increase Urgency

A strategic plan was developed to monitor the progress of the strategic change initiative, outlining specific timelines and goals. Although the plan was designed with a focus on the initial stages, early feedback indicated that it was overly ambitious for the set timeframe. While Davies (2011) argues that a robust plan should span 3–5 years, I implemented short-term milestones so we could effectively evaluate the progress at key stages. This supported the notion of increased urgency.

Step 2 – Build Guiding Team

Sharing the initial vision and objectives with key personnel of the principal teachers (PTs) leading the teams of SFLWs. This would be the core guiding team for the strategic change initiative.

Step 3 – Develop the Vision

Working collaboratively with the PTs we continued to work on the plan and the vision for the change.

Step 4 – Communication for Buy-In

Communication and clarity were key in ensuring all SFLWs were aware of the methods being used, moreover the reasons for them being implemented. The PTs were part of this process. Sharing the vision with the senior leadership team (SLT) was part of this process so they were aware of the objective of the work being undertaken.

Step 5 - Empower Action

The review and gathering of feedback was the most significant undertaking of the strategic change initiative. The PTs were on board facilitating feedback sessions and questionnaires. As Davies (2011) highlights, it is important not to lose sight of the long-term objective while short-term outcomes are met. However, this also exemplifies the significance of the vision being put into action (Davies, 2011).

Step 6 – Create Short-Term Wins

The short-term goals provided a platform for reflecting on development and examining the evidence to support the progress made towards the change for improvement (Scottish Government, 2020). Kotter illustrates this as he argues that “short term wins” (Kotter, 1996, p. 126) allow the teams to recognise that the change is having an impact and that there is real meaning behind the intention. It was through Kotter’s (1996) model (Figure 1) that I was able to reflect and take meaningful measures towards the change. However, as Bush and Glover (2014) contend that sustaining long-term positive change is more difficult than applying short term solutions to problems, I was cognisant of keeping the sustainability of the changes in view.

Step 7 – Don’t Let Up

This involved the implementation stage of the systems being introduced to help monitor progress of interventions of support and review effectiveness. This required a level of determination and desire not to give up but to be mindful of the long-term objectives.

Step 8 – Make Change Stick

Making the change stick was a challenging aspect of long-term change and is an ongoing process.

Stakeholder Views and Capturing Perspectives: The Process of Gathering Feedback

In order to capture a wide range of perspectives, feedback was gathered from a range of stakeholders: PTs who lead the SFLW teams; the SFLWs in those teams; teaching staff who work alongside SFLWs; young people who have support through SFLWs; and the parents/carers of young people receiving support from SFLWs.

Initial Stages of Gathering Feedback

The first stages of the work undertaken in reviewing the deployment of SFLWs initially involved gathering the views of SFLWs, pupils who access support, and their parents/carers, and teaching staff. This was concurrent with Levin (2000) who highlights that learners' views would have most impact with parents/carers and teachers, particularly so where there is the notion of change.

The guidance offered through the EEF was referred to and the support materials were adjusted considering my current context (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020). This included sample questionnaires and a Guidance Report focused on achieving highly effective practice with SFLWs. These materials supported the creation of a baseline that served as a foundation, to underpin planning and next steps, and, especially, the measurement of the impact of support for young people accessing these supports (Scottish Government, 2020).

The questions across the questionnaires were largely the same, however separate versions were tailored for each group (staff, pupils, parents/carers) to ensure the questions were relevant to their specific roles, perspectives, and level of influence in the consultation process. All questionnaire responses remained anonymous because Grazulevicius et al (2021) indicate that this can facilitate a more honest response.

Feedback from Young People Who Have Support Through SFLWs

I was mindful that gathering pupil views can at times present challenges, particularly when personal experiences or views on a service offered by staff are being sought (Hume et al., 2011). However, in my school context and for the Support for Learning department it became an explicit area of strategic focus to be more deliberate and intentional regarding seeking pupil views on all decisions that affected them.

The importance of gathering pupil views has been at the fore of Scottish education since the early 2000's and particularly in view of *Curriculum for Excellence* introduced in 2004 (Scottish Government, 2004). More recently, the legal status of the UNCRC (Scottish Government, 2024b) provides a framework for policy and practice (Daniels, 2022). Nevertheless, young people with ASN "struggle" to have their voice heard (Scottish Government, 2020, p. 5, 2020, p. 133). Therefore, it was important to consider the challenges around gathering young people's views that would be of particular value for this area of focus.

While pupil feedback data is invaluable, one factor we must consider is our readiness for the honest views of the young people and how to act on the points they have raised (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018). This is supported by Education Scotland, who indicate the value of clarity with everyone involved about the changes being implemented as a result of consultation; this increases pupils' interest to be involved and participate in an honest manner (Education Scotland, 2018).

Florian et al. (2017) indicate that there can be frustrations around gathering meaningful views from young people, especially where ASN are evident, and they highlight the need to ensure the methods employed are appropriate. Bragg (2007) outlines several of the most effective methods of gathering views, claiming group formats can remove inhibitions and encourage sharing or prompt ideas. As such, I hosted the group format as a forum for feedback around similar themes as the questionnaires and used a flip chart to note feedback as it was received, allowing everyone to see the contributions made. It was this method that proved most beneficial in collating feedback from our learners.

Questionnaires were also created digitally on Microsoft Forms and completed by pupils. To ensure a fair representation, supports were put in place where necessary to allow full understanding of each question and completion of the evaluation (Florian et al., 2017).

Feedback from Parents and Carers of Young People Receiving Support from SFLWs

The Scottish Government 2020 review highlights that parents and carers are frustrated at the lack of opportunity to have their voices heard, arguing that their knowledge of their own child and what the child finds difficult is invaluable (Scottish Government, 2020). That said, when seeking parents' views for the strategic change initiative, the level of response from parents' and carers was fewer than anticipated and quite disappointing. Therefore, it was necessary to look at an alternative method to increase engagement.

Feedback from Support for Learning Workers (SFLWs)

The initial consultation with SFLWs involved a general reflection regarding meeting learners' needs in classrooms. They are present in many different curricular areas and supporting a number of different young people, so their view would be beneficial in creating a narrative for this purpose alone. This also provided a direct view on their perception of the working relationship between the classroom teacher which ultimately provides the foundation for effective collaboration (Sirkko et al., 2022). The second part of the consultation conducted with the SFLWs was based on self-reflection. The questionnaire asked them to identify their strengths and skills, and furthermore what type of barriers to learning did they think they were most skilled at assisting with. This information proved highly valuable, especially in later stages, as it enabled more effective assignment of SFLWs to support young people, ensuring their needs were more easily met. This is supported by the Scottish Government 2020 review, which emphasises that individuals working with young people with additional support needs must possess the appropriate skills to build the relationships necessary for providing effective support (Scottish Government, 2020).

Feedback from Teaching Staff who Work Alongside SFLWs

Class teachers who worked with SFLWs were specifically asked to return their questionnaire. The questions focussed on the teachers' understanding of the role of the SFLWs when supporting young people in their classes, giving valuable insight into their expectations of them.

Findings and Discussion

This section shares and discusses the key findings of the study.

Young People and Parents

Overall, positive experiences from young people were highlighted.

As indicated in the previous section, the response from parents/carers was somewhat disappointing, and a wider school focus around parental engagement with feedback and evaluations is a future priority.

SFLWs and Teachers

Key Findings

The consultation feedback from SFLWs and teachers produced the following key findings:

1. More time is required between SFLWs and teachers for feedback and planning for young people.
2. Further clarity of and collaboration on expectations between SFLWs and teachers is required.

The partnership between support staff and the class teacher is crucial to supporting young people in classes, and the findings are reflected through Maclver et al. (2018) who argue that being inclusive in schools requires collaboration between teachers and support staff. Furthermore, Sirkko et al. (2022) highlight that effective collaboration between teachers and school assistants requires careful planning and viewing them as a unified team.

Action Planning and Implications for Practice with SFLWs and Teachers

Creating time for the necessary or desired planning proved to be a challenge that could not be addressed at this stage of the strategic change initiative. Reaching a middle ground for the interim, SFLWs would have pupil profiles detailing their learning needs and suggested strategies readily accessible as part of their materials, available for reference when needed. This pertinent information is already shared with all staff on the digital platform for Pupil Support.

Following preliminary consultations, it became apparent among the SFLWs that there was an element of confusion surrounding what had been shared by their PTs in advance of the first planned meeting that I was to chair. There was a level of concern around the focus of the study and the rationale behind it, and views were that the focus was about the ineffectiveness of individual practice. It was necessary for the main objective of the plan and their anticipated involvement to be clarified, as Robinson et al. (2007) outline this as an essential aspect of effective leadership. It was also necessary to reassure the SFLW team and increase their trust in the purpose of the work being undertaken. Chapman (2018) argues that building and maintaining trusting relationships is key to the sustainability of proposed outcomes. This is also reflected in step 4 of Kotter's model for change (Kotter, 2013).

Furthermore, Robinson (2007) argues that leaders need to build trust with teachers who may have doubts about proposals being made. Sun and Leithwood (2012) assert that trust is a key aspect of leadership, and they further clarify that trust allows risks to be explored and meaningful collaboration to take place to find a suitable solution. While this is a desirable factor in leadership style, one should consider how to grow capacity which will increase confidence and support the sustainability of this new approach (Harris, 2010).

Over the course of this work being undertaken, time has been spent with the SFLWs to support their desire to be involved in this positive change and elicit a degree of commitment to the changes in view (Kotter, 2013). One would hope that the time spent with SFLWs as a team would support their feeling of being valued and their desire to work collaboratively. That said, their perceived value is a picture that will need to be addressed in the future and will take time, through encouraged collaboration. Sirkko et al. indicate that not being valued is a common concern amongst SFLWs (Sirkko et al., 2022). Fullan (2020) contends that spending time with stakeholders provides the opportunity of being aware of any resistance to proposals, as there are times we can learn more from those who disagree, through the challenges they present - those who disagree are not necessarily resistant to change; sometimes their arguments can be reasonable and practical therefore promoting further thought.

Moving to Step 5 – Empower Action

This section explores and discusses the action points that were defined to progress the strategic change initiative to the empowering action stage (step 5) of Kotter's model for change, in view of the feedback gathered.

It is worth noting that while Biesta (2010) highlights that evidence-based change is prolific and has its place relating to educational matters, he contends that sifting through what is found and aligning it to values should be at the core of decision making (Biesta, 2010).

A key aspect of my vision was a strong commitment to enhancing the perceived value and recognition of SFLWs, both among themselves and among the staff they work with.

I believe the following identified action points reflect this, as they keep the needs of young people at the core while also enhancing the SFLWs' sense of value and self-worth. The action points are:

1. Introduce SFLW teams to school community and redefine title of role.
2. Create staff and SFLWs' user-guide to support clarity of roles and expectations.
3. Further develop means for monitoring progress made through SFLWs' interventions with young people.

The focus of the strategic change initiative motivated the PTs to take a more direct role of leadership with the SFLWs as a result of the feeling of empowerment and the desire to work collaboratively. Harris (2010) emphasises that there is increased buy-in when there is a commonality of values and I believe this to be the case as the SFLWs value this practice for the benefit of the young people.

The PTs have offered suggestions and progressed with elements of the change of their own accord. For example, they have initiated regular meetings with their teams and reflected on the effectiveness of supports in the classroom setting. Training and development have always been a priority of the PTs and their desire to build capacity and skills is evident with the promotion of relevant CPD.

Research suggests that the sustainability of the main objectives could be upheld through work undertaken with the PTs. As Hamilton et al. (2018) argue, the buy in for leadership roles will be promoted through "professional learning pathways that reflect their role, career patterns and aspirations" (Hamilton et al., 2018, p. 3). Furthermore, developing collaborative practice between SFLWs, teachers and PTs as a means of sustainability, as Mifsud and Day (2023) claim, will support engagement and help sustain positive impact on a school community. Chapman (2018) argues that building and maintaining trusting relationships is key to the sustainability of proposed outcomes.

While relationships are a large factor in my leadership approach, it is worth considering how this can build capacity that will increase confidence and support the sustainability of the change and future succession planning in a way that is more effective than relying on one leader (Harris, 2010). Further, clarity of vision and communication are both key to sustainable capacity building (MacBeath et al., 2008). From this perspective, more regular communication has been established with the SFLW teams via email and in-person meetings. The PT now has a briefing for a group of SFLWs to meet at the start of each week to review key information about events and individuals. The reciprocal relationship of sharing information and seeking views or clarity regarding specific aspects of this change is moving towards being a natural part of their role.

Progress to Date

The action points identified from the research are underway with full involvement from the SFLWs and PTs:

1. Introduce SFLW teams to school community and redefine title of role:

- a. A digital *Introduction to the SFLWs* has been produced with pictures and names of all SFLW staff. This was printed in colour and shared with all staff for displaying on classroom walls.
 - b. The title of Support for Learning Worker was re-established for clarity of reference and role. The title of Pupil Support Assistant (PSA), was no longer in use.
2. Create staff and SFLWs' user-guide to support clarity of roles and expectations:
- a. I created a digital user-guide which is in place following discussion with the SFLWs.
 - b. These have been shared with the school community and have been well received, establishing this as a reference point for all involved with working with SFLWs. The simplicity of this introduction has had a significant impact on teacher awareness and increased understanding of roles. This would align with Kotter's model for change as step 6 highlights short term wins would be of value in implementing sustainable change (Kotter, 2013).
3. Further develop means for monitoring progress made through SFLWs' interventions with young people:
- a. An online and paper monitoring system has been established, and SFLWs are accessing this to record progress of young people they are supporting.
 - b. Some aspects of implementation were not smooth, in terms of access and confidence of staff using the system. However, with more attention paid to the use of the system, their fears were alleviated.
 - c. This system will need reviewed for refinement, to ensure its robust in detail and accuracy of records.

In Conclusion - Reflections on Leadership

When reviewing the progress made with this strategic change initiative, I am mindful that initial warnings indicated it was an ambitious undertaking, in a relatively short space of time. While I was aware of this, I continued with the same focus, making necessary adjustments and reviewing progress regularly. That said, the work is ongoing with next steps in place and necessary planning to support this. I reflect on the short-term wins and the necessary steps to continue the journey for continued positive change. In one view, Daresh (1991) sums up reflective practice well, when he details that effectiveness (in school leadership) can be found when attention is paid to thoughtful and considerate reflection. Furthermore, Baxter et al, (2021) highlight that through reflection, ongoing problem-solving is enabled. He also argues that this process should be central to the teaching profession.

Whether in my personal or professional endeavours, I consistently engage in self-reflection, always striving for improvement and seeking opportunities to enhance future outcomes. My past instances of reflection, earlier in my career, align with the findings of Saric and Steh (2017), who suggest that feedback may not always contribute positively to personal growth. Nevertheless, I continue to recognise the importance and significance of feedback in my professional development and with advancing ideas as where there is a willingness to learn, reflection can be productive (Saric & Steh, 2017).

I am confident that the efforts made thus far have already initiated positive transformation in addressing the needs of learners through the support offered by SFLWs. I have established a goal for further enhancement in this area, and I observe a consistent commitment among the staff team to collectively pursue this positive aim. I anticipate that this culture of collaboration fostered wherein

the concerted efforts of SFLWs combine with the class teachers, will enable young individuals to achieve their full potential.

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