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The School Improvement Partner a ‘critical friend’ to
strategic leaders in a Local Authority’s schools?

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CHESTER BUSINESS SCHOOL

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Abstract

This research project begins to address the gap in knowledge about the role of the School Improvement Partner. It considers the links between the external consultant, ‘critical friend’ and the School Improvement Partner. The findings of this research indicate that the School Improvement Partner role can be akin to a “critical friend” and that there is a match between factors of successful consultancy. The paper concludes suggesting further research to expand the knowledge base and inform the development of the School Improvement Partner role.

Declaration

This work is original and has not been submitted previously for any academic purpose. All secondary sources are acknowledged.

Signed: Malik Killen

Date: 1st June 2009

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Introduction

1.1 Background to the Research

The researcher is a Business Manager of a Local Authority, School Improvement Service and has been for some seven years. Prior to this he has a further fourteen years experience in various roles within a Local Education Authority and latterly a Children's Service predominantly within the field of business management and school improvement. His current role involves all business aspects relating to a broad portfolio of services to schools and children. In particular, the business aspects of providing school leadership with challenge and support and intervening where schools offer some cause for concern.

This research project is driven by both a personal interest in external consultancy and a business need to ensure the highest quality challenge and support (external consultancy) to school leadership teams whilst controlling costs. This is mirrored by the experience and expertise of the researcher.

The key role in providing challenge and support and gathering intelligence for the Local Authority is now performed by School Improvement Partners. However, this Local Authority has a long history of providing schools with the 'critical friend' role through their use of advisers/inspectors assigned to each school. The new School Improvement Partner role is determined by National Government and was introduced across England in September 2007, although this Local Authority joined a pilot of the role during the 2005-2006 academic year and was part of the subsequent evaluation by the National Federation of Educational Research.

The applicant's professional experience in both business management and education, coupled with several relevant modules from the Masters in Business Administration, particularly the Strategic Leadership and Marketing elements provide an excellent background to this research topic.

1.2 Research Question

The School Improvement Partner a ‘critical friend’ to strategic leaders in a Local Authority’s schools?

Aims of the investigation

- To review models of consultancy in the context of the critical friendship role.
- To investigate the opinions of head teachers and School Improvement Partners as to the effectiveness of the School Improvement Partner role as a ‘critical friend’.
- To compare and evaluate the role of external and internal School Improvement Partners.

1.3 Justification for the Research

This research project should go some way to address the gap in existing research. Swaffield (2007) supports the view of Halsey et al. (2005) that there is no published research on the School Improvement Partner role outside of the evaluation of the trial by National Federation of Educational Research (NFER).

Given that there are links between the ‘critical friend’ or the external adviser and improved leadership (Baker *et al.*, 1991; Cox, 1983; Fidler *et al.*, 1996; Fullan, 2001) it seems appropriate to investigate the role of the School Improvement Partner which is the Government’s ‘critical friend’ for schools. It should provide an opportunity to test some of the previously researched components of the ‘critical friend’ role and identify those that appear most relevant within this particular field.

1.4 Methodology

This research is undertaken within an interpretivist epistemology with the researcher already part of the organisation under study and aware of the issues and challenges

faced by those working in this field. Clearly the ontological stance of the researcher will be one of subjectivism. It is hoped that an ongoing awareness of this will moderate this somewhat.

This research will have deductive elements in terms of the literature review but will develop through the adoption of a grounded theory approach as the research moves into interview stage and hence will become more inductive. The literature review will underline the gap in current research and suggest a particular line of enquiry while the interviews will be analysed using coding methods discussed within grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992; Glaser, 1998).

The interviews will be a small (due to the limitations of the research in terms of time and only one researcher) purposive sample which reflects the diverse groups involved in school improvement such as gender, educational phase, internal or external School Improvement Partner, length of service, context of the school and pupil performance. The interviews will be semi-structured with a number of predetermined questions. However, the researcher will allow the interviews to move towards a more open nature if the data being imparted is particularly rich. The notes taken during the interviews will be analysed using coding and memoing that enables the core themes and issues to be captured. These themes can then be further analysed leading to emergent theories that can inform the outcomes of the literature review.

Triangulation will be provided by considering the views of two groups (head teachers and School improvement Partners) and the outcomes of the literature review. Interviews with the School Improvement Partners and head teachers both sides of the 'critical friendship' or the external consultant and the client should provide rich data that, with the use of some open questioning, should be reasonably straight forward to validate (Jack & Raturi, 2006).

1.5 Outline of the MBA Dissertation

Following this introductory chapter there will be a review of the literature which is aimed at critically evaluating the academic and governmental knowledge base. The focus of

this review will be the academic views of external consultancy or ‘critical friendship’ and the governmental guidance and reports on the School Improvement Partner role. In chapter three there will be a description of the methodology adopted for the research and a justification of the methods and their ethical considerations. The findings from the research will be presented in chapter four followed by conclusions and appropriate recommendations from those findings in chapter five.

1.6 Definitions

The *School Improvement Partner* is a role introduced by central government to act as a ‘critical friend’ to school leadership in an attempt to support and challenge schools to improve.

The School Improvement Partner *internal* to the Local Authority is a full-time permanent employee whereas an *external* School Improvement Partner is usually a serving or recently retired head teacher commission for an agreed fee to act as a School Improvement Partner to one or more schools.

1.7 Summary

This chapter has provided some indication as to the gap in current research which should begin to be addressed in later chapters. In the following chapter, a review of the academic and governmental literature will be undertaken. This will critically evaluate the knowledge base and inform both the research methods and the subsequent findings.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review will outline the context for this research project and consider the academic and governmental knowledge base that underpins the establishment of the School Improvement Partner role and broader theories and models related to the ‘critical friend’ role. It will move towards offering a conceptual framework that can be explored through primary research the findings from which will be detailed later in chapter four.

According to Swaffield (2005, page 43) “*The correlation between leadership and school effectiveness is well documented.*” Swaffield cites a number of other authors (Leithwood *et al.*, 1996; Sergiovanni, 2001; Silins & Mulford, 2002) to support this view. In addition, she highlights that the impact of “*external support for school leaders has a less solid research base*” although she does indicate that some research does suggest links between external advice and improved leadership such as Baker *et al.* (1991), Cox (1983), Fidler *et al.* (1996) and Fullan (2001).

Given that there are links between the ‘critical friend’ or the external adviser and improved leadership, although they are based on limited evidence, it seems appropriate to investigate the role of the School Improvement Partner which is the Government’s ‘critical friend’ for schools.

2.1.1 Critical Friend

It would seem appropriate, for this study, to agree a definition of the term ‘critical friend’ given that there are a plethora of definitions offered by academics such as Winkley (1985), Miles *et al.* (1988), McDonald (1989), Costa and Kallick (1993), Ross and Regan (1990), Ainscow and Southworth (1996), Stoll and Thomson (1996), Brighouse and Woods (1999), MacBeath *et al.* (2000) and Swaffield (2005). These authors highlight a number of themes in their definitions of the ‘critical friend’ which can be summarised to include:

- Trust or good relationships
- Understanding the context or knowledge of the institution/organisation
- Problem identifier/solver
- Advocate for success
- Challenging expectations
- Providing insight or informed critic

Using these themes a definition of the ‘critical friend’ for this study can be developed:

A ‘critical friend’ is a well-respected individual who brings a critical and well informed view to an organisation. This view is built on a good grasp of the context and a sound understanding of the issues that allows problems to be identified and challenges leaders in an effort to support their drive for success.

The themes underlying ‘critical friendship’ offered by academics and the definition suggested above align well with those of external consultancy as we will see later in this chapter

2.2 The School Improvement Partner

The School Improvement Partner role underpins the direction for school improvement outlined in the New Relationship with Schools (DfES, 2004). This strategic direction is centred on a desire to see significant improvements in educational outcomes to ensure future economic competitiveness. It demonstrates the completion of a circle of approaches to schools, by government, over the last four decades. MacBeath (2007, page 248) cites keynote lectures by the former government advisor Michael Barber. In these lectures he refers to the 1970’s as ‘*uninformed professionalism*’ or what you might describe as independence and light touch control. Education then moves in to a period of something akin to central command and control with the introduction of a national curriculum, prescribed testing of children and external inspection or ‘*uninformed prescription*’. The circle appears to have been closed with the latest round

of changes aimed at supporting schools to self-evaluate and freeing head teachers to modify the curriculum and personalise it to meet children's needs or '*informed professionalism*'.

It is important to put these changes and the proposed research topic in context. In England, the field of education is congested with policy changes and innovations. Since the introduction of autonomy and delegated budgets for schools via the Education Reform Act 1988 it seems there has been annual legislation to affect some new direction or requirement on schools. This is mirrored by changes to the work and relationships of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and schools. One of the most significant changes, since 1988, being the establishment of Ofsted to provide external inspections of schools and the publication of performance data in 1992. These changes according to Hiscock (1992, page 141) put "*the then LEA adviser in the role of policing central government initiatives*". Arguably, matters were further complicated with the introduction of a requirement for LEAs to monitor schools' standards, on top of the creation of the government's inspection service Ofsted. This new requirement was set in the context of the New Relationship with Schools in 2004 (DfES, 2004). Earlier in 2004, David Milliband, in a speech at the North of England Education Conference (8th January), discussed a new model for the interaction between schools and government and LEAs – "*every school is able to have a single conversation about its development priorities, its targets and support needs*". This single conversation was to be based on the school's own self-evaluation. This was shortly followed by the introduction of the pilot of the School Improvement Partner role in 2005-2006.

The School Improvement Partner role is defined in great detail in the DfES publication, A New Relationship with Schools – the School Improvement Partner's Brief – Advice and Guidance on the role of the School Improvement Partner (2006, page 3) "*A SIP provides professional challenge and support, helping leadership to evaluate performance, identify priorities for improvement, and plan effective change...*". The publication continues highlighting that the School Improvement Partner is the main means of communicating with schools about their improvement and that the "*guiding principles of the SIP's work are:*

- *focus on pupil progress and attainment across the ability range*

- *respect for the school's autonomy to plan its development...*
- *professional challenge and support, so that... performance are improved*
- *evidence-based assessment of the school's performance and its strategies for improving teaching and learning."*

The publication goes on to provide a detailed job description and guidance on accountability, quality assurance and professional development for School Improvement Partners.

The School Improvement Partner role was trialled as part of the New Relationship with Schools (DfES, 2004) during 2004-05. The subsequent evaluation commissioned by the DfES and compiled by the National Foundation for Educational Research highlighted that head teachers' view the role of the School Improvement Partner as a very positive experience. The authors added that "*head teachers consider a SIP to be more challenging and more of a critical friend...*" (Halsey *et al.*, 2005, page 27). Subsequently, the DfES National Strategies guidance (2006a, page 23) offered a summary of the planned School Improvement Partner interactions with schools in which they highlight that the relationship should be one of working together with the school's leadership. In addition, they suggest that challenge from School Improvement Partners should be through the use of insightful questions that enables school leaders to "*reflect on their practice and the priorities they have set...*". They continue adding that the outcomes of the challenge from School Improvement Partners should result in school leaders embarking on a "*path of school improvement that they may not otherwise have identified.*"

This summary of planned interactions and the guidance mentioned earlier seems to begin to define the School Improvement Partner role as that of a 'critical friend' or external consultant.

2.3 The 'critical friend' or external consultant role

When evaluating the role of the School Improvement Partner an assessment of the wider academic models and factors effecting the 'critical friend' or external consultant

role is appropriate. This section considers the range of academic analysis of the success factors and pitfalls for external consultants and draws together a consensus from the literature which will inform the research design in terms of interview questions and triangulation or validity.

A good starting point is to build on the work of Simon and Kumar (2001) that canvassed clients' views of strategic capabilities which lead to management consulting success. Subsequently they reviewed eight academic writers and summarised what their research suggested were factors leading to successful consultancy, see Table A below.

Table A

Strategic capabilities identified by clients as leading to management consulting success in the academic literature (Simon and Kumar, 2001 page 366)

Factor	Authors who mentioned factor
Client-consultant communication	Bobrow (1998), Bowers and Degler (1999), Czerniawska (1999), Ford (1979), Hegyi-Gioia (1999), Popovich (1995), Riley (1999)
Collaboration/involvement of client	Bowers and Degler (1999), Czerniawska (1999), Dowling (1993), Hegyi-Gioia (1999), Popovich (1995), Riley (1999)
Broad skill base	Bowers and Degler (1999), Czerniawska (1999), Dowling (1993), Ford (1979), Popovich (1995)
Technical knowledge	Bowers and Degler (1999), Czerniawska (1999), Dowling (1993), Ford (1979), Popovich (1995)
Defining (identifying) problems	Bobrow (1998), Bowers and Degler (1999), Ford (1979), Hegyi-Gioia (1999)
Integrity and honesty	Bobrow (1998), Bowers and Degler (1999), Hegyi-Gioia (1999), Ford (1979)
Ability to listen to/comprehend client	Bobrow (1998), Bowers and Degler (1999), Riley (1999)
Marketing	Bobrow (1998), Bowers and Degler (1999), Czerniawska (1999)

Setting reasonable expectations	Bobrow (1998), Ford (1979), Hegyi-Gioia (1999)
---------------------------------	--

This analysis could be further developed by considering a broader range of academic literature which in the next section of this literature review can be drawn together to produce a consensus view of factors that lead to successful consultancy. The broader range of authors and researchers are considered below. Such as the three consultancy models introduced by Schein (1988): customer-provider, patient-doctor and process consultation. These models focus on the varied relationship factors between consultant and client. Similarly, Nees and Grenier (1985) suggest five categories for consultants: The mental adventurer; the strategic navigator; the management physician; the system architect and the friendly co-pilot. Schein (1997) suggests the term ‘contact client’ to describe, what in this case would be the School Improvement Partner/head teacher critical friendship. The ‘contact client’ is one of six client categories he identifies which suggests that the critical friendship will involve more than one contact within the organisation i.e. not just the head teacher in a school. Schein’s suggestion of the complexity of the interaction between and organisation and the external consultant is supported to some extent by Canback (1999) who considered the trends in consultancy and concluded that there were four broad trends where consultants:

- frequently tackle critical, long term issues and are an important part of organisations intellectual resource
- add value by progressing content and process issues based on expertise, knowledge of methods and problems solving skills
- work with clients in a complicated and ever changing relationship based on a high degree of mutual trust; and
- are best placed as part of independent consultancy companies

Turner (1982) continues the theme to a slightly lesser extent in terms of the complexity of the relationship offering a hierarchy of eight categories of client-consultant relationships beginning with *providing information* to a client through making a

diagnosis and recommendations to client learning and permanent improvement. Similarly, Rynning (1992) suggests more than a dozen factors that contribute to successful consultancy ranging from: problem formulation and new knowledge to efficiency of execution, implementation and level of co-operational abilities. These factors are not incompatible with the factors identified by Simon and Kumar above.

According to McLachlin (1999) his own research and consideration of the wider literature suggests that the integrity of the consultant is a common theme. He concludes that there are particular personal characteristics that appear such as:

- *“motivation,*
- *ethics,*
- *objectivity,*
- *honesty,*
- *loyalty, and*
- *confidentiality (Margolis, 1985).”*

He goes further suggesting that this theme is expanded by other writers using slight variations in terminology such as *to put the client's needs first* or *a genuine desire to help and serve the interests of the client* (Kolb and Frohman, 1970; Saleh and Sarkar, 1973; Putman, 1985; Shenson, 1990) and seeing the client's world through the their eyes (Maister 1993).

Many writers highlight the need for the client to be actively engaged for consultancy to be successful including Akkermans (1995); Ginsberg (1986); Jang and Lee (1998); Kolb and Frohman (1970); Rynning (1992); Turner (1982). The notion of engagement is akin to the commitment to a project that Schein (1969) suggests and willingness to experiment supported by Schaffer (1997) and Turner (1982).

Similarly there are a number of authors who support the view that successful consultancy must be founded on clarity of expected outcomes between consult and client: (Armenakis and Burdgd, 1988; Ford, 1985; Kellogg, 1984; Kolb and Frohman, 1970; Shenson, 1990; Turner, 1982). While it is important to have clear expectations

managing them is important. McLachlin (1999) cites Armenakis and Burdick (1988); Nees and Greiner (1985); Payne (1986) and Shapiro *et al.*, (1993) arguing that “*the client must maintain responsibility for the consulting engagement*” (page, 397). He notes that Mitchell (1994) highlights the need for clients to retain that responsibility even if the outcome is unsatisfactory and that O'Shea and Madigan (1997) offer a reminder that the clients retain responsibility for the business after the consultancy.

Concluding McLachlin (1999, pages 398/399) highlights that even if all the factors suggested by all the academic knowledge detailed above are adhered to “*consulting engagements could still fail simply because of a poor fit*”. He reminds us that too often the client is aware of the organisation’s shortcomings but is unclear about what consultant support is best matched to solve the problem or has not diagnosed the problem with sufficient clarity. Either way this might lead to recruiting a consultant that does not fit the actual need.

Costa and Kallick (1993) cite Senge (1990) when they suggest that the role of ‘critical friend’ assists learning organisations in gaining appropriate feedback. They go on to offer guidance as to the attributes and components of the critical friend:

- Someone that while being trusted asks probing questions
- Analyses data and offers an assessment of performance
- Someone that understands the context of the work and the expected outcomes

Finally they suggest that the critical friend should be an “*advocate for the success of that work*” (page 50). There are many other suggestions as to the component elements of the ‘critical friend’ from authors such as Brighthouse and Woods (1999), McDonald (1989) and Stoll and Thomson (1996) they tend to introduce the notions of challenge, identifying issues and supporting improvement.

Hofstede (1980) introduces the cultural aspects of any relationship which for the purposes of this research may be particularly important given one might expect a different cultural dimension between internal and external School Improvement Partners. A number of other authors highlight the need for compatibility between the

client and consultant in terms of personal relationships such as Margolis (1985) discussing the importance of the belief systems and Shenson (1990) focussing on the match of personality style with Mitchell in (1994) highlighting the chemistry required.

These themes or factors that researchers suggest should inform successful external consultancy implicitly suggest their absence form the basis of a series of shortcomings or pitfalls that ought to be avoided. A number of authors explicitly highlight such pitfalls. Schaffer (1997) outlines five flaws to avoid around themes such as consultant expertise, scope, a single solution, absence of partnership and relying too heavily on the consultant. Similarly, three negative models of consultancy are offered by Carucci and Tetenbaum (2000) they suggest consultants can act as the messiah, the dependency-builder, and the colluder. They argue that these roles appear when the consultants are not motivated by meeting the client's needs but their own self-interest.

More generally, Harste and Richter (2008) argue that much of the academic literature relating to consultancy is from a supply-side stance. They went on to research how managers perceived the contribution of external consultants and highlight the need to judge the effectiveness of consultants from both sides of the interaction, namely supply and demand. They concluded that managers perceive consultants as generally helpful but less so in relation to strategic initiatives.

Hughes *et al.*, (2007) researched attitudes and experiences of local government officers to external consultancy. They concluded that officers were uncertain as to the contribution consultants had made when acting in an advisory capacity. Officers did offer the researchers views about the style of approach external consultants should use.

This literature review has drawn from a wide range of authors who have researched both the supply and demand side to external consultancy. They offer factors for success, pitfalls to avoid and in the next section the basis for testing if Swaffield (2007, page 217) is correct to suggest the School Improvement Partner can not be described as a 'critical friend'.

2.4 Conceptual Model

Summarising the literature review above and extending the breadth of the work of Simon and Kumar (2001) the table B below combines the themes and conclusions identified by a broader range of writers on consultancy. This offers some insight into the factors that appear to contribute to successful consultancy or features which are key to the success of critical friend role.

Table B adapted from (Simon and Kumar, 2001 page 366). *Strategic capabilities identified by clients as leading to management consulting success in the academic literature*

Factor	Authors who mentioned factor cited by Simon and Kumar (2001)	Themes from a broader range of writers
Client-consultant communication or developing strong relationship	Bobrow (1998), Bowers and Degler (1999), Czerniawska (1999), Ford (1979), Hegyi-Gioia (1999), Popovich (1995), Riley (1999)	Rynning (1992), Canback (1999), McLachlin (1999), Saleh and Sarkar (1973), Putman (1985), Shenson (1990), Akkermans (1995), Ginsberg (1986), Jang and Lee (1998), Kolb and Frohman (1970), Turner (1982), Schein (1969)
Collaboration/ involvement of client	Bowers and Degler (1999), Czerniawska (1999), Dowling (1993), Hegyi-Gioia (1999), Popovich (1995), Riley (1999)	Rynning (1992), Canback (1999), McLachlin (1999), Kolb and Frohman (1970), Akkermans (1995), Ginsberg (1986), Jang and Lee (1998), Turner (1982), Schein (1969)
Broad skill base or experience	Bowers and Degler (1999), Czerniawska (1999), Dowling (1993), Ford (1979), Popovich (1995)	Rynning (1992), Canback (1999)
Technical knowledge or the skills to understand the issues and potential solutions	Bowers and Degler (1999), Czerniawska (1999), Dowling (1993), Ford (1979), Popovich (1995)	Rynning (1992), Canback (1999)
Defining (identifying) problems	Bobrow (1998), Bowers and Degler (1999), Ford (1979), Hegyi-Gioia (1999)	Rynning (1992), Canback (1999), Costa and Kallick (1993), Senge (1990)
Integrity and honesty	Bobrow (1998), Bowers and Degler (1999), Hegyi-Gioia (1999), Ford (1979)	Rynning (1992), Canback (1999), McLachlin (1999), Kolb and Frohman (1970), Saleh and Sarkar (1973), Putman (1985), Shenson (1990), Costa and Kallick (1993), Senge (1990)
Ability to listen to/comprehend client	Bobrow (1998), Bowers and Degler (1999), Riley (1999)	Rynning (1992), McLachlin (1999), Kolb and Frohman (1970), Saleh and Sarkar (1973), Putman (1985), Shenson (1990), Akkermans (1995), Ginsberg (1986), Jang and Lee (1998), Turner (1982), Schein (1969)
Marketing	Bobrow (1998), Bowers and Degler (1999), Czerniawska (1999)	Rynning (1992)
Setting reasonable expectations and managing them	Bobrow (1998), Ford (1979), Hegyi-Gioia (1999)	Rynning (1992), Armenakis and Burdug (1988), Ford (1985), Kellogg (1984), Kolb and Frohman (1970), Shenson (1990), Turner (1982), Costa and Kallick (1993), Senge (1990)

Conversely these authors explicitly and implicitly suggest that the absence of these themes or elements results in a counter list of the pitfalls to be avoided (see table C, below) in external or management consultancy.

Table C – Pitfalls to be avoided in external consultancy

Unclear or limited communication
Didactic or consultant led consultancy
Applying a narrow skill set to complex issues
Generalist experience or a lack of technical knowledge
Lack of awareness of all the problems
Consultancy driven by self-centred factors
Misunderstanding the client and their needs
Unrealistic expectations of the consultancy

The literature review above and the analysis it contains identifies factors and themes for successful consultancy together with the elements to be avoided. These will be explored and contrasted with the guidance in the School Improvement Partner handbook.

The DfES publication, *A New Relationship with Schools – the School Improvement Partner’s Brief – Advice and Guidance on the role of the School Improvement Partner* (2006), as mentioned earlier, provides much detail about the School Improvement Partner role. Specifically (in Annex A) it includes a job description, main accountabilities and person specification highlighting, amongst other factors, the following:

- act as a critical professional friend, helping leadership to evaluate their schools' performance, identify priorities for improvement and plan effective change;
- help build the schools' capacity to improve pupils' achievement
- contribute to whole-school improvement
- provide challenge and support for the senior leadership team;

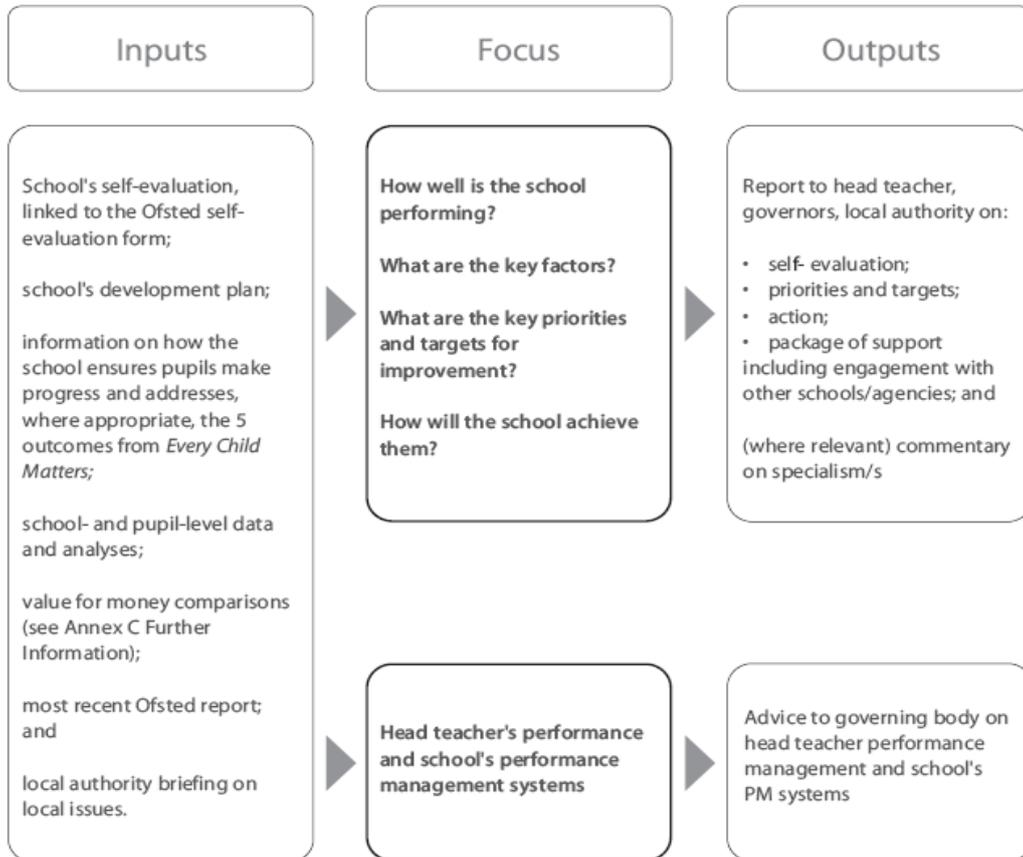
- provide information to governors on their schools' performance and development;
- report the outcomes of the dialogue with the school to the school's governing body;
- provide advice and guidance to the governing body to inform the performance management of the head teacher.

These factors sit within the “*common core*” (see diagram 1, below) of the School Improvement Partner role which is explained diagrammatically on page 5 of the DfES publication, *A New Relationship with Schools – the School Improvement Partner’s Brief – Advice and Guidance on the role of the School Improvement Partner* (2006):

“The school improvement partner will have a limited number of exchanges with the school's leadership about how well the school is serving its pupils and how the school needs to improve.”

Diagram 1 Common Core of the School Improvement Partner Role

These exchanges will vary from school to school, but will have a common core:



The School Improvement Partner guidance clearly includes factors or themes that form part of those that academics believe to be necessary for successful consultancy such as:

- technical knowledge (need to analysis school data)
- broad skill base (range of school leadership knowledge required to be a School Improvement Partner)
- the ability to listen and comprehend (provide guidance on support and whole-school improvement)

These elements of the School Improvement Partner role all feature large in the DfES publication, *A New Relationship with Schools – the School Improvement Partner’s Brief – Advice and Guidance on the role of the School Improvement Partner* (2006). However, the guidance is less clear about how the School Improvement Partner might avoid some of the pitfalls highlighted implicitly or otherwise by a wide range of authors. In particular issues around communication, setting reasonable expectations and avoiding being consultant led receive little if any attention.

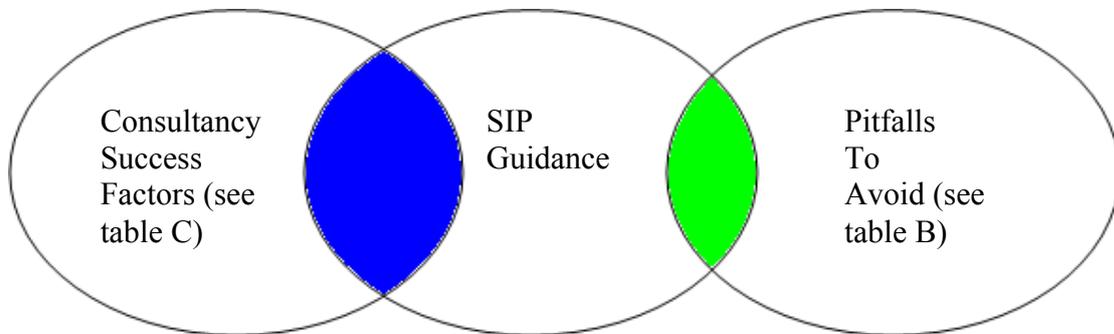
The School Improvement Partner role is a key function in the provision of external advice to school leaders and as indicated at the beginning of this literature review the link between external advice and improving leadership has been researched but more evidence would be useful.

This then provides an opportunity to develop a conceptual model that can be tested through later research via interviews with both the supply (School Improvement Partner) and demand side (head teacher). The literature review has provided details of the factors for successful consultancy and pitfalls to avoid. These have been considered against the guidance to School Improvement Partners and schools about the role.

Diagram 2 (below) suggests a model that describes the School Improvement Partner role in terms of the guidance provided by the government and the analysis of the literature earlier in this review. The diagram shows that the guidance published by the

government for the School Improvement Partner role contains elements that fit within ‘consultancy success factors’ such as technical skills and broad skill base, reflected by the blue shaded area. However, a number of the factors outlined earlier are missing such as relationship development. The green shaded area indicates that the School Improvement Partner guidance includes elements that appear as ‘pitfalls to avoid’ such as contributing to the performance management of the client, although many of the pitfalls are not present in the guidance.

Diagram 2 – Model of School Improvement Partner Role based on Government Guidance set against Academic Literature



The research detailed later in this dissertation will test this analysis and offer an insight into how in practice School Improvement Partners are implementing their role. This research should have a number of possible outcomes in terms of the model suggested above in diagram 2, above. Either the model will remain the same as the guidance is rigidly followed by the School Improvement Partners, or the size of the shaded areas will alter depending on the extent to which the pitfalls are avoided, if at all and whether there are more or fewer of the success factors in evidence. The research detailed later in this dissertation will test this assumption and offer an insight into how in practice School Improvement Partners are implementing their role.

2.5 Summary

Swaffield’s (2007) strong sentiments, that the School Improvement Partner role as defined by government can not be described as a ‘critical friend’ detailed earlier, sit against the literature review above which suggests that there are elements of ‘critical

friendship' in the School Improvement Partner model. This research should begin to address the gap in available research outlined by Swaffield (2007) and Halsey *et al.*, (2005). It should provide an opportunity to test some of the previously identified components of the 'critical friend' role and confirm or otherwise the relative position of the School Improvement Partner role within the conceptual model in diagram 1 above.

Before the findings of this research are presented the following chapter provides a detailed discussion of the methodology, methods and research procedures adopted.

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this third chapter there will be an outline of the philosophy and principles adopted for this research project. A detailed discussion of the chosen methods and procedures will follow which should inform the presentation of the research findings in chapter four and provide sufficient clarity to affirm subsequent conclusions and support any future research. There will be a justification of the selected methodology and a critical evaluation of the reasons for those that were rejected. Latterly, there will be a discussion of the ethical issues faced by the researcher and the steps taken to mitigate the risks or address the issues.

3.2 Research Philosophy and Strategy

This research is based on an interpretivist epistemology accepting the assumption that it is necessary to understand the differences between research involving human beings rather than objects or things. This study is to some extent exploring an emerging topic in that the School Improvement Partner role is relatively new and there is little published research this therefore lends itself to an interpretative approach. It is central to the interpretivist epistemology that researchers are empathetic to the people that are the subject of the research, that the issues being studied are seen through their eyes (Saunders *et al.*, 2007).

Goulding (1998, page 53) suggests that the context of any research will impact on the balance between theory and value laden investigation. While the researcher, in this case, will bring a theoretical insight based on the literature review in chapter two, they will also draw on their background and personal stand point. Goulding highlights the need to consider that researchers will have “*their own personal paradigm... which will largely dictate ontological and epistemological underpinnings*”.

The approach taken here is, as will be described later, broadly based on grounded theory. First presented by Glasser and Strauss in 1967, grounded theory offers the

researcher a means by which qualitative methods can be used to develop theory. Jarratt (1996) suggests that while qualitative methods can be more intrusive than quantitative techniques they are more suited to research that is exploratory in nature. Given the limited amount of published academic work on the role of the School Improvement Partner this study will be exploring this emerging role and therefore lends itself to qualitative methods. Grounded theory provides the opportunity for the use of multiple data sources (Goulding, 1998). In this study, this is particularly helpful given the mix of literature review and semi-structured/open interviews adopted as the research methods.

Grounded theory goes some way to address the perceived strengths of quantitative methods and the shortcomings of qualitative approaches. It has developed as a qualitative method which adopted some of the strengths of quantitative methods while retaining the qualitative interpretive approaches. In the four decades since its inception Glaser and Strauss have developed differing views on their theory. While both views assume similar research processes the differences appear in their application. In 1978, Glaser wrote *Theoretical Sensitivity* which further developed the themes published in 1967. In 1987, Strauss produced *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* this was a departure from the 1967 work. In 1990, Strauss and Corbin produced *Basics of Qualitative Research* this was an attempt to offer a more simplistic, easy to use version of Strauss' approach. In 1992, Glaser responded to Strauss and Corbin with *Emergence vs. Forcing: Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis* which was a vehement argument against Strauss in which he suggested that Strauss had developed a new method, rather enhancing grounded theory. This led in effect to the introduction of two schools the Straussian and the Glaserian of grounded theory (Stern, 1994).

The Straussian view is centred on a rigid and intricate set of processes for coding data whereas Glaser advocated a less strict adherence to complex coding systems (Goulding, 1998). Both schools agree that the developed theory should be parsimonious and true to the data. This research adopts an approach near to the Straussian end of the grounded theory continuum.

A more traditional view of the differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches is captured by Coolican (1990, page 36) stating that “‘Quantification’

means to measure on some numerical basis.... Whenever we count or categorise we quantify. ... A qualitative approach, by contrast, emphasises meanings, experiences ... descriptions... ”.

While grounded theory is designed to allow the researcher to establish a theory based on the core theme(s) that are emerging from the data. Saunders *et al.*, (2007) suggest that it can be adopted “*as a strategy*” (page, 499) and this allows the processes to be less formal or procedure driven while remaining “*systematic and rigorous*”. Given the time and resources (a single researcher with a small study group) available for this project a *less formal* strategy has been adopted. Creswell (2003) suggests that researchers adopting a qualitative approach should complete their data analysis using codes that group the data around topics that:

- you might expect to find
- are surprising
- concentrate on a more significant theoretical perspective.

Given the researcher is to some extent embedded in the project, an employee of the organization being studied with managerial responsibilities for some of the desired outcomes then Creswell’s suggested approach seems advisable.

Robson (2002) suggests that in-depth interviews are particularly helpful for research that can be described as exploratory. These interviews (semi-structured in this study) offer the opportunity to “*seek new insights*” (page, 59) in to the research topic. Data from semi-structured interviews and surveys can also be quantified while allowing the researcher the scope to capture all relevant data without trying to predict all the categories that might populate such interviews.

This research aims to compare more than one view of the situation, thereby enabling responses from different sources to confirm and develop understanding of the situation. This strategy of ‘triangulation’ provides more support for the subsequent arguments and recommendations. Jack and Raturi (2006, page 347) suggest that triangulation offers the

researcher the opportunity to validate their findings and '*overcome intrinsic biases arising from single method studies*'.

A number of academic writers support the view that qualitative research can provide rich and informative data that is of interest to both management practitioners and researchers (Boje, 2001; Crompton and Jones, 1988; Prasad and Prasad, 2002; Reason and Rowan, 1981; Van Maanen, 1979). Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue that some of the benefits of qualitative data are that it can allow the researcher to understand complicated and difficult to interpret events. To ensure that the data collected captures these suggested benefits the size of the samples will be determined by the need to be truly representative of the wider population of School Improvement Partners and head teachers.

Internal validity is one of the most important aspects of research design and refers to the degree of internal consistency. As the samples taken will be small it is important that they reflect as many of the variables as possible that might impact on the School Improvement Partner role: phase, success of the school, head teacher's gender and length of service, whether the School Improvement Partner is internal or external to the Local Authority. The degree of match between a sample and a population represents the external validity. Higher levels of external validity indicate stronger links between a sample and the population. Without internal validity you cannot have external validity.

Although great care will be taken to ensure that the methods are reliable; it is not always the case that they will give you true or 'valid' data. During the interviews with head teachers and School Improvement Partners, the interviewee might try to please the interviewer by giving acceptable rather than honest answers. This may be a particular danger given the role of researcher within the organisation under scrutiny. Steps have been taken to limit the risk of the researcher's position in the organisation impacting on the response from participants. Hosting interviews at the participants' place of work, providing a confidentiality clause and allowing participants to withdraw at any time together with providing participants with copies of the notes from interviews for their approval should alleviate some of the risks. Wright (1996, page 63) suggests that taking interview notes rather than tape recordings can help reduce concerns about confidentiality

and suggests that “*their inclusion would have compromised the flow of information from the respondents.*”

3.2.1 Justification for the selected paradigm and methodology

This research is set within an interpretive paradigm which centres on the need to make some sense of the School Improvement Partner role and explain the apparent contradictions outlined in the literature review in chapter two. A grounded theory based approach has been adopted as it allows the researcher to use multiple data sources such as published materials both academic in nature and specific to the discipline (in this case School Improvement Partners), observations of behaviour and interviews (Goulding, 1998). Jones and Noble (2007) suggest that grounded theory offers the researcher three benefits:

- It supports the development of new theory or provides an opportunity for a fresh look at established theory
- It allows the development of theory that is relevant and interesting to practitioners
- It can provide insights into complex processes.

Saunders *et al.*, (2007, page 493) suggest that inductively-based methods allow the researcher, through avoiding a predetermined theory to “*search for the recognised meanings in the data and to understand the social context and perceptions of your research participants*”. The initial search of the data for this project was the literature review which led to the conceptual model of the School Improvement Partner role described in chapter two. Chapters four and five while detailing the findings and their analysis support the methods adopted. The key factor in selecting a methodology based in grounded theory was that the researcher of this project could not ignore the fact that he had significant knowledge of the subject matter and a role in the management of the organisation. The research therefore had to be “*grounded in reality*” (Saunders *et al.*, 2007, page 492). This is supported to some extent by O’Callaghan (1996) suggesting

that the researcher should have, amongst other things some personal experience and an awareness of the main issues under research.

3.2.2 Rejected methods

Grounded theory, as a strategy (Saunders *et al.*, 2007), has been adopted for this research. This then rules out deductive approaches such as quantitative methods which depend on logic and tend not to rely on the researcher's experience or observations.

Positivism was rejected as a philosophical position as it follows a more traditional scientific approach to "*developing knowledge, research strategies, methods and interpreting results*" (Hines 2000, page 8), with the research design being more likely to be observed in a laboratory and qualitative methods to assess the subsequent data.

Probability sampling (including simple random, stratified and cluster sampling) was rejected as a method of selecting interviewees as these samples are best suited to surveys or more experimental research. Purposive sampling was adopted allowing the researcher to select the individuals to be interviewed based on the belief that they would provide rich data for the project. The use of case studies was also rejected as with limited research resources and time it would not be possible to complete sufficient studies to reflect the range of contextual factors within the research project. For similar reasons (time and a single researcher) a longitudinal study was ruled out.

A qualitative case study research methodology was considered for this project. However, it was felt that while the School Improvement Partner role could be considered as one case in reality each interaction between head teacher and School Improvement Partner was a case in itself. Anaf *et al.*, (2007, page 1310) suggest that multiple case studies usually have "*a goal of replication and generalization*" which is not necessarily the aim of this research project. While the case study does offer the opportunity of in depth study of complex situations (Stake, 2003) the use of an adapted grounded theory approach provides similar advantages yet acknowledges the extent of the researcher's professional involvement in the activity under examination.

Surveys and focus groups were considered as a means of extending the breadth (increasing the sample size) of the School Improvement Partners and head teachers' views captured by the research. These methods were rejected as Hines (2000) suggests it can be difficult to discuss sensitive issues in a group. Also, in the case of head teachers there is a statutory duty on Local Authorities to limit the administrative burden on schools and head teachers, in effect ruling out the possibility of issuing a survey or holding focus groups. Similarly, many of the School Improvement Partners are serving head teachers and subject to the same regulation. Focus groups with School Improvement Partners were rejected on the grounds of confidentiality. The nature of the questions would be such that securing open, honest and answers based on considered reflection could be comprised (Hines, 2000). In addition, both these methods may well have slanted the sample in such a way as to unbalance the data towards one particular group or context. For example, it is likely that Local Authority officers would more readily respond to survey or focus group requests from a colleague officer (the researcher) than head teachers.

Semi-structured interviews were adopted for this research as the most suitable to elicit rich and informative data. Structured interviews were rejected as they often fall short when assessing the emotional dimension (Converse and Schuman, 1974). Unstructured interviews might provide a larger breadth of information however in practice they are very rare. Almost all interviews have some structure however, any attempt at an unstructured approach for this research was ruled out on the grounds that the resulting data from a small sample of interviews would be very difficult to code and analyse (Ratcliffe, 2002). A further consideration was that the researcher had prior knowledge of the subject matter making the maintenance of an unstructured approach at best challenging during the interview.

3.3 Research design

Qualitative research techniques often provide extremely rich data but they can be time-consuming. With this in mind it was decided to limit the number of interviews while allowing, when appropriate, the interviews to become more open in nature rather than religiously sticking to the predetermined questions. This approach is supported by Saunders *et al.*, (2007) arguing that the extent of the sample is countered by the quality

of the data collected and its analysis. In this way the subsequent data should capture all the rich content. Given this, outside of the literature review the research consisted of two stages:-

- Semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of head teachers to include a range of phase (primary or secondary schools), experience in post(s), gender, socio-economic factors, size of establishment and success relative to the school's context in terms of pupil attainment and attendance.
- Similar interviews with School Improvement Partners internal and external to the Local Authority, taking into consideration factors such as gender, length of service and phase and breadth of experience.

Ratcliffe (2002, page 20) suggests that qualitative researchers use interviews not just to gather data but to serve as *“active interventions...leading to negotiated contextually-based results, examining the ‘how’ and ‘why’ as well as the ‘what’”*. Bennett *et al.*, (1994) argue that purposive samples enable the researcher to use their judgement of what is typical to determine a sample that meets the specific needs of the research. Grounded theory as previously described has an elaborate set of coding processes. Clearly the resources available here do not allow for such a complex analysis however the underlying philosophy is retained within the adopted design.

Coding in qualitative research is one method of examining information from interview notes and looking to similarities and differences. These can then be labelled and placed in groups or categories ready for further analysis. Initially, open coding was chosen to determine the core themes from the data. This was followed by the use of axial coding that allows for the core themes to be examined more closely and determine any links between the core themes. In this research factors such as the context of the school and its impact on the head teacher, whether the School Improvement Partner was external or internal to the Local Authority and extent of the participants school improvement experience were some of the contextual factors to be considered when linking the core themes.

3.4 Research procedures

The primary research element of the project was undertaken during the spring of 2009. Some twelve participants were approached to become involved in the project. They were provided with a copy of the research proposal which had received approval for the university and invited to express their interest in becoming involved in the process. Eight of the original twelve expressed an interest however two participants were not able to be involved at the point of interview: one for personal reasons and the other had changed role.

Prior to the interviews consent forms were signed by both parties and confidential nature of the interview was confirmed (Fisher, 2007). The interviews were scheduled for two hours each with several days between each interview to allow the researcher to complete a full set of notes while the data was fresh. All the interviews took place at the participant's workplace during the working day.

The range of contextual factors covered included views from both a primary and secondary school: a primary school facing challenging contextual circumstances with poor academic attainment, low attendance, pupils drawn from a poor socio-economic area of the City; and a secondary school with above national average pupil attainment and drawing its intake from a reasonably affluent area. School Improvement Partners working in both phases and internal and external to the Local Authority were also included in the sample. In addition, there was an equal balance in terms of the gender of the participants and a range of school improvement experience from a recently recruited School Improvement Partner and a head teacher in his second year of headship to well established and experienced post holders.

The predetermined interview questions were designed to be open to encourage a full and rich input from the interviewees. The questions (see appendix C) were premised around the conceptual model described in chapter two. The aim was to test whether the pitfalls present in the guidance for the School Improvement Partner role and the absent success factors were reflected in reality. This would lead to data that could inform any conclusion about whether the School Improvement Partner role could be described as a 'critical friend' or not as Swaffield (2007) argues.

The notes from the interviews were open coded, the following day, to highlight the core themes emerging from the data. Strauss (1987) recommends that the coding of data should occur as soon as possible after the interview. A process of axial coding where these themes were compared to seek out links or contradictions was then completed. During this process memoing was used to highlight key phrases or quotes that reinforced the emerging themes and might inform subsequent conclusions. Glaser (1998, page 178) suggests memoing has as its goal the capturing of “*meanings and ideas for one’s growing theory*”.

3.5 Ethical considerations

In any research, there may be issues of confidentiality, in this case particularly in relation to the interviewees. In terms of ethics in the final published results all the names of individuals and organisations have been removed. As Nias (1988, page 10) points out, “*To subject professional practice... to systematic enquiry and to share the results of this scrutiny with a wider audience..... is to open oneself and one’s colleagues to self-doubt and criticism*”.

Given the nature of the research, in that those subject to interview gain their livelihoods from the organisation under study and the questions faced were centred in some ways about the success of their role then, it was important to provide written consent and confidentiality agreements to all those that took part (Fisher, 2007). This consent and confidentiality form (see appendix A) offered all of the participants the right to withdraw from the process or decline to answer any question. The form also confirmed that the interview discussions were confidential and that no comment would be attributed to any individual. In addition, reassurance was provided at the start of each interview that no other Local Authority officer would be made aware of the nature of the sample of School Improvement Partners or head teachers involved in the research.

Finally, consideration has to be given to the need to remain objective when recording the content of the interviews and subsequent analysis of the data. It is important to ensure that outcomes were noted in their reality rather than trying to impose what the researcher might

feel ought to be present. The nature of the findings and conclusions drawn outlined in the following chapters go some way to confirm this was achieved during the research.

3.6 Summary

The chosen research methodology, methods and procedures are interpretivist and grounded theory has been adopted as a strategy (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). No attempt has been made to slavishly implement a grounded theory approach in its pure form due to limitations of time and one being a single researcher. This is not to say that the research does not seek rich informative data that can build on the conceptual framework outlined in chapter two.

The next chapter details the findings from the research processes detail above and is followed by conclusions draw from the findings and the earlier literature review.

4 Presentation of Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a description of the findings from the research including an analysis of the samples chosen for interviews and the main themes from the semi-structured interviews conducted during February and March of 2009. The main categories emerged from a process of open coding. Axial coding was used to filter these categories arriving at the main themes described later in this chapter. Memoing was used to capture particularly rich, surprising or contradictory data and highlight appropriate quotations. Selections from the interview notes together with some quotes from interviewees are used to provide insights into the context and essence of the responses.

4.2 Analysis of respondents

The interview questions were open in nature and designed to provide rich data that would address the following aims of the research:

- To investigate the opinions of head teachers and School Improvement Partners as to the effectiveness of the School Improvement Partner role as a ‘critical friend’.
- To compare and evaluate the role of external and internal School Improvement Partners.

The questions were open in nature with the intention of capturing the fullest possible responses. The interviews were conducted with three head teachers and three School Improvement Partners. The tables D and E, below, provide details of the range of contextual factors covered by this sample for head teachers and School Improvement Partners respectively.

Table D – Head Teacher Sample Analysis

	Head Teacher A	Head Teacher B	Head Teacher C
Phase	Primary	Secondary	Primary
Gender	Female	Male	Male
Length of Service	2 years	4 years	9 years in two schools
School Location	Affluent Suburb	Reasonably Affluent Suburb	Deprived Suburb
Performance	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory
Socio-economic context of the pupils	Middle class	Lower Middle Class	Lower Working Class
Attendance	Average	Average	Low
Attainment	Well above average	Above Average	Well below average

Table E – School Improvement Partner Sample Analysis

	School Improvement Partner One	School Improvement Partner Two	School Improvement Partner Three
Phase	Primary	Primary	Secondary
Gender	Female	Female	Male
School Improvement Experience	5 years as both head teacher and latterly School Improvement Partner	Less than one year as a School Improvement Partner. Three years as a current serving head teacher	8 years as a head teacher some years ago and subsequently as an Local Authority School Adviser and then School Improvement Partner
Internal or External	Internal	External	Internal

The range of contextual factors covered is extensive and reflects both the profiles of the School Improvement Partners employed by the Local Authority and its schools. The proportion of internal School Improvement Partners to external is approaching 3:1.

The original intention, therefore, was to interview three internal and one external School Improvement Partners however an internal School Improvement Partner had to withdraw due to personal reasons.

The head teacher sample again reflects the distribution of the Local Authority's schools in terms of phase: 125 primary schools as opposed to 31 secondary schools. One of the primary head teachers that had agreed to take part had to withdraw following her successful appointment to a new post.

The samples show a mix of gender and experience of head teachers and School Improvement Partners. Schools reflect a mix of pupil performance both academic and in terms of attendance, socio-economic circumstances and location.

4.3 Findings from the Interviews

The interview notes were initially open coded to identify the high frequency words or phrases. Using a colour coding system the most frequently occurring words or phrases were:

- Knowledge
- Experience
- Understanding
- Management
- Lack of time
- Experience of schools in different contexts
- Performance management
- Relationships
- Trust
- Support
- Challenge
- Local Knowledge
- External

- Internal
- Data
- Quality assurance

This allowed the interview notes to be processed further using axial coding to determine relationships between these high frequency phrases or categories (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). This resulted in a number of main themes emerging from the interviews. The main themes are presented here under each of the predetermined questions that formed the basis of the semi-structured interviews. These main themes are then supported with selected sections of the notes from the interviews grouped by the role of the interviewee: head teacher or School Improvement Partner. The sections from the interview notes capture the rich nature of the findings and reflect the essence of the responses.

Question One - What do you think are the most important features of the School Improvement Partner role for it to be most effective?

The two elements of the main theme, knowledge and experience, (see table F, below) under this question reflect the views of the participants that the role of the School Improvement Partner is particularly specialist and the organisations they act as consultant to (schools) are very complex and often quite different from one another. One of the recurring points made was centred on the breadth and depth of the School Improvement Partners’ knowledge and experience. One head teacher summed the point up “...if I were offered the choice between two MBA qualified consultants, one fresh out of university and a seasoned manager with an MBA, well it’s a no brainer really..”

Table F – Main themes from Question One

Themes	Comments from head teacher interviews	Comments from School Improvement Partners
Knowledge and experience.	Experience – understanding the structures in schools. Each school is very different.	Specialist knowledge about the issues facing schools and broad range of strategies for improvement is a key element.

	<p>You must have been a head and a good head at that. There does not seem to be enough checking done as to whether some School Improvement Partners headship experience was good or not.</p> <p>Primary School Improvement Partners with only head teacher experience lack the breadth of management experience. They have no knowledge of management models. They often have not acquired a management qualification. This is because a number of primary heads became heads some years ago and therefore did not have to do the National Professional Qualification for head teachers etc. Primary schools can be small and therefore don't offer the opportunities to experience the range of management models and team constructs.</p> <p>Good data skills are essential. They allow an effective School Improvement Partner to challenge even the best performing schools.</p>	<p>The role is not to tell schools what to do but guide them towards good practice and methods of review, planning, self-evaluation – almost helping them to find their own answers thus building capacity.</p> <p>Head teachers acting as School Improvement Partners often had a narrow view of school improvement. Only drawing on their own experience in their school.</p> <p>Good knowledge and breadth of school improvement experience across many settings in many contexts.</p> <p>The amount and range of pupil level data about every school means under-performance can not be disguised. If the School Improvement Partner is good enough they can challenge any school merely through strong data analyses. So, consultants need to know there stuff and come well briefed and prepared is the message.</p> <p>School Improvement Partners must have senior level leadership experience in schools. This experience must be phase appropriate.</p> <p>School Improvement Partners need credibility in terms of their leadership and school improvement experience and their academic ability.</p>
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Question two - Knowing the guidance provided to School Improvement Partners in the handbook are there any factors that you think need developing or adding?

All the participants expressed an opinion about the importance of the relationship between the head teacher and the School Improvement Partner (see table G, below). This theme was repeatedly linked to the time restrictions highlighted in more detail later under question four. One head teacher somewhat ironically said that '*schools are*

institutions where everything you do is based on relationships unlike the guidance offered in the School Improvement Partner handbook’.

Table G – Main Themes from Question Two

Themes	Comments from head teacher interviews	Comments from School Improvement Partners
Develop good relationships	<p>People management skills are important as well as being able to develop a good working relationship with the head.</p> <p>School Improvement Partners need to build relationships and the respect of the head again the three days in school limits the opportunity for this.</p> <p>Because School Improvement Partners are not allowed to provide support themselves or train in their schools this limits their ability to display their skills and knowledge and thus win the respect.</p> <p>Relationships must be developed. Head teachers must trust their School Improvement Partner otherwise giving negative or challenging messages becomes very difficult.</p>	<p>The School Improvement Partner has a very high status within school. The statutory basis for the role results in headteachers and school staff responding positively to the messages given by School Improvement Partners.</p> <p>Personal qualities in terms of developing a relationship with the head teacher are important.</p> <p>Key issue is to establish good relationships.</p> <p>Stability of placement. Time to develop the relationship and establish trust and belief in the quality of the School Improvement Partner’s work.</p> <p>Headship experience helps to establish credibility and shortens the process of being accepted. However, it helps more with personal relationships than the meat of being an effective School Improvement Partner.</p>

Question three - To what extent does local knowledge affect the quality of the School Improvement Partner?

There were mixed views as to whether local knowledge affected the quality of the School Improvement Partner (see table H, below). It is probably not surprising that the external School Improvement Partner felt a lack of local knowledge was not an issue. The possibility that the local knowledge gap could be bridged by training or learning

was acknowledged by some participants. Although, one head teacher seemed particularly keen to underline the weaknesses of an external School Improvement Partner and deny the possibility of learning the local information: *“As fast as you learn about the support that’s offered in this Authority the world has moved on. This weeks must have course or management tool is old hat next week.”*.

Table H – Main Themes from Question Three

Themes	Comments from head teacher interviews	Comments from School Improvement Partners
Good local knowledge is important	<p>External School Improvement Partners tend to be over dependent on the information provided solely by the head teacher and the data provided centrally. Whereas internal School Improvement Partners often see the school outside of the School Improvement Partner role and bring knowledge not mentioned in the School Improvement Partner handbook.</p> <p>Knowledge of the support available locally is difficult for some external School Improvement Partners.</p>	<p>The weakness of external School Improvement Partners was that they could not easily provide details of where to source local support for the issues raised during visits.</p> <p>The lack of local knowledge tends to be most apparent and impact the most when identifying or quality assuring the support a school might need.</p>
Local knowledge is less important	<p>It doesn’t matter to me where the School Improvement Partner comes from they either have the knowledge, skills and understanding and do a good job or they don’t.</p> <p>A lack of local knowledge should not be a problem if the continued professional development and quality assurance of the School Improvement Partner role is robust.</p>	<p>External School Improvement Partners working very well. The key is the breadth of experience across a range of schools in various contexts. It also helps that many are Ofsted trained inspectors as well.</p> <p>The issue is about good quality assurance of the School Improvement Partner role. If you were assessing risk then you would align unknown quantities like external School Improvement Partners to your best performing schools.</p> <p>Local knowledge is important but not as key as the breadth of knowledge and experience of school improvement issues. Local knowledge to some extent can be learnt.</p>

Question four - Are there any elements of the School Improvement Partner role or missing from it that constrain its effectiveness?

There was a unanimous view that there was either insufficient time for the School Improvement Partner to complete the role or that the *one size fits all* allocation of time was erroneous (see Table I, below). One head teacher highlighted the concerns “..it doesn’t matter how good they are if they only come into school once a term. We have 16 teachers, covering 12 subjects and they will be lucky to meet me and the deputy head in the first year”. In addition, the School Improvement Partner’s role in the performance management of the head teacher was highlighted by all the participants but with some very diverse views.

Table I – Main Themes form Question Four

Themes	Comments from head teacher interviews	Comments from School Improvement Partners
Limited time to perform the role	<p>While School Improvement Partners are allocated five days per school two of these days are desk based or for their own continuing professional development. Three days in school (particularly for external School Improvement Partners) is often not enough time.</p> <p>Three days in school is not enough. The best schools should have less time and then the spare resource this creates could be targeted at school is need.</p> <p>Because the School Improvement Partner only spends three days in school it is possible for them to visit say in January and then not appear in school again until July this is of limited benefit to the school.</p>	<p>The prescription of five days of School Improvement Partner time allocated to all schools. Some schools need more time and some could manage with less.</p> <p>Three days in school is not enough. I am not following the time constraints set down in the School Improvement Partner handbook. It’s impossible to stick to three days and get the job done.</p> <p>Even though I’m only contracted to spend three days in school you have to do more otherwise you use all the time getting to know the head teacher and school and then there would be no time to actually do the job.</p>
Head teacher performance management	Performance management of head teachers should get in the way of the School Improvement Partner role. Head teachers should be wary of	At first the late introduction of the performance management of head teachers by School Improvement Partners might seem to conflict with

	<p>opening up to their School Improvement Partner but head teacher performance management is a farce.</p> <p>Sometimes you might hesitate before sharing a particular issue in school especially if the School Improvement Partner is new to the school and you don't know if you can trust them yet.</p> <p>I have no problem with the School Improvement Partner being involved in my performance management – I think I do a reasonable effective job.</p>	<p>the development of relationships. Head teachers may have reacted in a guarded fashion. There was no evidence of this.</p> <p>No evidence that the performance management of head teachers is getting in the way of performing the School Improvement Partner role effectively.</p> <p>Performance management of head teachers must affect the role although no hard evidence to support this view.</p>
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Question five - Does the particular context of the school (organisation) affect the impact the School Improvement Partner has and how?

While this main theme, understanding the context of the school, was raised by all the interviewees some of the views appeared diametrically opposed (see table J, below). One head teacher commented *“what does a head from a Kent school where all the children are dropped off in four-by-fours know about my school. Sixty five percent of my children get free school meals not organic bread sandwiches and guava fruit smoothies”*. Whilst probably less surprisingly a School Improvement Partner took an opposing view point *“...ultimately good management experience is transferable....your start in life shouldn't affect your ability to learn...”*.

Table J – Main Themes from Question Five

Themes	Comments from head teacher interviews	Comments from School Improvement Partners
Understanding the challenges faced by schools (the context of the organisation)	<p>Being able to judge the school within the context that the school operates is essential.</p> <p>It is frustrating to be have the school's performance challenged by a School Improvement Partner that has never worked in an inner city</p>	<p>The key features are around the School Improvement Partners understanding of schools is that they must understand a breadth of contexts.</p> <p>Often the fact that some School Improvement Partners have only</p>

	<p>school.</p> <p>Experience of the particular problems of the school is important for a School Improvement Partner. Assuming that a school in a leafy suburb with good results faces no challenges undermines the messages the School Improvement Partner provides.</p>	<p>been heads for a short period or that all their senior leadership experience has been in one school limits their understanding of the full range of school contexts.</p> <p>Experience in and across schools – the narrowness of some School Improvement Partners experience (only managed in one school) often limits their ability to challenge schools in contexts they have no experience or knowledge of.</p> <p>The experience suggests that the context of the school doesn't affect the impact of the School Improvement Partner it is their quality and experience.</p>
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Question six - Supplementary points raised by interviewees at the end of the interview

There were a very diverse range of issues raised by participants at the end of the interviews. Many simply reemphasised earlier points. A number of issues were mentioned each by a single participant such as the funding for the School Improvement Partners, the contractual arrangements and the possibility of a privatised service. The theme highlighted (see table K, below) was mentioned by three of the interviewees.

Table K – Themes from Supplementary Points

Themes	Comments from head teacher interviews	Comments from School Improvement Partners
The School Improvement Partner role and the relationship with other government education agencies	School Improvement Partners tend to form part of the inspectorate – Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI) in that too much of what they do is data driven. Progress is overlooked and not given the weighting it deserves. The experience is one of too much challenge and insufficient support.	Ofsted merely provide a snap shot of performance at fixed points (6 yearly) the School Improvement Partner role produces termly reports on performance. School Improvement Partners having to submit reports to the National Strategies (government agency with responsibility for

		<p>improving the quality of teaching particularly in English, maths and science, they also link closely with Ofsted) might have encouraged them to be very challenging towards heads at the expense of the support elements of the role. Again, no evidence of this.</p>
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4.4 Summary

The main themes identified from a range of categories following the initial open coding exercise were:

- Knowledge and experience.
- Develop good relationships.
- Good local knowledge is important
- Local knowledge is less important
- Limited time to perform the role
- Head teacher performance management
- Understanding the challenges faced by schools (the context of the organisation)
- The School Improvement Partner role and the relationship with other government education agencies

These main themes provide an insight into how the School Improvement Partner role is performed in practice as opposed to the guidance offered in the government's handbook. In the next chapter a comparison of the academic views of the success factors and pitfalls to avoid of external consultancy and the actuality of the School Improvement Partner role will be discussed.

The findings from the semi-structured interviews has provided a rich source of data from which, in the next chapter, a range of conclusions can be drawn. These conclusions will be set in extant theory from the literature review.

5 Analysis and Conclusions

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide an analysis of the findings presented in chapter four. It will draw from the earlier literature review and reconsider the conceptual model in chapter two. The views of academics on external consultancy and the guidance for School Improvement Partners from government will be discussed in the light of the research outcomes. There will be a critical assessment of the methodology adopted and any apparent shortcomings in the study will be identified. Finally, the need for further research will be discussed.

5.2 Critical evaluation of adopted methodology and limitations of the study

Grounded theory offers two ways of creating new theory either through understanding the individual case or the discovery of new theories. This to some extent leaves the chosen approach open to criticism from the traditional empiricist school of scientific research and the interpretists adopting alternative methodologies (Geiger and Turley, 2003).

Since the introduction of grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 critics have expressed concerns about the approach. The public split by the two authors and the subsequent development of, in effect, two schools (Straussian and Glaserian, discussed in chapter two above) underlines the divergence of views on the theory. Qualitative researchers that adopt different methods have argued that grounded theory can be too restrictive at the expense of the artistic elements of qualitative research (Baker *et al.*, 1992; Morse, 1994; Stern, 1994; Wells, 1995). Strauss and Corbin (1998, page 13) suggest that grounded theory encompasses the artistic elements but introduces some of the more scientific approaches “*Analysis is the interplay between researchers and data. It is both science and art*”. The rigorous approach to coding the notes from interviews and developing categories and themes from the analysis provides for a far more transparent piece of research.

It must be acknowledged that this was a small scale research project. Every effort was made to cover as full a range of contextual factors when selecting the purposive sample of interviewees. However, the limitations in terms of time and a single researcher together with the unfortunate late withdrawal of two participants does allow for some criticism. A larger scale study could address these shortcomings by capturing a broader range of schools within more varied contextual settings. This would broaden the range of personal attributes of head teachers captured. Similar benefits would come from interviewing a larger number of School Improvement Partners. The other variable beyond the scope of this research would be to consider a large scale study across a sample of Local Authorities covering factors such as:

- Size – determined by population
- Urban or rural
- Controlled by different political parties
- With or without a history of providing a ‘critical friend’ role to head teachers
- All external School Improvement Partners or a mix of internal and external (government grant funding conditions require Local Authorities to employ a proportion of external School Improvement Partners ruling out ‘all internal’ School Improvement Partners)
- With or without grammar schools
- With or without middle schools

Geiger and Turley (2003, page 593) conclude that grounded theory is best suited to areas of research that have “*inductive, processual and contextual character*” these factors appear in this research project. Despite the small scale of this research project and any shortcomings argued by critics of the adopted methods it does contribute to a very thin body of knowledge on the role of the School Improvement Partner.

In chapter three the role of the researcher was discussed in terms of his role within the organisation which was the focus of the research project. There was a risk that participants might ‘try to please the interviewer by giving acceptable rather than honest answers’. The steps taken to mitigate these risks such as the location of the interviews, confidentiality clauses, sharing the interview notes and not tape recording the interviews appear to have

produced ‘valid data’. It would seem unlikely that a head teacher would describe their performance management system as a “*farce*” or School Improvement Partners acknowledge that they were investing more time than prescribed into the role if as participants they felt the need to ‘please’ the researcher.

Some concerns must be registered in relation to the management of the interviews themselves. The interviewer was more than aware of the pressured nature of the participants’ roles and was particularly aware of the restrictions on time they faced. This was challenging when participants became animated or overly focussed on a particular point. This led to repetition and risked diluting the richness of the data. This resulted in two interviews extending beyond the time allocation and a second interview, in one case, as the participant felt the interview notes did not reflect their full view of the subject matter. To some extent this justifies the adoption of a semi-structured approach to the interview process which allowed the researcher the “*great latitude.....in how different respondents are treated....and the interviewer is free to modify the format...*” (Ratcliffe, 2002, page 21).

5.3 Analysis/conclusions about each research objective (aim)

This research project had three aims the first of which was to ‘*review models of consultancy in the context of the critical friendship role*’ which was evidenced in the literature review in chapter two and forms the basis of the conceptual model at the end of that chapter.

The literature review provides a consensus from academics around the factors for successful external consultancy which can be set against the guidance produced by government for the School Improvement Partner role (see Table L, below). This analysis suggests that while a number of the success factors are present in the guidance some key elements appear absent such as those that focus on the relationship and communication aspects of the role.

Table L – Analysis of School Improvement Partner Guidance and the Extent to which External Consultancy Success Factors are Present

Success Factors identified from the academic literature	Success factors present in the School Improvement Partner Guidance
Client-consultant communication or developing strong relationships	Little mention is made of the development of relationships. There is guidance about the formal communication expected between the School Improvement Partner and the head teacher and school governors
Collaboration/ involvement of client	Guidance suggests the School Improvement Partner should act as a critical professional friend, helping leadership to evaluate their schools' performance, identify priorities for improvement and plan effective change
Broad skill base or experience	Much as made of the skill base and experience required by the School Improvement Partner. Although assumptions are made about experience as a head teacher providing an appropriate school improvement background
Technical knowledge or the skills to understand the issues and potential solutions	This success factor is linked to the skills and experience mention above. There is guidance about the technical data sets to be analysed and the need to set this within the school's context
Defining (identifying) problems	The guidance is built around schools' own self-evaluation of their strengths and weakness, so to some extent the guidance suggests that the school will identify the problems
Integrity and honesty	While there is a section relating to the integrity and behaviour expected of a School Improvement Partner honesty is not mentioned and the integrity issues focus mainly on contractual propriety
Ability to listen to/comprehend client	Again, in the guidance, this links to the skill base and knowledge elements rather than the notion that listening skills are important
Marketing	The absence of a contractual arrangement between the school or organisation and the School Improvement Partner or external consultant (as the Local Authority employs the School Improvement Partner) limits the likelihood of issues such as marketing being a relevant success factor in this research.
Setting reasonable expectations and managing them	There is much guidance relating to the role of the School Improvement Partner in approving the school's performance targets. However, nothing is present about managing the expectations of the head teachers in terms of the role itself

The counter consideration developed in the literature review was that, as well as success factors, academics either explicitly or implicitly suggest a number of pitfalls

that should be avoided for external consultancy to succeed. Table M (below) provides an analysis of the pitfalls to avoid from the literature review and whether the government guidance on the School Improvement Partner role includes or fails to address any of the pitfalls.

Table M – Analysis of School Improvement Partner Guidance and the Extent to which Pitfalls to Avoid are Present

Pitfalls to Avoid identified from Academic Literature	Pitfalls to Avoid present in the School Improvement Partner Guidance
Unclear or limited communication	The formal communication with the head teacher and the school governors is detailed and clear in the guidance. The concern would be that there is little mention of communication that helps to develop the relationship between the head teacher and the School Improvement Partner
Didactic or consultant led consultancy	The very presence of the School Improvement Partner is to some extent didactic in that the role as imposed on the school by the government. The prescriptive nature of the role (performance management of the head teacher, approving targets, judging self-evaluation...) strongly suggests it is consultant led
Applying a narrow skill set to complex issues	These pitfalls are addressed in the guidance. The need for the School Improvement Partner to be able to analyse complex data sets and have knowledge of school leadership is clear. The breadth of the school improvement experience of the School Improvement Partner is limited in that the requirement is to have head teacher experience, however, if this is in one school of a particular context this could be quite narrow.
Generalist experience or a lack of technical knowledge	
Lack of awareness of all the problems	The guidance suggests that given the experience required to become a School Improvement Partner then the challenges facing schools should be familiar. However, the range of contexts in which different schools operate might provide so limitations.
Consultancy driven by self-centred factors	This pitfall is unlikely given the section in the guidance relating to integrity and behaviour.
Misunderstanding the client and their needs	The knowledge and skill set required of the School Improvement Partner in the guidance suggests that misunderstanding the head teacher is very unlikely. However, the head teacher may have needs that the role is not designed to meet.
Unrealistic expectations of the consultancy	Given the guidance document for the School Improvement Partner role is some 36 pages long and

	the time allocation to each school is five days (only three of which are in school) the guidance appears unrealistic in terms of achieving all the expected outcomes within the time available.
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It is reasonable to conclude that the government guidance for the School Improvement Partner role does contain pitfalls that ought to be avoided for external consultancy to be successful. The most significant pitfalls not addressed in the government guidance centre on the:

- need to develop strong working relationships between the head teacher and School Improvement Partner and allowing time for this development
- didactic nature of the role in that it is imposed on the school by government and that the School Improvement Partner is expected to judge the performance of the school and the head teacher (and this could effect their salary given performance related pay for head teachers)
- possible unrealistic expectations by the government in terms of the time available to the School Improvement Partner to complete such a complex role and the head teacher in that the role might not allow the School Improvement Partner to address the particular needs of a school.

In summary, it is clear that the guidance from government for the School Improvement Partner role does not provide for all the success factors that academics put forward and that some of the pitfalls that authors warn external consultants to avoid are present in that guidance. The second aim of this research would allow the researcher to test these conclusions about the guidance with evidence from those involved in the operation of the role in practice.

The second aim was to *‘investigate the opinions of head teachers and School Improvement Partners as to the effectiveness of the School Improvement Partner role as a ‘critical friend’.*

Evidence from head teachers does suggest the School Improvement Partner role is valued. It is more difficult to evidence impact on school performance. In addition, where performance has improved determining cause and effect may be extremely difficult without a large scale research project across a number of Local Authorities. More predictably School Improvement Partners themselves felt that their role was both valuable and had a positive impact on school performance, although evidence of this impact was difficult for them to highlight.

The initial research aim suggested that the government guidance for the School Improvement Partner role had not built on the success factors identified by academics for external consultancy or planned sufficient well to avoid the pitfalls. The evidence present in the previous chapter from semi-structured interviews suggests that ‘in practice’ many of the success factors are present and the pitfalls are avoided or the risk of them mitigated. Table N, below, provides details of the relevant success factors from the academic literature and those that are present in the government’s guidance for School Improvement Partners set against the evidence from interviews with head teachers and School Improvement Partners.

Table N - Success factors from academic literature, government guidance and interview evidence

Relevant Success Factors identified from the academic literature	Success factors present in the School Improvement Partner Guidance	Success factors supported by the research findings
Client-consultant communication or developing strong relationship	Little mention is made of the development of relationships. There is guidance about the formal communication expected between the School Improvement Partner and the head teacher and school governors	In practice this gap in the guidance was overcome by School Improvement Partners. However, this took time and required School Improvement Partners to work beyond their contracted days in school. Developing strong relationships was highlighted by all the participants as a key feature of the role.
Collaboration/ involvement of client	Guidance suggests the School Improvement Partner should act as a critical professional friend, helping leadership to evaluate their schools'	Although not specifically mentioned during the interviews collaboration was implicit in that all participants felt relationships and openness

	performance, identify priorities for improvement and plan effective change	were particularly important.
Broad skill base or experience	Much as made of the skill base and experience required by the School Improvement Partner. Although assumptions are made about experience as a head teacher providing an appropriate school improvement background	While all parties agreed that the breadth of experience was important, one head teacher highlighted some concerns with the narrowness of School Improvement Partners with only primary school head teacher experience.
Technical knowledge or the skills to understand the issues and potential solutions	This success factor is linked to the skills and experience mention above. There is guidance about the technical data sets to be analysed and the need to set this within the school's context	Both head teachers and School Improvement Partners felt that technical knowledge was important and was evident due to the background of the individuals performing the role.
Defining (identifying) problems	The guidance is built around schools' own self-evaluation of their strengths and weakness, so to some extent the guidance suggests that the school will identify the problems	Identifying problems was linked at interview to understanding the context of the school. Therefore, the points made about experience and knowledge are also relevant here.
Integrity and honesty	While there is a section relating to the integrity and behaviour expected of a School Improvement Partner honesty is not mentioned and the integrity issues focus mainly on contractual propriety	Integrity was not mentioned by any of the participants. Openness did feature during discussions about good relationships.
Ability to listen to/comprehend client	Again, in the guidance, this links to the skill base and knowledge elements rather than the notion that listening skills are important	While listening skills were not mentioned at interview all participants agreed that breadth of knowledge and understanding of school improvement issues were key factors
Setting reasonable expectations and managing them	There is much guidance relating to the role of the School Improvement Partner in approving the school's performance targets. However, nothing is present about managing the expectations of the head teachers in terms of the role itself	As challenging schools to improve is a fundamental part of the School Improvement Partner role the system itself is likely to make reasonable expectations difficult. However, the key point coming out of the interviews seemed to be that as long as the context in which a school operates is

		understood, agreeing challenging targets was possible.
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In conclusion, it is reasonable to proffer the view that ‘in practice’ individual School Improvement Partners and head teachers do ensure that most of the success factors for external consultancy identified by academics are present in the School Improvement Partner role.

Table O, below, provides an analysis of the pitfalls that academics suggest should be avoided for external consultancy to succeed, those apparent in the government guidance and the evidence from participants of how these pitfalls are managed or mitigated ‘in practice’.

Table O – Pitfalls to be avoided from academic literature, present in government guidance and mitigated in practice

Pitfalls to Avoid identified from Academic Literature	Pitfalls to Avoid present in the School Improvement Partner Guidance	Pitfalls to Avoid addressed in practice from the research findings
Unclear or limited communication	The formal communication with the head teacher and the school governors is detailed and clear in the guidance. The concern would be that there is little mention of communication that helps to develop the relationship between the head teacher and the School Improvement Partner	In practice this pitfall is avoided by School Improvement Partners and head teachers. This results in more days spent in school than School Improvement Partners are contracted to perform (at their own expense).
Didactic or consultant led consultancy	The very presence of the School Improvement Partner is to some extent didactic in that the role as imposed on the school by the government. The prescriptive nature of the role (performance management of the head teacher, approving targets, judging self-evaluation...) strongly suggests it is consultant led	This was not mentioned during the interviews. It should be noted that the schools involved in this study have long history of external advice and may be used to working collaboratively and therefore participants did not see this as an issue.
Applying a narrow skill set to complex issues	These pitfalls are addressed in the guidance. The need for the School Improvement Partner to be able to analyse complex data sets and have knowledge of school leadership is clear. The	All the participants expressed views that the breadth and depth of knowledge together with an understanding of the schools’ contextual factors was important and evident in the role. There

Generalist experience or a lack of technical knowledge	breadth of the school improvement experience of the School Improvement Partner is limited in that the requirement is to have head teacher experience, however, if this is in one school of a particular context this could be quite narrow.	was one comment about the possible lack of broad experience of some School Improvement Partners with primary school experience. The view was that they may lack knowledge of the full range of management concepts and structures.
Lack of awareness of all the problems	The guidance suggests that given the experience required to become a School Improvement Partner then the challenges facing schools should be familiar. However, the range of contexts in which different schools operate might provide so limitations.	This potential pitfall tended to be addressed by School Improvement Partners' breadth of knowledge and experience. Allowing them to understand the context of the school.
Consultancy driven by self-centred factors	This pitfall is unlikely given the section in the guidance relating to integrity and behaviour	There was no evidence of this pitfall hampering the role and therefore nothing to suggest it needed to be avoided.
Misunderstanding the client and their needs	The knowledge and skill set required of the School Improvement Partner in the guidance suggests that misunderstanding the head teacher is very unlikely. However, the head teacher may have needs that the role is not designed to meet.	There was no evidence of this pitfall impeding the role. Again School Improvement Partners understanding the contextual factors of a school was cited as important. This would lend itself to reducing misunderstandings.
Unrealistic expectations of the consultancy	Given the guidance document for the School Improvement Partner role is some 36 pages long and the time allocation to each school is five days (only three of which are in school) the guidance appears unrealistic in terms of achieving all the expected outcomes within the time available.	The most significant view from the interviews was the limitations of time, especially to develop a good working relationship, resulted in less than satisfactory time allocations for important functions of the role. For example, target setting and reviews of school self-evaluations.

Clearly, the School Improvement Partners and head teachers 'in practice' are managing to avoid some of the pitfalls academics highlight. This is at the expense of School Improvement Partners as they avoid the pitfalls by investing more time than they are contracted to perform. Surprisingly, there was no evidence of functions like the performance management of head teachers hampering the progress of the role. Most of

the pitfall avoidance appears to be through the strength of the relationships between the head teacher and the School Improvement Partner.

The third and final aim of the study was to *‘compare and evaluate the role of external and internal School Improvement Partners’*.

The role of both external and internal (to the Local Authority) School Improvement Partners are provided with the same guidance from government. They both attend the same professional development opportunities provided by government and the relevant Local Authority. The requirements in terms of background, knowledge and experience are the same as is the assessment process, determined by government, for them to qualify to perform the School Improvement Partner role.

The only substantive difference between an internal and external School Improvement Partner is their local knowledge. This, it could be argued, may affect an external School Improvement Partner’s knowledge of local support available to schools and more importantly the awareness and understanding of the context in which the school operates. The evidence from the interviews of head teachers and School Improvement Partners suggests that there is a divergence of opinion. Some participants believe that a lack of local knowledge does have a limiting affect on the effectiveness of the external School Improvement Partner while others felt this could be overcome. The strongest view came from a head teacher, stating that *“It doesn’t matter to me where the School Improvement Partner comes from they either have the knowledge, skills and understanding and do a good job or they don’t.”* In essence, suggesting that the effectiveness of the School Improvement Partner is based on the quality of the individual. To some extent this view is supported by a School Improvement Partner highlighting that the issue of effectiveness is a matter for good quality assurance by the Local Authority.

In summary, there is little difference in the effectiveness of either external or internal School Improvement Partners in a structural way. Any differences appear to be at the individual level.

5.4 Analysis/conclusions about the research question and overall conclusions

The research question focussed on whether the School Improvement Partner could be described as a ‘critical friend’ to head teachers.

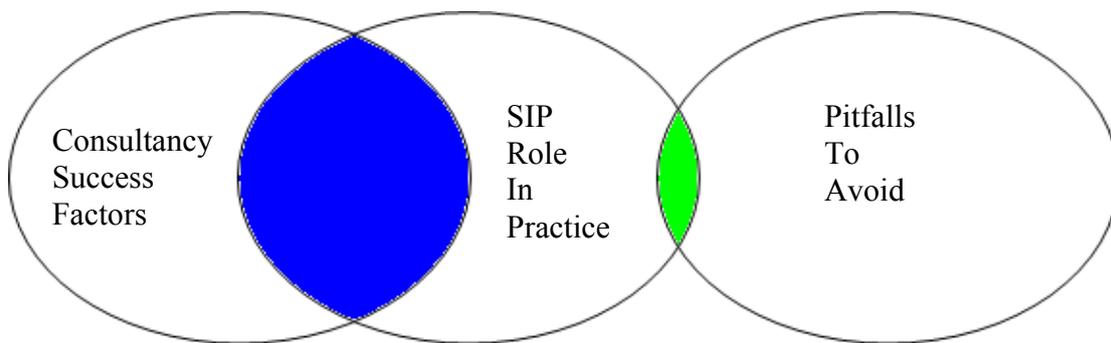
The School Improvement Partner role includes in its guidance from government (DfES publication, *A New Relationship with Schools – the School Improvement Partner’s Brief – Advice and Guidance on the role of the School Improvement Partner*, 2006) pitfalls to avoid for successful ‘critical friendship’ or consultancy (see table O, above). However, the outcomes of this research study suggest that the professionalism of the head teachers and School Improvement Partners involved has resulted in a desire to make the system work. Most surprisingly this has been, in some cases, at the individuals own financial expense with School Improvement Partners investing more time than they are contracted to perform into the role. Other pitfalls are avoided simply by the processes being either under valued (head teacher quote – describing their performance management as a “*farce*”) or a confidence in, and trust of, the professionalism of the ‘critical friend’ relationship.

Unlike Swaffield (2007) where she suggests that the School Improvement Partner can not be described as a ‘critical friend’ the findings of this research indicate that the role can be akin to a “critical friend” see table N, above, matching School Improvement Partner functions to academic research into factors of successful consultancy. Elements of the School Improvement Partner role that, on paper, appeared to obstruct the chances of successful “critical friendship” were not supported through the research (see interview results with head teachers). This, however, may be due to the inherent weakness in these elements such as head teacher performance management. Should these weaknesses ever be addressed then revisiting the research might be valuable.

The diagram 3 (below) is a modification of the conceptual model (diagram 2) from chapter two. This adapted model draws on the evidence from the literature review about external consultancy success factors and pitfalls to avoid, the published guidance for School Improvement Partners and then the findings from the semi-structured interviews. The model suggests that the School Improvement Partner role in practice displays more of the success factors outlined by academic authors than the guidance

document would suggest as indicated by the reduction in the size of blue shaded area. The green section in the diagram suggests that while in practice the pitfalls apparent in the School Improvement Partner role are avoided any changes to the arrangements, for functions like head teacher performance management that make the systems robust and meaningful, could alter this as the pitfalls may become very difficult to avoid.

Diagram 3 – Modified Conceptual Model of the School Improvement Partner Role set against Academic literature, government guidance and primary research data



Whilst the School Improvement Partner role is defined by government in significant detail and there is standardised training for all School Improvement Partners, the application of the role by individuals varies considerably. This is evident from the responses from both head teachers and School Improvement Partners with comments about the different timing and content of School Improvement Partner visits. Some School Improvement Partners clearly find the five day per school limiting and exceed this - making conclusions on impact and effectiveness difficult.

5.5 Opportunities for further research

Further research is recommended into the breadth of school improvement/school leadership experience of School Improvement Partners and the extent to which this breadth effects the impact the role has on school performance. This proposed research would be both opportune and expedient given that since the completion of this research project the government has introduced the National Challenge Adviser role. This role

is in effect a ‘*School Improvement Partner plus*’ or ‘*Super School Improvement Partner*’ role. Initially aimed at secondary schools where 30 percent of the students are not achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics. This threshold of performance has seen 11 schools in the Local Authority subject to this study (600 nationally) become subject to the National Challenge. A school failing to achieve the threshold within two years will result in the school closing or a National Challenge School Trust being established which is in effect a closure and then re-opening with new leadership and staff under new governance.

The National Challenge Adviser guidance offers significantly more rigorous instructions on the expected challenge to be provided to school leaders. The role allows 20 days per school as opposed to the 5 days for the School Improvement Partner role. Analysis of the background/experience that academics determine is required for an individual to be successful in the role could inform the recruitment of the National Challenge Advisers. Similarly a critical evaluation of the guidance offered to National Challenge Advisers, building on the results of this research and the evidence from academics about successful external consultancy discussed in the literature review earlier, could inform the development of the role and help promote its success.

5.6 Final thoughts

One of the cornerstones of the human condition is the ability to develop and maintain relationships. For managers it is the skill that underpins all other attributes. Schools are places where children and adults play, share, work together and respect one another. So it is true to say as a head teacher did at interview “*schools are institutions where everything you do is based on relationships*”. The breadth of skills applied by leaders and managers within schools is often, therefore, built on the education they receive daily from the children they serve.

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APENDIX A

Consent Form

Title of research

The “School Improvement Partner” can it be a ‘critical friend’ to strategic leaders in a Local Authority’s schools

Name and position of researcher

Malik Killen, final year student, University of Chester (MBA)

Please initial box

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason

I am aware that my confidentiality will be maintained throughout the research process and subsequent dissertation

I agree to take part in the above study

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of researcher

Date

Signature

Malik Killen

APENDIX B

Participant Information Sheet

Project Title: The “School Improvement Partner”, can it be a ‘critical friend’ to strategic leaders in a Local Authority’s schools

Purpose of the research

The researcher Malik Killen is undertaking this research project as part of the final year of a Masters in Business Administration with the University of Chester. It is a requirement of the course to complete a project based on primary research and I have chosen the above area of study. To date there have been very few studies of the School Improvement Partner role and I hope this project will add to our understanding of the complexities of the role.

Who is being asked to participate?

School Improvement Partners both internal and external and head teachers.

Research Methods

The research will be centre on an in depth review of the academic and governmental literature. This will be followed by a number of semi-structured interviews. The interviews will last about two hours at time and venue convenient to you.

Important information for you if you decide to take part

Taking part in this research is voluntary and you will have the right to decline to answer any questions and/or to withdraw from the research at any time. Your responses will be recorded in written form you will have the right to check and verify that those notes are a fair record of what you said in the interview. All your data and responses will be handled both anonymously and confidentially throughout the research process.

Data

Data collected will be analysed by me only and will be securely stored. All records will be destroyed no later than the end of September 2009.

Contact details of researcher

If you have any queries about this project please contact me:

Telephone:

E-mail:

Appendix C

The premise of my research is that much of the academic writing around the role of the external consultant suggests that the 'critical friend' or its component elements is the key feature of the success of the consultancy.

Questions

What do you think are the most important features of the SIP role for it to be most effective?

Knowing the guidance provided to SIPs in the handbook are there any factors that you think need developing or adding?

To what extent does local knowledge affect the quality of the SIP?

Are there any elements of the SIP role or missing from it that constrain its effectiveness?

Does the particular context of the school (organisation) affect the impact the SIP has and how?

Would you like to revisit any of the questions/do you have any other points that you like to mention?