

**TRUST AND TENSION: THE ROLE
OF THE PRIMARY SCHOOL
IMPROVEMENT PARTNER IN ONE
LOCAL AUTHORITY 2008 - 2011**

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THE PRIMARY SCHOOL
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Abstract

The thesis addresses the role of the primary School Improvement Partner (SIP) within the field of school improvement. In early 2004 the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) published a vision for a new relationship between central government and schools. One element of this vision was a new role: that of the School Improvement Partner. Following the General Election in 2010 the White Paper, 'The Importance of Teaching', ended the SIP role.

This study is a reflection on the role of the primary SIP, through a case study in one urban Local Authority (LA). This intrinsic case study enables the voices of the different professionals to be heard as it explores and explains how different professionals navigated their professional world and made meaning of the SIP / headteacher relationship, particularly how closely the role of SIP followed the government brief, the tensions and conflict involved and the contribution of the SIP to educational change.

The research used a mixture of methods: two sets of interviews with six SIPs and six headteachers, documentary analysis of government and LA policy papers, SIP reports and an interview with a recently retired National Strategies officer who was responsible for monitoring the SIP programme across the region.

The data analysis illuminated initial concerns about the SIP role and its purpose. Headteachers were concerned about the introduction of the SIPs, and evidence from headteachers, SIPs and the author's own experience as a SIP indicated that the role was interpreted in different ways.

Headteachers were wary of these new professionals and there were several areas of tension such as accountability, power and a nationally developed agenda that felt inflexible and not always relevant to headteachers or schools. However, trust developed over time. At its most successful the SIPs were acting as critical friends, providing focused support and challenge for headteachers to help them reflect on school improvement processes and outcomes through a constructive

dialogue. The culture of this LA made a difference to the programme and this raises implications for the way that LAs work with headteachers in the future.

The thesis concludes that the sudden withdrawal of funding by the new Coalition government for the SIP role was unwelcome to the headteachers. There were variations in the way the role was lived by the headteachers and SIPs, in contrast to the national policy. The majority of headteachers were positive about having an objective 'critical friend' who helped them reflect. They believe there is a place for a partner with whom they can have confidential conversations and share aspects of leadership and school improvement issues, but that such relationships are most effective when built on trust and this takes time to develop. There are lessons to learn from this as we move into a self improving school system.

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Declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Signed

Dated

Chapter One: Introduction: Setting the Scene

In early 2004, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) published a vision for a new relationship between central (Labour) government, local government and schools. One element of this vision was a new role: that of the School Improvement Partner (SIP). Following the General Election in 2010, the Coalition government announced the end of the SIP role. This thesis is a case study that explores the role of the primary SIP in one Local Authority (LA) in England from its beginning in April 2008 to its end in 2011.

The study is placed in the context of research, policy and practice of school improvement in England. It has been researched and written in my role as a Local Authority Primary Adviser and then Primary SIP Manager in the same LA. The LA is an urban unitary authority in the south east of England. There are 54 primary phase schools and nine secondary schools. Primary phase schools range in size from one form entry to four form entry. There were differences in the primary and secondary school improvement systems generally and the primary and secondary school SIP teams were introduced separately with different managers and protocols. This study focused entirely on the primary phase, which is my area of expertise and experience. Attainment data indicates that the LA was in line with or above the national average in the results of the end of Early Years Foundation Stage, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 measures and National Curriculum Tests at the time of the SIP programme. The outcomes of inspections for primary schools for this period were very positive. The LA had above the national average of schools judged to be good or better and double the percentage of primary phase schools judged to be outstanding in 2009/10. Relationships between the primary schools and the LA were positive.

A summary of the policy background

Government policy for school improvement and school effectiveness has undergone many changes. In the last decade the Labour government sought higher standards from schools. There was an emphasis on increasing

accountability, an expectation of rising standards and the development of a target setting culture with minimum standards for achievement. Several national 'top down' programmes such as the 'Improving Schools Programme' (first called the 'Intensifying Support Programme') were implemented across the country, both imposed and strongly recommended by the advisers and consultants from the National Strategies. Various writers and educationalists, including Stoll and Fink (1996) and Fullan (2003), felt that that this 'top down' nature of school improvement was limited in its impact and that schools needed to have more control and opportunity to work in ways that were context sensitive rather than nationally determined.

The 'New Relationship with Schools' (NRwS) was introduced by the government as a positive move:

'The time is right to reshape the relationship between schools and central and local government, so as to release greater initiative and energy in schools in a way that helps standards rise further' (DfES, 2005 p.4).

It was designed to repair relationships that MacBeath (2006) considered to be damaged by 'a decade of tensions and antagonism between agencies of government and schools (2006, p.1) and replace them with a system that put school needs and concerns at the centre. The NRwS consisted of a jigsaw of different elements that together would deliver this new model of school improvement (Figure 1 shown in Chapter Two). The element of the NRwS in which I was interested and on which this study focuses is that of the SIP.

Part of the background to the NRwS was that the DfES wanted to ensure that schools had the 'right' challenge, that in some cases LAs were insufficiently challenging and they believed that the 'National accreditation and networking of School Improvement Partners will raise the stature and credibility of local school improvement' (DfES, 2005, p.37). The new SIP role would replace the link adviser

role and create a single, focused conversation with schools about school improvement.

‘School leaders want challenge and support from people who really know the business of school improvement and the realities of school leadership. School Improvement Partners will provide this to a national standard of professionalism. Their role will be key to challenging and supporting schools to improve’ (DfES, 2005, p.21).

This challenge and support would ensure that schools were concentrating on the appropriate priorities, using the other elements of the NRwS jigsaw (a new inspection framework, an expectation of systematic school self evaluation, improved data systems and better communication processes that allowed schools to order documents on line) to support the focus on standards and achievement. The SIP would be involved in headteacher performance management, taking on the role of ‘external adviser’ and ensuring that a professional who was familiar with the school’s performance advised the governing body on the headteacher’s performance management. They would also provide challenge on target setting as well as having regular conversations with schools about school improvement. The LA’s planning, preparation for, introduction of and demonstration of impact of this new role would be evaluated termly by an officer from the National Strategies.

How this enquiry relates to my professional practice

At the time of the introduction of the NRwS I was working as a link adviser in the study LA. As link adviser to approximately 15 primary phase schools I was interested in how this new role would work. It seemed to have inbuilt tensions about confidentiality and accountability as well as a specific agenda. It seemed an unnecessary role when feedback we received as an LA from headteachers was positive and the LA Ofsted judged the primary advisory service as ‘good’. However we were all required to become accredited as SIPs and I, along with many advisers and education consultants from LAs across the country, did so. The study LA was in the final tranche of LAs to introduce the role. To prepare for the role in

'my' LA, I also went to work as a SIP in another LA a year before we started. This experience, in a very different LA, gave me much to think about; the importance of relationships, the value of the SIP and the role of the LA, before the introduction of primary SIPs in the study LA in 2008.

Due to the promotion of the original LA officer who was in charge of the programme from September 2008, I became acting SIP Manager and therefore responsible for the development of the SIP role in the LA and the management of the SIPs themselves. I was interested in how the role was perceived by both SIPs and schools, the growing sense of a SIP team and the attitudes of the headteachers to 'their' SIPs. Just after I had carried out the first set of interviews there was a national consultation about the future of SIPs. The government was considering an 'enhanced' role, allocating schools in challenging circumstances more SIP days and expecting them to 'sign off' improvement plans (DCSF, 2009). The study LA was trialling this new role in several schools. However, in May 2010 following the general election, there was a change of government, the role itself ceased to be statutory and the extra government funding for the programme was withdrawn. This was a huge shift in the world of school improvement.

The research questions

In the context of the study LA: positive relationships between primary schools and the LA, a strong school improvement team (as rated by the National Strategies and Ofsted) and a high percentage of effective schools (judged by Ofsted), there was some unease amongst headteachers about having a range of new educational professionals working with schools, replacing the role of link advisers. This study set out to explore 'trust and tension' and looked to research the following questions:

1. How did headteachers, SIPs and national government officers perceive the role of the SIP?
2. How closely did the role of SIP as practised match the government SIP Brief?

3. What did SIPs, headteachers and national government representatives see as the main tensions of the SIP role?
4. Did the SIP contribute to educational change, and if so, how?

This enquiry sought to answer these questions and what, if any, lessons can be learned to apply to the rapidly changing landscape of school improvement where there is an expectation that there will be a move away from external school improvement professionals to a self improving schools system.

Chapter Two: A Review of the Literature

Introduction

The role of School Improvement Partner (SIP) was one of the elements of the 'New Relationship with Schools' (NRwS), (DfES 2004) a policy which heralded a change in approach to school improvement and school effectiveness. This discussion of literature examines the role through two different lenses: the lens of educational policy, school improvement and the way recent governments have directed education, and the lens of academic literature of educational change. The 'direction of travel' of education policy, the centrality of the role of headteacher in school improvement, critical friendship and the difference it can make to school effectiveness are considered. Culture and context of the local area are also seen to be important and these are related to theories of educational change.

The background to the NRwS and SIP

Models of and beliefs about school improvement have changed and developed over time. In the 1970s teachers had a great deal of autonomy and freedom. Several high profile cases, such as the William Tyndale primary school, came to media attention and this led to a feeling by some that things had gone 'too far' and that schools were failing in achieving both academic standards and standards of behaviour (Gillard, 2011). As a result, politicians began to call for the teaching profession to become more accountable (Gillard, 2011). In 1974 the DES established the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) to 'promote the development of methods of assessing and monitoring the achievement of children at school, and to seek to identify the incidence of under-achievement'. In 1976 in the 'Ruskin Speech', Prime Minister James Callaghan said:

'The goals of our education, from nursery school through to adult education, are clear enough. They are to equip children to the best of their ability for a lively constructive place in society and also to fit them to do a job of work' (Callaghan, 1976).

Accountability was further increased in the 1988 Education Reform Act. This Act gave the Secretary of State many new powers that had previously belonged to schools and Local Education Authorities (LEAs). It introduced a National Curriculum and Local Management of Schools (LMS). It established two new councils: the National Curriculum Council (NCC) and the School Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC). It introduced the testing of all pupils at the ages of seven and eleven and the results made public. The outcomes of these tests were soon translated by the press into 'league tables', where school performance was ranked.

For several years test results rose, until in the 1990s they began to plateau (Gillard, 2011). This led to the development of the National Strategies, such as the National Literacy Strategy to develop and improve subject knowledge and pedagogy. These were top down and tightly controlled models and lacked teacher ownership. This is described by Barber in Fullan (2007) as the time of 'informed prescription'.

Accountability was increased when in 1992 the Education (Schools) Act made provision for the establishment of Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education). Ofsted used private contractors to inspect schools and Ofsted published the reports on individual schools. As criteria were devised for judging the success of schools, this continued the tension of accountability. The tests and the inspection regime changed the definition of 'successful' in schools. This role had previously been carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI). Their role since the 1944 Education Act could be characterised as

'conducting inspection, largely of schools, writing reports, and, crucially, reflecting the state of the system back to government' (Lee and Fitz, 1997, p.41).

HMI informed government on the state of the education service and also made sure it could inform the government about its particular interest in policy.

Inspectors identified good practice where they saw it and made recommendations about particular policy interests. However, the HMI annual reports in 1990, 1991 and 1992 became increasingly critical of government policy, including the resources available for schools and the underfunding of teacher training. They also angered unions by criticising the quality of teaching and learning. They reported that 70% of classes were satisfactory, but ‘made no intervention over a right wing re-writing of this, as one in four lessons being inadequate’ (Lee and Fitz, 1997, p.9). Lee and Fitz concluded that when Ofsted took over the role of inspection it led to a new way of ensuring schools worked to the agenda set by the government:

‘They provide a powerful institutional underpinning for steering the system in which the fear of ‘failing’ may produce a new orthodoxy of practice which old models of inspection could never have achieved, nor would have wished to’ (Lee and Fitz, 1997, p.13).

The New Relationship with Schools (NRwS)

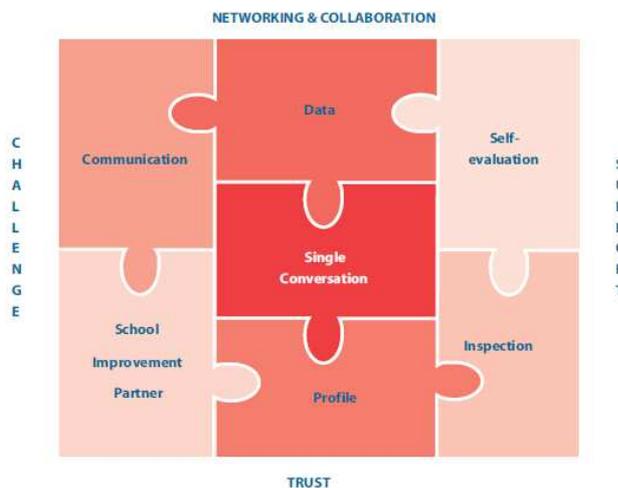
The ‘New Relationship with Schools’, published in 2004, followed the period of top down reform in school improvement in the 1990s and was identified by the government as a ‘new approach’. It was called ‘the New Relationship’ because it was trying to redefine relationships and put schools at the centre of their own improvement, rather than impose a top down model.

‘In this context the time is right for a new relationship between government and the Profession which:

- builds the capacity of schools to be effective learning institutions with rigorous self-evaluation, strong collaboration and effective planning for improvement
- delivers an intelligent accountability framework that is rigorous and a lighter touch, giving both schools and parents the information they need

- makes it easier for schools to access the support they require without duplicative bidding, planning and accountability systems
- puts in place a simpler, streamlined school improvement process based around a school's own annual cycle of planning, development, reflection and evaluation
- enables a unified dialogue to take place between schools and the wider education system' (DfES, 2004, p.3).

The aim of the 'New Relationship' was to 'help schools raise standards – with clearer priorities, less clutter, intelligent accountability and a bigger role for school leaders in system-wide reform, and better information for parents' (DfES, 2004, p.7). Seven elements of this new relationship were identified, represented as an interlocking set (Figure 1). Guidance and legislation were introduced to support them, including a revision of the school inspection framework and the creation of a school profile which would give people easy access to information about individual schools. These seven elements all had their part to play in the 'New Relationship':



(DfES, 2004, p. 4)

Figure 1: the New Relationship with Schools

1. Self evaluation

Self evaluation was given high status in the NRwS and was seen at 'the very heart of the new relationship,' (MacBeath, 2006, p.2). MacBeath describes self

evaluation as the story of how the school is doing and 'embedded in the day to day world of the classroom and school, formative in character, honest in its assessment of strengths and weaknesses and rigorous in its concern for evidence' (2006, p.2). MacBeath says this was the theory behind self evaluation, but that in practice the majority of schools used the form devised by Ofsted: the Self Evaluation form (SEF). Surveys carried out by the National College of School Leadership by Davies and Rudd (2001) indicated that headteachers saw the SEF as something that had to be done for Ofsted rather than an invaluable tool for school improvement.

2. Inspection

The NRwS also saw a revision of the Ofsted framework. The changes which were introduced included a shorter inspection of not more than two days and only a few days notice before the inspection, more frequent inspections, closer interaction with the headteacher and senior leadership of the schools during the inspection and the importance of the school self evaluation (DfES, 2004). Ofsted inspectors could also ask to see the SIP reports or to meet the SIP if s/he was available.

3. Single conversation

The NRwS describes the single conversation as an opportunity for every school to have 'a single conversation about its development priorities, its targets and its support needs' (2004, p.8). This conversation was to be between the SIP and the headteacher at the SIP visits. Concern was expressed by Arrowsmith (2007) who, as a SIP himself, felt that the limited number of SIP visits made it difficult for him to have enough knowledge and time to be able to carry out this role effectively. The output of the single conversation was the SIP report. These reports were required to follow the LA's 'standard reporting requirements and paperwork'.

4. School profiles

The government intention was for there to be a short document for parents which was available on the internet. This showed a range of information about the school, including: data on student attainment and progress set against benchmarks for other schools in similar contexts, the most recent Ofsted

assessment, what the school offered in terms of the broader curriculum and the priorities for future improvement. This duty was ended in February 2012 as the DfE said it had not 'met its intended purpose' and could be seen as additional bureaucracy and duplication' (DfE website, accessed 7.6.2012).

5. Data

MacBeath describes data as the most important jigsaw piece in the NRwS, because data is 'in the driving seat' (2006, p.12). By having comprehensive data, headteachers and teachers would be able to analyse performance data in greater depth as part of the self-evaluation process, target improvement activity and promote high performance. One way this was to be achieved was through RAISEonline (Reporting and Analysis for Improvement through School Self-Evaluation) a web-based system containing school based data. Changes were made to the census collections in line with the principle of 'collect once, use many times', (DfES, 2004, p.13). This was to reduce the demand on schools from different government departments.

6. Communications

The NRwS promised a streamlined communications strategy. Schools could order documents on line rather having them sent to school.

'We have set ourselves the goal of improving the way in which we communicate with schools. We are changing our approach from an 'old-style' based on paper and on prescription, to a 'new style' communications model, based on involvement, participation and information delivered at the right time in the right way. New forms of communication will put schools in charge of the information they receive' (DfES, 2004, p.11).

7. The role of SIP

The final element of the NRwS was the School Improvement Partner, the topic of this thesis. The SIP role is outlined in the 'SIP Brief', which underwent several

revisions in the time of the programme. The third and final SIP Brief described the main function of the SIP to:

‘provide professional challenge and support to the school, helping its leadership to evaluate its performance, identify priorities for improvement, and plan effective change’ (DCSF, 2007, p.2).

The SIP Brief contained the job description for SIP (Appendix One) which outlined the main purpose and activities of the role:

- acting as a critical professional friend to the schools, helping their leadership to evaluate their schools' performance, identify priorities for improvement and plan effective change;
- helping build the schools' capacity to improve pupils' achievement and to realise other key outcomes for pupils that bear on achievement;
- contributing to whole-school improvement in the schools, including effective contribution to the Every Child Matters outcomes;
- providing challenge and support for the senior leadership team in the schools; and
- providing information to governing bodies on their schools' performance and development (DCSF, 2007, p.20)

The government introduced tight controls for the creation of this new role, setting criteria for experience and skills for the role which were outlined in the SIP Brief. The NRwS (2004) stated that the role of SIP would make an opportunity to create a stronger force for school improvement by: ‘involving experienced serving headteachers in leading the process of reform’ (DfES, 2004, p.9). The NRwS saw this role being carried out by serving headteachers, some ex-headteachers working as independent consultants; and some ‘LEA advisers with the right track record’ (DfES, 2004, p.9). As well as getting the ‘right people’ to be SIPs, the government also wanted them to be ‘on message’. There was a rigorous process for the recruitment and assessment of SIPs: an initial

application form, an online exercise and a two day residential that comprised one day further training on data and one day of assessment activities. The assessment included a data exercise, the framing of hypotheses about a school, based on data provided, a role play activity and a report writing task. Successful candidates were then asked to nominate which LAs they were prepared to work for as SIPs and to write profiles that were put on an online database. It was up to the LAs to recruit from this pool and different LAs used different procedures for selection. The assessment process was costly to the government, but showed the commitment to the role of SIP.

At the formal training and assessment events there was a strong emphasis on the interpretation and analysis of data. However the DfE published a wide range of support materials for SIPs, again showing the commitment to the role and to make sure that SIPs were fully briefed on the aspects of education policy and practice they were to discuss with schools. Titles included:

- Supporting School Improvement Partners (SIPs) working in schools causing concern
- Briefing for SIPs: Every Child Matters
- Guidance for SIPs: Supporting and challenging improvement in learning and teaching
- Parental involvement in Pupils learning
- School Improvement Partner Reports - Advice and guidance on the writing and quality assurance of School Improvement Partner reports
- Briefing for SIPs: School Self-Evaluation
- One-to-One Tuition: A guide for School Improvement Partners
- Briefing for SIPs: Governors in the New Relationship with Schools (NRwS)
- Headteacher performance management from September 2007 – the role of the School Improvement Partner (SIP)
(DfE website, archived).

Tensions in the role of the SIP

'SIPs that drive us to drink' Kent (2009) proclaimed in the '*Times Educational Supplement*', describing the role of the SIP. He writes from the point of view of a SIP trainer talking to aspiring SIPs. Whilst designed to be humorous and written as 'discourse of derision', (Ball, 1990, p.31), the article does highlight some of the theories about educational change and explore some of the tensions in school improvement and the role of SIP.

Confidentiality

From the introduction of the NRwS, potential tensions and flaws were identified by researchers such as MacBeath (2006) and Swaffield (2007). Part of the role of the SIP was to verify the school's judgements about different areas of work, reporting to the LA if they held a different view to the school. The SIP Brief (2007) promised confidentiality, but this 'is either naive or ill informed' (MacBeath, 2006, p.22) as there was the expectation that SIPs would pass these concerns on to the LA. 'Confidentiality' is usually translated as acting with discretion whilst in a school and not talking about issues within schools when in other schools. This has the potential to create tension. The SIP is described as the 'conduit' between central government, the LA and the school. MacBeath (2006) suggests that the term 'conduit' is a one way direction, from government to school, as the SIP delivers government policy such as target setting and ensuring schools set their priorities in line with government policies (2006, p.9).

Compliance

The guidelines for the SIP role are quite clear that the SIP is not supposed to be asked by the LA to collect data from schools or to monitor compliance with LA and national policies and directives. Nevertheless, it was very tempting to use the SIP for this and other agencies and departments within the study LA were keen to use SIP time to discuss different agendas and seek information, thus further undermining the partnership. This is also highlighted as one of the tensions by MacBeath (2006). Swaffield's (2007) research was carried out very early in the role of SIP, before the role was introduced to all LAs, including the

study LA. She concluded by wondering whether the role would be successful and overcome the threats and the tensions that were within the SIP Brief (DCSF, 2007) and job description (Appendix One) which made the role 'dishonest' (MacBeath, 2006). Swaffield felt that the role of the LA was key to the success of the SIP and that LAs would,

'have the potential to influence the enactment of the role and support SIPs in a role that in some ways resembles critical friendship' (Swaffield, 2007, p.218).

Critical friend

The SIP Brief (2004) was the basis for the role and has been interpreted in different ways by the SIPs, LAs and the National Strategies officers as will be shown later. It describes the role as a 'critical professional friend' but Swaffield (2007) and MacBeath (2006) have both identified flaws in this term and this is a key tension in the role of SIP. Costa and Kallick (1993) characterize a critical friend as:

'a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work' (1993, p.50).

Swaffield (2005) in her study of headteachers and critical friends identifies the main elements of the role needed to be successful. These include trust, the engagement and commitment of both partners, knowledge of the school and honest communication. She identifies a tension. How can a headteacher trust someone who is accountable to another body? The SIP Brief states clearly that the SIP is accountable to the LA and has a duty to report concerns about a school to the LA. MacBeath (2006) also suggests that creating a role that is both

critical professional friend to a headteacher and a person who reports concerns about a school to an outside body is an inherent tension.

‘In practice, while SIPs are likely to work to a more flexible and responsive brief, they do have to constantly bear in mind that they are accountable to the LEA and government for adherence to their prescribed remit’ (MacBeath, 2006, p.122).

There is tension even in the title ‘critical friend’. Watling et al. (1998, p.61) speak of a critical friend ‘providing an appropriate balance between support and challenge’. MacBeath sees the relationship as more positive than that; rather than a ‘trade off’ between the terms of friend and critic, ‘a richness from combining both’ (MacBeath and Jardine 1998, p.41). The deeper friendship and trusting relationship make it more possible for challenge to be made. Time is also a tension. The critical friend needs to know the school well to be able to ask appropriately challenging questions and yet the guideline for the time allocation for a SIP was five days across the school year, which included time off site to prepare and to write up reports. MacBeath (2006) expressed some concerns that this was insufficient time to really develop the role in the true sense of the critical friend.

The four values of the NRwS

These seven elements were framed by four values: trust, challenge, support and networking and collaboration (see Figure 1). MacBeath (2006) describes these as ‘easily overlooked’, but very important as they were the values on which the new relationship was founded and they underpinned the work of the SIP.

Trust

Trust has been identified as a key issue in successful partnerships in effective school improvement and different forms of trust are outlined in the literature. Fullan (2003) discusses the importance of relational trust as identified by Bryk and Schneider (2002). Relational trust consists of four components: respect,

competence, personal regard for others and integrity. Bryk and Schneider (2002) discuss these forms of trust in relation to effective school leaders, but I think they are also pertinent to the work of the SIPs.

Reina and Reina (1999) identified three kinds of trust: competence trust, (trust of capability), contractual trust (trust of character) and communications trust (trust of disclosure) (Reina and Reina, 1999, p.64). To achieve competence trust, the leader has to respect people, their knowledge skills and abilities, respect people's judgements, involve others and seek their input. Contractual trust includes managing expectations, establishing boundaries, honouring agreements and being consistent in approach. Communication trust is built by sharing information, telling the truth, admitting mistakes, giving and receiving constructive feedback, maintaining confidentiality and speaking with good purpose (Reina and Reina, 1999, p.82). These aspects of trust are discussed later in the analysis of interviews.

Bottery (2004) identifies different stages of trust that develop in a relationship. He describes the most basic level of trust as 'calculative'. When people first meet and are not sure how the relationship is going to develop, they perform mathematical type calculations of the degree to which the new person can be trusted. 'Role' trust is seen as a further development of this. In this study, because the SIPs have trained as teachers and been primary headteachers there was an assumption that they would hold certain views. Calculative trust and role trust can then be supplemented and developed by further meetings and 'practice' trust is created where relationships can be built which take trust beyond the logical into affective and value areas. Finally, 'identificatory' trust is seen as the highest level of interpersonal trust, which is built up over years. Individuals come to know each other so well that there is an almost intuitive knowledge of what the other will do, generating a mutual unconditional respect and trust (Bottery, 2004, p.3). These levels of trust are explored through the perceptions of headteachers and SIPs in chapters four and five.

Bottery (2004) also identifies three foundations of trust that are important to the teacher/government relationship. The first foundation for trust is an agreement over values and value priorities (which relates to the purpose of education), the second of a perception of integrity: that people will do what they say they will do, that they will be committed to their clients rather than the maintenance of their own jobs. The third foundation is the perception of job competence. This relates to the tensions expressed earlier in the chapter. The accountability measures that are used to judge schools could stem from a difference in belief about the priorities in education and values held by different groups, shown in the various definitions of successful schools and the Ofsted judgements of schools which affect them greatly. Bottery (2004) outlines how governments write critical reports of performance standards which lead to the 'blame' of professionals and the perception of incompetence. Undermining the trust in professionals then provides legitimation for further government action.

Finally Bottery (2004) talks of 'thick' trust which is seen where the trusters have a very good understanding of each other and this generates a sense of support. However, because those people understand each other so well, there is the sense that those who do not share the values are excluded.

'By strongly identifying with people of similar values and beliefs, walls may be built to divide others who are different from ourselves' (Bottery, 2004, p.4).

He argues that not only is thick trust needed but also something that will build bridges between strangers. To appreciate different value bases within the same society, a respect of difference is vital. This, Bottery describes as 'thin trust'. Uslaner (2002) says that thin trust can lead to thick trust, as people get to know each other and then relationships can develop. The danger is that if people are too comfortable in their thick trust relationship they may leave others out and not take the time to get to know them. This is dangerous for school leaders as it may lead them to ignore views that are different to their own and limit their thinking. It

can also lead to groups of headteachers and schools that work closely together and exclude other schools.

Challenge and support

Two other values that underpin the role of the SIP, as stated earlier, are those of challenge and support. MacBeath (2006) calls them 'uneasy bedfellows', because 'they can only coexist where the quality of support allows challenge to be heard and accepted' (2006, p.14). They are considered together here as they are often used together when talking about school improvement and the role of the LA. The 1997 White Paper stated 'The role of the LEA is not to control schools, but to challenge all schools to improve and support those which need help to raise standards' (DfEE, 1997, p.67). The NRwS too, expected both challenge and support. Intervention by the LEA was to be 'in inverse proportion to success' (DfEE, 1999) so that schools whose pupils performed well in national tests and were judged by Ofsted to be successful would have little contact from the LEA, whose resources were concentrated on schools at the opposite end of the spectrum.

Swaffield (2008) comments that 'support' is perceived as the more benign of the dyad, and implies giving approval, encouragement, assistance or practical help. It is made tangible in many different forms but is generally viewed as constructive (Swaffield, 2008, p.3). 'Challenge' on the other hand is 'more ambiguous, prone to interpretation, and is certainly not always seen in a positive light' (Swaffield, 2008, p.3). Challenge is sometimes interpreted as having more pressure and the demand to work harder (Ainscow et al., 2000). It can have more positive and less adversarial implications: such as 'stimulation to reflect or act, and a questioning that prompts reasoning and explanation or the consideration of different viewpoints' (Swaffield, 2008, p.3) but Swaffield concludes that it is the perception of the recipient that defines how these are interpreted.

Swaffield (2008) examines different aspects of support and challenge offered to headteachers and identifies some of the concerns and issues for them. Leadership

is described as 'greedy work' with principals working at a 'relentless, full-on, treadmill pace' (Gronn, 2003, p.148). Leadership of the headteacher is seen as a vital component of school improvement and effectiveness. James and Connolly note how it has been emphasised as 'a factor, if not the factor, that makes the difference' (2000, p.32). Fullan, (2003) writes about the overload for headteachers and school leaders and how the 'sheer volume of new initiatives blunts the impact of each other' (Fullan, 2003, p.25). Swaffield (2008) identified some elements of support that headteachers interviewed as part of her study said they would find helpful which included:

- A range of different partnership possibilities as the needs of headteachers are all different
- At least one other professional who they know will respect confidence so they can be totally honest and open
- Opportunities for headteachers to get to know each other both formally and informally
- To make meetings relevant and determine the agenda
- The careful match of people if discussion is to go beyond the general (Swaffield, 2008, p.20)

Swaffield's (2008) findings are also added to by Guy, Sammons and Mehta (2008) who looked at leadership characteristics in schools with different effectiveness and improvement profiles. They identified three different profiles of schools, low, moderate and high strands who all achieved or maintained high attainment and value added scores from different starting points. The factors that made a difference to the effectiveness and improvement profiles included the length of service of the headteacher, both in time and in their current schools, the number of headteachers the school had had in the last 10 years, school sector and socio-economic context and concluded that these had implications for school support.

Early research showed a positive picture of SIPs from headteachers. Swaffield (2008) discussed the role of SIPs with headteachers in her study in 2005 and her results supported those of Halsey et al. in 2005. She concluded that the individual was one of the main factors affecting these results. This may have been 'partly to do with the way individual SIPs carry out their work, and their interpersonal skills, factors that will remain influential and important'. Yet she felt that the SIP role was at heart a challenge role because 'SIPs will always have to work within the constraints and requirements of the role, and their official agenda and modus operandi are such that SIPs' support of headteachers will always be compromised to some extent' (Swaffield, 2008, p.13). She felt that the element of challenge and the 'single conversation' meant that the SIP could not be supportive in the real sense.

Cowen (2008) found that in some primary schools there was a concern about challenge and that some primary schools found this difficult.

'There are a very small number of examples from the case studies which demonstrate some lower levels of challenge. In these cases there appears to be some evidence of 'cosy' relationships and a lack of probing, questioning and challenge to improve schools' understanding of performance, target setting and focus on priority areas' (Cowen, 2008, p.32)

On the other hand, the National Strategies evaluation of SIPs (unpublished, 2009) found that schools, especially schools judged to be outstanding, welcomed challenge and that was one of the areas in which headteachers of these schools felt that SIPs could improve. What did schools in the study LA think? This is explored later in the study.

Networking and collaboration

The fourth theme of the NRwS is part of the aim to encourage schools to support other schools, both by working together on common priorities and the sharing of good practice with other schools. Within the role of the SIP is the notion of

brokering support. The SIP Brief states that the role of the SIP, having helped the school analyse its priorities and needs and identify the range and type of support required to meet those needs, is to

- 'work with the school on its choice of sources of support
- feedback requests to the local authority where the SIP judges that resources controlled by the local authority are relevant and, once external support has been engaged, help the school to evaluate the impact that such support has had on the school's improvement plan' (DCSF, 2007, p.10).

Evaluation of the SIP programmes show that this was perceived to be the least effective element of the SIP's work.

Evaluating the NRwS and role of SIP

Two surveys were commissioned by the government to evaluate the NRwS. Halsey et al. (2005) wrote an evaluation of the pilot of the NRwS to support future development of the role. This found an overall positive reaction to SIPs, with clear messages from headteachers that schools would like SIPs with recent (although not necessary current) headship experience. The government also commissioned a comprehensive two year national evaluation of the NRwS policy from York Consulting (Cowen, 2008). This report interviewed officers from different LAs, school staff and SIPs and concluded that the SIP role had a positive effect in school improvement in several areas. The review found that the impact of the SIP role was not perceived as significant in primary schools as in secondary. The writer concluded that this could have been because the SIP role had not been in place in primary schools as long as in secondary schools (and the final tranche of LAs did not begin the primary SIP role until April 2008). There was also a tension as to whether SIPs should have been undertaking direct delivery of support as this was not originally deemed to be part of the SIP role. This was a theme that recurred throughout the time of the SIP and different views were expressed by different groups. This tension is explored in the interviews with SIPs and headteachers in this study.

Cowen (2008) also outlined other tensions concerned with the role of the SIP, in addition to those already mentioned which informed this study. These include the power balance between SIPs and headteachers, how SIPs perceive their role, how headteachers perceive the role, the role of the LA in the practice and development of the SIP role and what difference SIPs are actually making to schools. My study explores these tensions.

The type of SIP was also seen to make a difference in the perceived effectiveness of the role. Figure 2 shows the data collected by Cowen (2008). She found that primary headteachers with SIPs who were serving headteachers felt that their SIPs were less effective than the other types. She concluded that LA SIPs with headship experience were seen to be the most effective group. This finding is explored against the SIP team in the study LA

Table 7.2: Primary Sector SIP Type Differences¹⁵					
	Primary Headteachers with..				
	HT SIP	EC(w) SIP	EC(wo) SIP	LA(w) SIP	LA(wo) SIP
The SIP...					
..has the necessary knowledge and information to discuss packages of support	55%	64%	59%	74%	71%
..has skills and experience have been effectively matched to the school	59%	66%	59%	73%	60%
..has an effectively relationship with the headteacher	70%	75%	74%	84%	80%
..is able to interpret data effectively to guide the school	73%	77%	80%	84%	84%
..reports are of significant value to the school	49%	60%	54%	60%	58%
..has supported schools to raise standards of achievement	30%	41%	42%	51%	45%
..has supported schools to develop strategies to achieve ECM outcomes	14%	25%	25%	30%	25%

1.35 It is important to note that these figures indicate that many primary headteachers with serving headteacher SIPs do agree that their SIPs are effective, but they do so less often than those with other types of SIP.

(HTSIP = serving headteacher SIP, EC(w)SIP = external consultant SIP with previous headteacher experience, EC (wo)SIP = external consultant SIP without previous headteacher experience LA(w) SIP= full time LA employee SIP with previous headteacher experience and LA (wo) SIP= full time LA employee SIP without previous headteacher experience)

(Figure 2 from Cowen, 2008, p.75)

A further tension identified by Cowen (2008) was clarity of role. She found that in some LAs there was overlap between the SIP and traditional adviser role and there appeared to be a reluctance on the part of the LAs to 'let go' of the advisory role and align the SIP programme to their school improvement programme (Cowen, 2008, p.44).

Despite these tensions and concerns, the study concluded that there were ways that the SIP was positively supporting school improvement and these included:

- 'providing consistent challenge and focus;
- helping to understand performance issues and how to tackle improvement;
- influencing the development of a more evaluative culture within schools and helping to tackle underperformance at an earlier stage;
- challenging self-evaluation processes and leadership structures;
- interpreting data effectively to guide school leaders and providing reports considered to be of value to schools and governors;
- providing advice on how to address particular priorities and capacity building senior leadership teams to improve self-evaluation approaches;
- identifying school support needs and informing LA strategies for interventions; and signposting schools to relevant and suitable support' (Cowen, 2008, p.26).

In these ways the SIPs were seen as delivering the policy of the NRwS.

NRwS as policy

The NRwS sits within the background of a series of education policies that have contributed to educational change in England since 1997 when the Labour party was elected to government. The next part of the chapter looks in more detail at the policy background and tensions within the policy of educational change more generally. 'New Labour set out to transform education. They put a significant pot of resources in schools, combined with high profile targeted interventions aimed at improving educational standards' (Chapman and Gunter, 2009, p.1).

‘Good education makes a difference. Good teaching changes lives. Educate a child well and you give them a chance. Educate them badly and they may never get a chance in the whole of their lives’ (Blair, 2007)

The beliefs of an administration about education drive its policy. It would seem sensible to believe that policy is devised in an organised and structured way, based on thorough research and data, but this is not the case. Trowler (2003) says policy development is:

‘Always a political process with competing groups, interests and ideologies continuing to fight over the shape of education policy’ (Trowler, 2003, p.36).

There are also contradictory strands within one ideology. One such paradox is in the centralisation – deregulation tension. The government wants central control (for example the National Curriculum) whilst also wishing to develop market forces and encourage local solutions. Another is the idealistic rhetoric - pragmatic practice, where government rhetoric wants to ensure low unemployment and so creates vocational courses, but also wants high level training to enable Britain to compete with other countries (Trowler, 2003, p.118). In addition, education policy is often thought of as a ‘thing’, a fixed statement of some sort written in policy. It could be seen as:

‘A specification of principle and actions related to education issues, which are followed or which should be followed and which are designed to bring about desired goals’ (Trowler, 2003, p.95).

However, policy would seem to be more of a process, something that is dynamic and moving and this has certainly been the case with the policy about SIPs. The National Strategy visits monitoring the LA implementation of the policy showed the shift in the role over time. Policy is always changing and developing as it becomes practice and is interpreted by the players ‘on the ground’. Outcomes and results

may be different from the policy makers' intentions because policy is interpreted by people with different beliefs and motivations. It means

‘to the extent that each side is ignorant of the ‘subjective’ world of the other, reform will fail, and the extent is great’ (Fullan, 2007, p.99).

Thus it is also a mistake to think of policy as written and fixed. Ball (1994) describes policy as ‘both text, an action, work and deeds, it is what is enacted as well as what is intended. Policies are always incomplete insofar as they relate to or map on to the ‘wild profusion’ of local practice’ (Ball, 1994, p.10).

‘Policy making is the result of negotiation, compromise and the exercise of power and as a result, laden with multiple agendas, attitudes and sets of meaning’ (Trowler, 2003, p.98).

It has paradoxes and tensions within it. For example, the tension in having a National Curriculum that is very traditional with the aspiration for Great Britain plc – a dynamic and world competitor promoting entrepreneurial skills and flexibility. One way of transmitting policy in the way it ‘should be’ delivered is through the top down method, through a managerial approach. However, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, this is not always successful as people do not have ownership of the initiative and so it does not become part of their practice. Hajer and Wagenaar (2003) argue that, as society changes, deliberative policy analysis, where citizens and government shape policy by practice, is a more relevant form of policy analysis. They discuss the importance of context in understanding: that policy is not always understood in the same way by the readers as by the writers (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003, p.246). This study explored the interpretation of policy by players in one LA to see how it evolved over time and how closely it followed the original policy

Another aspect of policy development mentioned earlier in the evolution of the SIPs is that policy has a ‘career’ which begins at a point of formality and then

progresses and evolves. It is interpreted by the actors (Ball, 1994) in the context of their own culture, ideology, history and resources. Policy makers try to constrain the way we think about education in general and specific education policies in particular through the language in which they frame policies, but we do not have to be 'captured by the discourse'. This study explored the meaning that SIPs and headteachers have made of the SIP role in one LA. The backdrop to this thesis is educational change. What is education for? What is its role in developing and changing society? As previously stated, every government has a view on this and successive governments have tried to 'get it right' by introducing a range of different policies and strategies designed to improve education and to deliver their ideology. This was brought into sharp relief in May 2010 when a new government came into power and quickly redefined approaches to school improvement.

Theories of educational change

"Education, education, education" was Tony Blair's slogan for the 1997 general election. The Labour government's commitment to education was expressed through a range of policies in their time of office. These included the National Strategies for teaching literacy and numeracy and the 'Every Child Matters: Change for Children' (2004) which aimed to improve the opportunities and outcomes for children through whole-system reform of the delivery of children's services. It also included the NRwS. The aim of the NRwS was to improve educational outcomes and standards across the country, but Joyce et al. ask 'Can a reform agenda that has school improvement as its core resolve contradictions of development and accountability / focus on target setting and also a broader range of outcomes and promote an approach to change that is not just a "quick fix"?' (Joyce et al, 1999, p.220). To them school improvement is a strategy for educational change that focuses on pupils' achievement by modifying classroom practice and adapting the management arrangements within the school to support teaching and learning (Joyce et al, 1999, p.220).

Characteristics that would show whether a school was well placed to improve further by enhancing pupil progress, achievement and development were identified by Stoll and Fink (1996). The characteristics of these schools were that they:

- Enhance pupil outcomes
- Have a clear focus on teaching and learning
- Build capacity to take charge of change, regardless of source
- Define their own direction
- Assess their own culture and work to develop positive cultural norms
- Have a strategy in place to achieve their goals
- Address the internal conditions that enhance change
- Are able to maintain the momentum of improvement even when conditions are not favourable
- Monitor and evaluate their process, progress and achievement and development (Stoll and Fink, 1996, p.43).

Before the mid 1980s school improvement was seen as a separate branch of study from school effectiveness. The school effectiveness movement dates from the 1960s. It tried to answer the question: what do schools look like in their daily operations? Bollen describes school effectiveness as 'taking a picture of a school and comparing that with pictures of other schools' (Reynolds et al, 1996, p1). Georgopoulos and Tannenbaum (1957) define it as:

'The extent to which any educational organisation as a school system, given certain resources and means, fulfils its objectives without incapacitating its means and resources and without placing undue strains on its members' (Georgopoulos and Tannenbaum in Reynolds et al.,1996).

School effectiveness research outlines aspects of 'good' schools, such as those identified by Sammons et al. (1995). This is controversial because there needs to be agreement and a shared understanding about the purpose and

aims of education - what schools are for and what 'good' looks like in schools. There are some features over which people initially agreed, such as the impact of home background being greater than that of school (Coleman et al. 1966; Plowden 1967; Jencks et al. 1976). However Mortimore (1998) maintained that schools made a difference and this led to the notion of value added (the difference that the school makes). This is a feature of Ofsted judgements today with a focus on achievement which includes both attainment and progress.

School improvement, on the other hand, is described by Bollen as 'like telling stories about development and change in school' (1996, p.1). Harris (2002, p.5) described school improvement as 'not a fad or a fashion, but a systematic way of generating change and development within the school'. Stoll and Fink (1996), amongst others, believed that the two fields had much to learn from each other and could be combined in further research. This combination was seen in the introduction to the NRwS. It is generally agreed that school improvement as a field of study dates back to the 1980s and the definition used in the International School Improvement Project (ISIP) is often seen as the beginning of the school improvement movement:

'A systematic, sustained effort at change in learning conditions and other related internal conditions in one or more schools with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively,' (van Velzen et al., (1985) quoted in Reynolds et al 1992, p.3).

This was developed further and defined by Hopkins as:

'A distinct approach to educational change that enhances student outcomes as well as strengthening the schools' capacity for managing change' (Hopkins et al. 1994, cited in White and Barber, 1997).

The attempt of governments to ensure that schools and staff work to deliver their view of education is reflected in different phases / styles over time. Fullan identifies

four main phases of change. The 1960s was seen as the 'adoption and innovation era' (Fullan, 1992, p.21), or the time of 'uninformed professional judgement' (Barber, 2002) because educators took on, or adopted many innovations such as new maths, new chemistry etc. It was a time of trying out new ideas and materials in classrooms, but there was little or no central control. There were pockets of very exciting change and 'innovations, the more the better, became the mark of progress' (Fullan, 1992, p.20), but there were also areas where little happened and schools as a whole did not really develop.

The 1970s are described as 'implementation era', a focus on what happens in practice. This questioned whether the changes that had been identified actually happened in classrooms, and whether teachers and teaching were changing as a result of the innovations. It was recognised that it can be very complicated to put ideas into practice. As a result, schools sometimes adapted the changes so they became unrecognisable from the original plans / ideas. In some schools the changes did not reach the classrooms and teaching staff. External ideas did not always get into schools and if they did, they did not flow across classrooms, but remained in pockets. In the third phase from the late 1970s to mid 80s definitions of school effectiveness were agreed (Rutter et al. 1979; Hargreaves 1984; Rosenholtz, 1989) and large scale studies of school improvement were carried out. These produced some understanding of how to make educational change happen, although, as Fullan (1991) points out, clear descriptions of success are not the same as solving the problems of the management of change towards that success.

'Managing change', is described by Reynolds (in Bennett and Harris, 2001) as the fourth phase. This was a move away from the study of change as a phenomenon to the research coming from the people who were studying change as they were bringing it about (2001, p.33). This was a time of more empowerment, where schools were trying new ideas and solutions. This was reflected in the 'spotlight focus' and the latter programmes of developing pedagogy in schools by the

National Strategies in 2009. Barber (2002) called it the time of 'informed professional judgement', both knowledge rich and using professional judgement.

These phases of reform highlight the dilemma of large scale reform and how much difference it makes. This dilemma is described by Fullan (2007) as 'too tight – too loose'. Top down change fails to gain ownership, commitment and even clarity, people are just 'going through the motions', but bottom up change does not lead to success on any great scale either. Recent government focus was on 'top down' because they wanted the change to be adopted by everyone. However, people learn by thinking about their 'new doing'. Fullan (2007) describes this as 'Capacity building with a focus on results', which combines bottom up and top down approaches. People have to believe that they can make a difference and have some ownership of change to make it successful. It can be the case that people think that by putting the policy into practice things will change, but as we saw earlier, quite often when schools plan change, it can pass staff by. Real change is deeper than that. It needs to be seen as worthwhile and then it needs to be thought through and implemented carefully.

Fullan (1991, 2007) outlined a model which identified a series of stages in the management of educational change, they are:

1. Initiation stage: This is influenced by:
 - The existence of quality innovations on which the change innovators can draw
 - Access of schools to innovations
 - Advocacy from central administration
 - Teacher advocacy of particular innovations
 - The impact of external change agendas
 - The absence or presence of community pressure, new national policies and funds available to support them
 - The willingness of schools to see the possible wider benefits of any particular innovation

2. Implementation stage

- Characteristics of change – the need, clarity, complexity, quality and practicality of change will all impact on the implementation
- Local characteristics - the context at various levels – regional, community, headteacher / principal and teacher will influence the implementation
- External factors – factors outside the institution, such as central and local government and other agencies will affect the implementation.

3. Continuation – for an innovation to continue and become institutionalised depends on whether

- The change becomes embedded in the structure of the institution
- There is a critical mass of staff at various levels who are skilled in the new ways and committed to them
- There are resources to provide some form of aftercare to support the initiative and to help develop those new to the innovation (James and Connolly, 2000, p.23).

Several aspects of this model are applicable to the NRwS. Whilst there is a time beyond which a relationship cannot be considered 'new', the role of SIP was not really in place for a sufficient length of time to become embedded. Many elements were present at the initiation stage. There was national advocacy and legislation, termly monitoring visits for LAs to measure progress against targets and LAs were given a contribution to the funding of the programme. I show in later chapters how the context of the LA affected the implementation stage and discuss the possible future of the role.

Fullan (2003a) talks about the elements of complexity theory. These include non-linearity (that reform will not unfold as intended and that there will be unpredictability, where surprises will happen) (Fullan, 2003a p.22). He suggests that ways to overcome these problems are to use common sense, to start with the notion of moral purpose, create communities of interaction around these ideas and

give out good quality information. The lessons we can learn are that we should give up the idea that the pace of change will slow down, that coherence is everyone's responsibility and we should not seek perfect coherence (Fullan, 2003a, p.26). Fullan also writes the lessons of educational change that 'conflict and diversity are our friends' (Fullan, 1992, p.22). By having a range of people and a range of views, we need to get used to living with uncertainty. This is one of the tensions for school leaders, who are expected to plan and be strategic, but who are affected by wider policy that can become statutory very quickly and may not match the plans that the school has made.

The importance of context in educational change needs to be considered and James and Connolly (2000) present a framework for understanding change: the 'context – content – process' model which was developed by Pettigrew and his co-workers in 1988. Pettigrew argues that previous models for analysis of change were flawed because they only looked at 'snapshots', whereas change is a process and what is important is the ongoing context: the 'what' of change. Content refers to the focus under study. Context can then be divided into inner context and outer context. The inner context is the existing structure, strategy and culture of the organisation which will influence the process and the outer context is the wider national political agenda and the 'interpretations of local and national policies and events' (James and Connolly, 2000, p. 30). Process refers to the action, reactions and responses of the various players who have a stake in the change: 'it is the "when?" the "where?" and the "who?" of change' (James and Connolly, 2000, p30). During change the three interact and interplay. I show how important these are to exploring the SIP programme.

Another powerful aspect of school improvement which can be a barrier or an enabler to change is the culture of the school. Deal and Kennedy (1983) define culture as 'the way we do things around here'. It is elusive and, as a visitor to a school, it is not always apparent, much is unspoken. Achieving change entails changing people's beliefs and that is the hardest thing to do. Not everyone is happy to live with uncertainty. Fullan (1999) talks about the importance of getting

people to try things out and experiment to make things happen because people have to try things and experience them before they can change. Just how do you get a reform started when there are large numbers of people involved? It requires some sort of impetus – getting small groups to try things out, inspiring groups of people to start; what is needed is a ‘bias for action’. To be successful it is necessary to have both pressure and support, although we do not always think of pressure as a positive thing, ‘pressure without support leads to resistance and alienation. Support without pressure leads to drift or waste of resources’ (Fullan, 1992, p.25).

This poses the question: can school culture be changed? If, when new teachers, staff and pupils join a school they learn the existing culture, does that mean it can never be changed? Stoll and Fink put forward the suggestion that school culture can be looked at on two dimensions, ‘effectiveness – ineffectiveness’ and ‘improving – declining’ (Stoll and Fink, 1996, p.85). This model presents five types of schools: ‘moving’, ‘cruising’, ‘struggling’, ‘sinking’ and ‘strolling’.

Moving schools are effective and improving, cruising schools are effective but not improving, struggling schools are ineffective and they know it and are trying to improve and sinking schools are ineffective and members of staff are not prepared or able to change. In the midst are strolling schools, which are neither particularly effective nor ineffective, they are moving towards some kind of school improvement, but at an inadequate rate’ (Stoll and Fink, 1996, p.86). Stoll and Fink (1996) believe that culture can change through three routes:

1. Evolutionary change: where change is implicit, unconscious, and unplanned.
2. Additive change: where norms, beliefs and values suddenly change because of a new initiative
3. Transformational change which is explicit and conscious with deliberate attention to changing norms, values and beliefs.

Transformational change is seen as the most effective of these and one way this happens is through the appointment of a new headteacher.

Leadership is seen as a key factor in school improvement and educational change and leadership has been a focus for a great deal of research. James and Connelly (2000) write about the importance of the role of headteacher as leader. The role of the headteacher has changed over the last 20 years. They are the centre of everything at school - the pupils and their learning, improving the quality of teaching and learning, the parents and their concerns and demands and initiatives from government, health and safety requirements and buildings and premises issues. Fullan (2007) claims that whilst school improvement research is in its fourth decade (as discussed earlier) 'systematic research on what the principal actually does and its relationship to stability and change is quite recent' (Fullan, 2007, p.156). What is agreed is that it takes the backing and support of the principal / headteacher to make change happen. This is one reason that the government designed one piece of the NRwS jigsaw around support and challenge for leadership and included the role of adviser for Headteacher Performance Management in the SIP role.

Moral purpose is seen as a key element of successful leadership and also of school improvement. Stoll and Fink (1996) state 'there is little sense in attempting to improve schools unless there is a moral purpose and a very clear idea of what is to be achieved' (1996, xii). They describe moral purpose as the 'why' of change, school effectiveness as the 'what' of change and school improvement as the 'how' of change.

'At micro level, moral purpose in education means making a difference to the life chances of all students. At macro level, moral purpose is education's contribution to societal development and democracy' (Fullan, 1999, p.1).

‘With the emphasis on uninformed and informed prescription over the past twenty years – one casualty has been teachers’ intrinsic motivation or sense of moral purpose’ (Fullan, 2003, p.11).

Fullan believes that society needs schools that have moral purpose at the heart, where leaders and everyone within are committed to narrowing the gap between the highest and lowest achieving pupils. Schools need to produce social capital; to help produce citizens who have the skills to make society better and more equal. He believes that headteachers should start with their own context and school and then need to consider the networks / neighbourhoods, the LA and beyond to pursue moral purpose on any scale (1993 xv): to look beyond their own schools and see further than their own school out into the wider community and beyond. Part of the SIP’s purpose was to support schools in the identification of achievement gaps and challenge schools to close them. The reason for using serving headteachers as SIPs was to develop system leadership, which has developed very rapidly since the change of government in 2010.

SIPs were part of the conversation about reform; that ‘reform is not just putting into practice the latest policy – it means changing the cultures of classrooms, school districts, universities and so on’ (Fullan, 2007, p.7). It means changing what people do in school every day and changes that they make to their plans and the way they talk to children. I wanted to discover whether SIPs actually made a difference to schools and were able to support and challenge headteachers to make meaning of the changes.

The problem of meaning is central to making sense of educational change, ‘It is those small changes at school level and meanings for individuals that have been neglected and which have led to a spectacular lack of success of most reforms’ (Fullan, 2007). Does that mean that the school SIP partnership can make a real and positive difference to schools? Can SIPs and headteachers make that connection and help schools move on to achieve their aims?

‘The crunch comes in the relationship between these new programmes or politics and the thousands of subjective realities embedded in people’s individual and organisational contexts and their personal histories’ (Fullan, 2007, p.37).

The implications for SIPs are that there are no hard and fast rules and the uniqueness of the individual setting is crucial. This links back to earlier in the chapter, what works in one place might not work in another, as Reynolds (1996) suggested.

For successful school improvement there needs to be a focus on implementation to see what has happened and why the innovation has failed or succeeded. Has there been a ‘bias for action’? Part of the conversation between SIP and school is about what the school needs to do to change. The school uses its self evaluation to decide its priorities and develop its improvement plan. This process is discussed with the SIP, with the SIP providing support and challenge to explore with the school how best to achieve the objectives.

The role of the Local Authority (LA)

The role of the LA has changed significantly over time and at the time of writing, is still changing. Fullan (1999) claims that people do not always consider the role of the LA in managing change, but that it does have an important part to play. System leadership requires a high level of knowledge about the particularities of schools which the LA often holds and there were concerns that having external SIPs from a wide area could erode this. There is a move to a more collaborative, self improving system, of schools supporting schools. Chapman and Gunter (2009) discuss the impact of the different phases of school improvement and educational change, outlined earlier in the chapter. Hargreaves (2010) in Chapman and Gunter (2009), shows how some schools improved at double the rate of others. This includes schools working in peer driven networks where the ‘peer factor replaces the fear factor’ as the key driver in raising standards, where the combinations of experts at conference (outside in) and successful colleagues

(inside out) make a difference, where mentor schools and extra resources are available, but not mandatory and short, medium and long terms strategies for improvement are clearly laid down.

Is this theory in action, the way that schools can improve further? Fullan (2007) describes the comparison that Damian Allen, Executive Director of Children's Services in Knowsley made between the White Paper in 2005 and the strategies he and his team had used successfully for school improvement in Knowsley. These showed a difference in approach between the 2005 White Paper and included co-leadership between the LA and schools, high support and engagement with schools and developing system performance.

Cowen (2008) showed that the breadth of support provided to schools requiring higher levels of support intervention varied across LAs. This became evident both through the perceptions of those SIPs that worked across LA areas and the different practices that LAs adopted in allocating additional resource for SIP functions (Cowen, 2008, p.42). The National Strategies and DCSF were consulting on the best way to improve and refine the role of SIP up until 2010. In 2009 the White Paper: '*Your child, your schools, our future*' was designed to form the basis for the 2009 Children, Schools and Families Bill (which was intended to become the 2010 Children, Schools and Families Act), but much of this did not get through Parliament before the general election. The White Paper outlined the end of central government prescription of teaching methods and the National Strategies for literacy and numeracy. It also dramatically cut the use of the private consultants employed to improve schools. Schools would have more freedom and would be enabled to establish networks of school-to-school support to help drive up standards in a 'new era of localism'.

The White Paper's key points included:

- all pupils to be taught in a way that meets their needs;
- all pupils to have opportunities to take part in sport and cultural activities;
- all schools to promote their pupils' health and well-being;
- schools to work in partnership with other schools and with wider children's services;

- partnerships of primary schools to share specialist teaching;
- strong accountability and rapid intervention when needed to further improve schools;
- expanding the role of 'School Improvement Partners' (SIPs);
- developing a new School Report Card (SRC);
- giving schools greater flexibility and encourage greater innovation;
- improving the relationship between central government, local authorities and schools.

However, the election in May 2010 was inconclusive and ended with a Coalition government of the Liberal and Conservative parties. Their education White Paper '*The Importance of Teaching*' was published on 24 November 2010. It declared that:

‘What is needed most of all is decisive action to free our teachers from constraint and improve their professional status and authority, raise the standards set by our curriculum and qualifications to match the best in the world and, having freed schools from external control, hold them effectively to account for the results they achieve’ (DfE 2010, p.8).

Whereas some LAs ended the SIP programme soon after the White Paper was published (as it was made clear that the legislation to have a SIP would not be enforced) the study LA made the decision to keep the SIP role until July 2011 and then March 2012 to enable a time of transition to system led leadership.

The future

Part of the role of SIP was to use the skills and practice in school improvement of headteachers and the government was hoping for a significant number of serving headteachers to become SIPs. Hopkins describes system leaders as ‘those headteachers who are willing to shoulder system leadership roles’. If the goal is ‘every school a great school’, then policy and practice has to focus on system improvement (Hubber et al., 2007, p.13). This was a step on the way to system

leadership. Hargreaves (2010, 2011, 2012) in three think pieces for the National College for School Leadership explored the idea of a 'self improving school system' (SISS), creating it (2010) leading it (2011) and looking at the self improving school in an international context (2012).

Many of the features identified earlier as important for the relationship between a SIP or critical friend and headteacher are also evident in the SISS. Hargreaves identifies four building blocks for this: clusters of schools (the structure), a local solutions approach and co-construction (the two cultural elements) and system leaders (the key people) (Hargreaves, 2010, p.3). The aspects of culture and leadership were identified as important in the NRwS and identified as important features in school improvement. The decentralisation of education policy and the desire to raise standards further have given the opportunity for this to develop. Hargreaves notes that the developing emphasis on improved leadership developed through programmes devised and led by the National College and the increasing partnership between schools have made this new way possible.

The role of SIP is replaced by the National Leaders of Education (NLEs) and Local Leaders of Education (LLEs), outstanding and good headteachers who go through an assessment process to be accredited and then are deployed up to a day a week in schools in challenging circumstances. At the time of writing they are deployed by the LA, but in the future this is likely to be led by teaching schools. Hargreaves says for these roles to work, school leaders will have to be 'ruthlessly honest' about their performance to enable schools to improve.

Conclusion

To conclude, through exploring some of the literature in school improvement, educational change and policy development in relation to the role of SIP, there is evidence that an external partner or 'critical friend' can make a positive difference, that leadership plays a vital part in school improvement, and the role of SIP was designed to be a 'professional critical friend' to challenge and support headteachers to improve schools further. The role has contradictions and tensions

within it. These included the power balance between the SIP and headteacher, the accountability of the SIP to the LA rather than the school and the definition of the role as laid down in the SIP Brief.

The last few decades of the field of school improvement have shown that there have been many changes in education. There have been changes in the belief about how best to effect educational change and improve schools as successive governments have introduced different policies and systems to deliver their vision of education. However, policy is not an objective, rational written document, but a power struggle and a compromise that means that it can develop in different directions over time and change in education has been driven by these changes of policy and interpretation of it. The rise in accountability of schools, with an inspection framework that defines success has led to further tensions, as a range of strategies have been imposed on schools. Whilst the NRwS was outlined as a 'new' relationship, it too had accountability structures built into it. Fullan (2003) talks about a moral compass that leaders have to hang on to. The moral purpose, values and beliefs of headteachers and SIPs are an important element of their professional relationship.

The end of the role of SIP is part of a time of huge change, as old systems and structures are dismantled and the face of education is changed. The new world is a range of different schools and institutions, led 'from within' by headteachers of schools judged to be good and outstanding by Ofsted, who hold the criteria for school effectiveness. The SIP team in the study LA had to negotiate this world, make sense of the role and deliver it in a way that the majority of headteachers found helpful, but that was also rated by government representatives as good in their monitoring visits. Trust is seen as a key element of relationships between external advisers and headteachers and school staff and trust, as shown by Bottery (2004), is complex and layered. The place of trust in the relationship between headteachers and SIPs is explored further as are the tensions of the role identified in the literature.

It is against this backdrop that this study explored four research questions:

- 1 How did headteachers, SIPs and national government officers perceive the role of the SIP?
- 2 How closely did the role of SIP as practised match the government SIP Brief?
- 3 What did SIPs, headteachers and national government representatives see as the main tensions of the SIP role?
- 4 Did the SIP contribute to educational change, and if so, how?

Chapter Three: The Research Design: Methodology and Methods

Introduction

This study was carried out at a time of fast moving and far-reaching change in the world of primary education. At the time of writing this continues. The research methodology and methods I used for the study had to be flexible to take this instability into account and I also built in a 'post research' element to the study.

Context of the research

My background and experience affected the way I have chosen to carry out this study. As a former teacher and headteacher and now working for an LA, I have been closely involved with schools over my career and the achievement and success of children and young people is at the heart of what I do. The role of School Improvement Partner (SIP), which the government of the time designed to create a 'new model' of school improvement, was one I took on and the 'New Relationship with Schools' (DfES, 2004) a policy that I was expected to implement. Headteachers had expectations and views about the role and this affected the way they behaved with the SIP allocated to them and how the relationship developed. There was also the way that the SIPs interpreted the role. They had to decide how to operate, based on their interpretation of the material and messages they were given and their own experience, values and beliefs.

During the time of SIPs it was the responsibility of the LA to assign a SIP to every school. The partnership developed between the headteacher and the SIP, two educational professionals. I wanted to explore the way that the LA, individual SIPs and the headteachers made the relationships their own, constructing the meaning and finding a way to fulfill the demands of the role. To decide on the most appropriate methodology to answer the research questions I first considered my position as a researcher.

My position as researcher

Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) suggest that researchers' understanding of the world informs their ontological assumptions, gives rise to epistemological assumptions which in turn give rise to methodological considerations and these in turn relate to issues of data collection (from Cohen et al., 2000). The way that people come to grips with their world can be categorised into three main areas: experience, reasoning and research (Mouly, 1978, cited in Cohen et al., 2000). Whilst we depend upon 'common sense knowing' or experience for much of our daily life, it is haphazard and random, rather than a scientific approach where theories are constructed carefully and systematically. Three types of reasoning are identified: deductive, inductive and the combined inductive - deductive approach. Deductive is based on the syllogism, a major premise based on an a priori or self evident proposition, a minor premise providing a particular instance and a conclusion (Cohen et al., 2000, p.4). Deductive reasoning works 'from the more general to the more specific and sometimes this is informally called a 'top-down' or 'waterfall' approach (Burney, 2008). Inductive reasoning is where the study of a number of individual cases leads to a hypothesis and eventually to a generalisation. Burney (2008) describes this as a 'bottom up' approach: moving from specific observations to broader generalisations and theories. This method was followed by the inductive – deductive approach which combines the two, recognising the strengths of each. Inductive – deductive is the approach that I have taken in this study. I have both identified and discovered themes and patterns and looked at the data in the light of existing frameworks.

Research is the third way that people come to grips with their world and this has been described by Bassey as, 'systematic, critical and self-critical enquiry which aims to contribute towards the advancement of knowledge and wisdom' (Bassey, 1999, p.38). This description necessitates some definitions and reflection. 'Systematic' implies that there is order and structure and a planned approach (Morrison, 2002). 'Critical and self-critical' suggest that the research methodology and research design are open to scrutiny and that 'all aspects of research are subject to reflection and re-assessment by the researcher' (Morrison, 2002, p.5).

The approach that the researcher takes depends on the way that she looks at social reality which raises several questions. Is social reality external to individuals or is it the process of individual consciousness? Is it 'out there' or is it created by people? What is the researcher's epistemological position? How does she believe that knowledge is acquired and how is it communicated to others? If the researcher believes that knowledge is fixed, absolute and 'out there' to be discovered, then they tend to be described as a positivist. If the researcher believes that knowledge is personal, subjective and unique then the researcher will choose to get involved with people and talk to them about their views and beliefs and take more of an interpretative approach. Finally, the beliefs of the researcher as to whether human beings respond mechanically to their environment or whether they can initiate their own actions will affect how they go about their research.

This study takes an interpretative approach. My position is constructivist in that I believe that the human world is different from the natural world and therefore must be studied differently (Guba and Lincoln, 1990, cited in Patton, 2002, p.96). I accept that there is a 'world out there', but that there are different ways that the world is understood by people and they make their own meaning from it: people have the capacity to interpret and 'construct' reality (Patton, 2002, p.96). We have a choice about how we behave and we can choose our actions and it is through listening to people's voices that sense can be made of the world. Patton (2002) says 'constructivists study the multiple realities constructed by people and the implications of those constructions for those lives and interactions with others' (Patton, 2002, p.96). This study was constructed in line with these views. Education is part of my social world and the education system is an organised entity within the structure of society. I see in my daily work that there are many different views and meanings made of different educational policy and practice and this study seeks to explore one facet of this, looking through the eyes of those involved and the way they interpreted it.

Radnor (2000) describes her position as interpretivist and this has influenced my work as a researcher. In this study I was trying to understand the social world. Interpretivism states that the social world is fundamentally different from the physical world because, unlike the physical world, in the social world people have their own intentions, feelings and emotions, affected by each other as well as the context in which they live. As I chose to find out about people's views, this affected the way that I carried out the research and used my position within it. My background and experiences would suggest that I would be able to make sense of what people told (and whether and how they told) me, but would also colour the way I heard it and understood / constructed what I heard from them. Ely (1991) said that everyone has their own view, a 'multiple socially constructed reality' (Radnor, 2000, p.21) and as the researcher, I wanted to understand what was happening in that world. 'To do so s/he must attempt to recognise personal prejudices, stereotypes, myths, assumptions, and other people's experiences' (Ely, 1991, p.122). It was important for me to be very open and clear about this.

The individual makes a difference. She exists within a social context. Therefore as a researcher I needed to grapple with the relationship between the values, meaning attributed to the human and the societal structures that humans create, i.e. the institutions, systems, laws and organisations which we inhabit and which inhabit our world. Giddens (1984) theorises this relationship between agency and structure calling it 'structuration'. He uses this term to synthesise the two elements: people as active forces in social systems and people working within structured situations, a double involvement of interdependence in which human beings create society and are at the same time created by it (Radnor, 2000, p.20). This commitment to understanding the social world and belief that the actors in the world construct meaning is why I have chosen this methodology, rather than a positivist approach. I have also chosen this approach to carry out my research because we are living in a time of constant change and this is particularly true of the educational world. This change is generated by individuals who make up the structures and systems that inhabit our world (Radnor, 2000, p.18). I share with Radnor this vision of people in society as active agents participating in a dynamic

changing network of interaction framed within structural conditions, rather than seeking an 'absolute truth' and correct way of doing things, which I do not believe exists.

I decided to use a range of methods including interviews and looking at documentation, both from the LA and from the National Strategies as this would enable the different voices to be heard and would make the internal consistency stronger.

Reflexivity

Patton (2002) describes being reflexive as involving 'self-questioning and self-understanding'. To be reflexive is to 'undertake an ongoing examination of what I know and how I know it' (Patton, 2002, p.64). My experience affects the way I research and the way I interpret what I hear and see. Reflexivity then, urges us 'to explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research' (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999, p.228). This research is in my own area of professional life. Throughout the study I have kept a research journal which shows the changes in my thoughts and views of the different areas as well as charting the changes in government policy and indeed changes in government, to try and make these influences and constraints clear. The notion of government 'top down' initiatives and the rapid change in education in the area of central control and local interpretation (for example the National Curriculum) as well as the seemingly 'liberating' policy (for example 'Excellence and Enjoyment' (1999)) have influenced my teaching, leadership and approaches to school improvement. I am a woman in a workforce that is predominantly female. I hold a fairly senior position in my professional life, although as a researcher I am very inexperienced. This could have influenced the way people talked to me and the willingness of people to take part in the survey. I have also worked for the LA for several years and so know many of the headteachers well. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) highlight the importance of social context and audience in research, 'interviewees' conceptions of the nature and purpose of social research of the particular research project and of the

personal characteristics of the interviewer may, therefore, act as a strong influence on what they say' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.221). This will have affected my research and a reflexive approach acknowledges and celebrates that aspect of learning, recognising that I am an insider researcher and the influence that has on my work.

Researching as an insider

I come to this research as an 'insider'. I worked as a primary SIP in another LA in preparation for the role in the study LA and this showed me some of the issues headteachers, SIPs and LAs faced in the role of SIP. I was a primary SIP in the case study LA. It is a role I have lived as well as a role that I have worked to develop at a strategic level in the LA. The world of schools and education is a familiar world to me and I bring the sense and meaning that I have developed in schools, in the LA and as a SIP. My role at the time of writing was 'Senior Adviser: Primary' and, following a restructure in the LA in light of changing government policy and the role of the LA, 'Strategic Commissioner: Standards and Achievement'. In this role I am responsible for delivering the statutory LA functions for schools and working in partnership with schools to develop a 'schools supporting schools' system. Sikes and Potts (2008), although resisting a definitive definition of insider research, consider that these are studies that are 'undertaken by people, who, before they begin to research, already have attachment to, or involvement with, the institution or social groups, in, or on, which their investigations are based' (Sikes and Potts, 2008, p.3). This is the situation in which I find myself.

There are advantages and disadvantages to being an insider researcher. One advantage is that as part of an organisation the researcher has an up to date knowledge of 'how it works' and knows the 'right' people to talk with to find out the information needed. Because of this familiarity with the people involved in the study (SIPs and headteachers) I have an existing positive relationship with them and it has been possible to gain access to the group and they have readily agreed to take part. I also felt that they talked more freely to someone they knew,

although a disadvantage is that this knowledge could mean that I overlooked vital evidence or missed elements that could have been obvious to a more detached observer. It also means that the researcher may have a preconceived idea about different people and elements of the organisation, which have developed because of their experience of working for that organisation. Ethnographers are told to make the 'familiar strange and the strange familiar' (Sikes and Potts, 2008), or to 'see the world through the other person's eyes' (Drever, 1995, p.14).

I have attempted to overcome these possible concerns in a number of ways: by meeting with fellow students who are in other fields of work to discuss my study and I think the experience of working as a SIP for another LA helped me to see that things can be done differently. In addition, visiting and talking with colleagues from other LAs as part of my wider role has shown me that the organisations called LAs can look very different and these have made me think about our culture, 'the way we do things here' and how different that is from other LAs. This was also strengthened by interviewing a former National Strategies officer who was responsible for monitoring the SIP programme in several LAs across the region and who brought a wider view to the study.

Another potential tension identified by Sikes and Potts to insider research (2008) is the effect it can have on relationships with colleagues. Good and positive relationships are central to working life and carrying out research in the workplace can alter them and put them under strain. Colleagues needed to be clear which role I was in and information that I gleaned as researcher had to be treated cautiously and responsibly. When carrying out research, I aimed to differentiate between the two roles: my work and my research. When I sent the original letters of invitation to be part of the study, I made it clear to headteachers that I was interviewing them in my role of researcher, not as the SIP Manager and I stressed it at the beginning of the interview. I think that recording the interviews also made this clear as, whilst the machine was recording it was a 'separate' time.

Ethics

I believe that the dual role of insider researcher opens up enormous opportunities to do work that can have a value and significant impact on the organisation and contribute to shared knowledge in the wider world, but there are issues to be considered with this. One of the most significant elements is to make sure that as a researcher I do not harm anyone in any way (Yin, 2009, p. 73).

One potential tension and ethical dilemma is that of power and status. I was the SIP manager and so led and managed the SIP team. However, in terms of length of experience in education, all the SIPs had more experience than me. I presented participation in the research as a choice, inviting members of the team to take part. In a previous study for my Professional Doctorate I had interviewed some of the SIPs and there had been a very positive response. I assured them that what they said would not affect their employment in the LA and that their views would be treated as confidential. In fact they were very interested in the research and several of the SIPs offered new insights and avenues that the research could follow. In some ways it strengthened the team and showed SIP colleagues that they could influence the development of the role in the LA which made them feel valued. They could see the link between research and practice from the study. Finally, they are confident professionals, several of whom have masters qualifications, who are used to talking to people and working in different environments and felt comfortable with the idea of research. I do not have a hierarchical relationship with the primary headteachers and so the issues of power and status outlined felt less important in their case. Again I assured them that anonymity of the interview would be preserved. I did not reveal to headteachers and SIPs the identity of other participants in the study and I reassured all participants of the confidential nature of what they said. Nobody is named in the work and anonymity is preserved as much as is possible in a small organisation.

I approached the participants selected by letter / email and a copy is attached (Appendix Two). This letter gained consent from all participants to be interviewed

and to have their interviews recorded. All participants were given the opportunity to comment on the draft of the chapters to make sure their views were represented accurately. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without giving reason and that some of the findings might be used in the future in publications. To arrange the times for the second round of interviews seven months later I approached the headteachers either in person in meetings or emailed them, reminding them of the study and asking if it was possible to come and interview them for a second time. I was concerned that they would not want to take part again as they have so many demands on their time. Yet, when I came to do the second phase of interviews it was interesting that several of them had forgotten the first interview and even taking part in the study. That was a healthy dose of reality for me: that my research does not feature at all in everyone's life!

Research design

I selected case study as the approach for the study, to study the evolving practice in one LA. I see strengths of case study methodology for the issue I wish to explore for a variety of reasons. The case study 'seeks to engage with and report the complexity of social activity in order to represent the meanings that individual actors bring to those settings and manufacture in them' (Stark and Torrance in Somekh and Lewin, 2005, p.33). It sits within the social constructivist perspective, which is consistent with my epistemological position.

There are several types of case study. Yin (2009) discusses the 'right' time to use case study, depending on the form of research question, whether or not the researcher has control of the behavioral events and whether the research focuses on contemporary events (Yin, 2009, p.8). He outlines three specific types of case studies: *Exploratory*, which is a pilot to other case studies and provides a basis for and generates hypotheses for future study; *Explanatory*, case studies which may be used for doing causal investigations and testing theories (Cohen et al., 2001, p.183); and *Descriptive* case studies, which provide narrative accounts. Stake (1995) also described three types of cases studies: *Intrinsic* - when the researcher

has an interest in the particular case; *Instrumental* - when the case is used to understand more than what is obvious to the observer and *Collective* case study when a group of cases is studied. He draws the distinction between the different types, not because it will be 'useful' to sort case studies, but to help the researcher reflect on the most effective methods to use (Stake, 1995, p.5). This case study is intrinsic because I have a direct interest in the case and because I wanted to learn about a particular case (Stake, 1995, p3).

This case study has been designed in line with the main precepts of the methodology set out by Stake (1995). It should be a spotlight on one instance: 'A case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances' (Stake, 1995, p.xi). This study explores one role that has been designed to support school improvement: that of the SIP. There are many other strands to school improvement and these are mentioned in the study, but the spotlight is on the SIP role and the aim to illuminate the part it plays.

A case study is of a bounded system (Stake, 1998, p. 88). In this study the bounded system is one LA. Although there are SIPs who carry out the role in other LAs and their views on these are discussed, the study explores the impact and tensions of the role in one LA. The spotlight is only shining on one LA. Case study is the story of a single instance of real people in real situations and allows the reader to enter that world and see how it works. It can bring situations to life in a way that numerical analysis finds hard. It aims to show 'what it is like' to be in a particular situation'. I am looking at the SIPs and headteachers in one LA and hopefully can bring the reader into the world – to see 'what it is like' and to illuminate it for the reader. This gives me the approach I need to explore the role of the SIP.

'A case study is a specific instance that is frequently designed to illustrate a more general principle' (Nisbet and Watt (1984, p.72) in Cohen et al., (2000, p.181). Case study considers that there may be insights to be gained from looking at the

individual case that can have wider implications and, importantly, that would not have come to light through the use of a research strategy that tried to cover a large number of instances' (Denscombe, 2003, p.30). The role of SIP was one that, at the time of writing, was a national, statutory role. It is possible that some of the findings may resonate and be informative to other people looking at effective school improvement. It also captures a short period in the journey of school improvement. As stated earlier, I have chosen this methodology because I wanted to explore and reflect on questions and examine how the practice reflects existing theories and contributes to them. Schools and LAs are different and I think looking in depth at a set of schools in one LA was an effective way of exploring the issues and so the detail involved in a case study was more appropriate than the 'wide angle lens or the distant panoramic shot' (Cresswell, 1998, p.17). Looking in detail at one situation enables the researcher to really understand how it works. It is possible to gain a more holistic picture of the setting and the people in it. This is consistent with my epistemological position of seeing knowledge as 'personal, subjective and unique' (Cohen et al., 2000, p.6).

The 'case' that forms the basis of the investigation is normally something that already exists' (Denscombe, 2003, p.31). The nature of the Professional Doctorate is that it starts with a practice based 'problem' or concern. I work in the world of school improvement, which as the previous chapter has demonstrated is a rapidly changing world with a range of views about what defines and contributes to schools and their work with pupils. The role of SIP existed as part of a framework to contribute to school improvement and I was keen to hear about the way the role of SIP worked in schools for headteachers and what SIPs believed about the role and how they lived it. This will give me greater insight into the area of study and support me in my professional role. The case study also explores the role in a set period of time – from 2008 to 2011. This covers the introduction, development and, due to changes in government, probable end of the role. It finishes by looking forward to the new educational landscape.

One of the case study's unique strengths is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence such as documents, artefacts, interviews and observations and the combination of these data types can present a strong case for what is happening and why. It promotes triangulation and captures reality. I feel this approach gives me the opportunity to examine a range of different types of evidence, e.g. interviews and documentation that can be used effectively. It will also enable me to ensure reliability and validity. The use of the multiple methods to explore and interrogate the activity can lead to a 'rich description' (Geertz, 1973) and to 'represent it from the participants' perspective' (Stark and Torrance in Somekh and Lewin, 2005, p.33).

Concern has been expressed about case study and there are several perceived disadvantages. There is a perception of it as a 'soft' method (Denscombe, 1998, p.40) with a lack of rigour. I have worked to overcome this concern. I used a wide range of data such as policy documents, SIP reports and interviewed SIPs, headteachers and a former officer from the National Strategies. To ensure that there was a range of respondents, I interviewed SIPs from each of the different 'types': former link advisers from the LA who were SIPs, headteacher SIPs and self employed consultants who were SIPs and a cross section of headteachers from the LA. To ensure a range of headteachers I categorised the schools by group size (based on number of pupils), the judgement of overall effectiveness from Ofsted held at the start of the study, the length of time the headteachers had been in post and the number of headships the headteacher had held. I ensured that the study included headteachers from all those groups. The educational professional who worked as regional adviser from the National Strategies and who had a view of how the case study LA developed, could compare with other LAs and had an understanding and experience of the national picture. Boundaries in case studies can sometimes be unclear, but I do not perceive this as a concern as I was clear that the LA is the boundary of this case study. Although some of the SIPs worked in other LAs, it was the role in 'my' LA that the study was about. The schools were all part of the study LA. I also agree with Stark and Torrance (in Somekh and Lewin, 2005) that in case studies based on policy, there needs to be

an acceptance that the wider social and historical context affects our views of the action. The definition of school improvement is given by the government and their policies designed to implement and contribute to their vision of education and society. This definition and the education policy (which created the role of SIP) means that the study is bound in context.

Finally, the issue of whether or not you can generalize from a case study has caused much debate. Bassey (1999) 'wants to reconstruct the concept of educational case study as a strategy for developing policy'. He would like every case study to end with an empirical statement about what has been found in that setting and then a '*fuzzy generalization* which shows how the proposition *may* apply more widely' (Bassey, 1999, p.55). It is possible to make a contribution that may lead to a generalization. Stake (1995, p.7) talks about refining generalization or a modified generalization where case study can contribute to knowledge in that way.

Pratt (2003) states in Popperian terms that much of the issue of generalizability is misconceived. In conversation with Bassey, they discuss the view that as in Popperian tradition any 'single (valid) instance can falsify a hypothesis, a single case study can have as much value, and be as valid, as a huge-scale experiment', thus instead of trying to avoid the problems of context, context is a valuable element in case study' (Pratt, 2003, p.164). Ruddin (2006) agrees that the case study can utilise what Popper called 'falsification', but also explores Stake's claim that case studies do not need to make any claims about the generalizability of their findings. Rather, what is important is the use that is made of them and what is important is that the findings feed into the processes of 'naturalistic generalization' (2006, p.797). I agree with Pratt that context is important: it may well not be possible to generalize from my findings to large or very different LAs, but the study can contribute to reflection on policy and different ways of looking at school improvement.

The verification and reliability of the research

Cohen et al., (2000), state that validity and reliability are requirements of effective research, but that these can take many forms. They state that in qualitative studies this issue can be addressed through 'the honesty, depth, richness and scope of the data achieved, the participants approached, the extent of triangulation and the disinterestedness or objectivity of the researcher' (Cohen et al., 2000, p.105). External validity cannot be achieved as such, because, as discussed earlier, a case study is not designed to generalise from one situation. However the description can be given in a clear and detailed way so that readers can make those decisions. The internal validity was addressed by checking with the respondents that what I had written was what they had said and sharing parts of the study with them. Multiple sources of data were used to ensure consistency. I used my research diary, interview materials, written documents from the LA and national policy documents.

Triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods (Patton, 2002, p.247). Patton (2002) outlines four types of triangulation identified by Denzin (1978b). These include 'data triangulation', the use of a variety of data sources and 'methodological triangulation', which is the use of multiple methods to study a single problem or program. The data was also generated from different perspectives including interviews with the former National Strategies officer, a range of headteachers at different stages in their careers and SIPs from different backgrounds. I also used my research diary in which I recorded incidents that arose during daily working life. In addition to using the different methods of data collection there were aspects of the research design, such as collecting data over time which showed how the changes in education policy changed direction in the LA and showed the changes in the perceptions of the headteachers and SIPs. Cresswell (1998) suggests expending most energy in those areas where there is 'dubious and contested description through triangulation' (Cresswell, 1998, p.213) and Stake (1995) recommends the researcher involves the participants in reviewing the chapters and also other 'surrogate readers' (Stake, 2009, p.112). To

achieve this I asked colleagues who knew about the role of SIP, but who were not involved in the study to read and comment.

The study: The participants and their selection and the context of the research – the Local Authority

The participants selected were six primary headteachers from across the LA, six SIPs, of the different 'types' who worked for the LA and a recently retired National Strategies adviser for school improvement who had been responsible for monitoring the introduction and performance of the SIP role across the region, including the study LA. To select the headteachers I drew up a matrix to include a range of criteria outlined below (Figure 3) and then made a random selection from each category. I wanted to include a range of headteachers, with different lengths of experience in headship. I included one recently appointed headteacher, one in the first five years of headship, two more experienced headteachers, who had been in post between five and ten years and two headteachers in their second headship. They were from different phase schools (junior and primary), with different levels of overall effectiveness, as judged by the most recent Ofsted inspection and from a range of socio economic areas in the LA. This final criterion was based on the percentage of pupils taking free school meals. The relevance of some of these criteria is often questioned by the education profession, but I was using the measures that are used by the current government as indicators. From the schools selected at the beginning of the study, one was judged as 'outstanding', four had a judgement of 'good' and one of 'satisfactory'. Inspections that took place over the time of the study judged one of the schools previously satisfactory to be outstanding and another two to be satisfactory (having previously been judged as good). This sample was chosen to try and ensure that it was representative of the schools in the LA and had some measure of objectivity. Had any headteachers declined to be part of the study I would have approached others in the group, but in fact everyone I approached agreed to take part.

	Size of school By group number (number of pupils on roll)			Ofsted judgement of overall effectiveness at beginning and end of study			Experience of headteachers in 2009		
	Small One form entry	Medium Two form entry	Large Three form entry	outstanding	good	satisfactory	New – less than one year in post	Experienced – more than five years in post	Second headship
Study schools	3	2	1	1 (2)	4 (2)	1 (2)	1	3	2
LA	16	17	10	12 (18)	30 (21)	13 (13)	7	25	21

Figure 3: Features of the participant headteachers

The SIPs

There were a range of people who worked as SIPs in the study LA (Figure 4). All had been primary headteachers at some stage in their careers (this was one of the stipulations of headteachers in the LA at the beginning of the SIP recruitment stage). They included former LA link advisers who had all qualified to be SIPs, current headteachers, retired headteachers and independent primary consultants. Again, I invited a range of SIPs to be part of the study. During the study two SIPs, one headteacher and one independent consultant left, but they had not been the SIPs I had interviewed in phase one and so I was able to interview the same SIPs in phase two of the research which added to the consistency.

SIPS	LA	Current Headteachers	Retired headteachers	Independent consultants
Study	1	1 (not in the study LA)	2	2
Team at the beginning of the study	3	3 (2 not in LA and one in LA)	2	3
Team at the end of the study	4 (one adviser /SIP left and two part time advisers joined the team)	2	2	2

Figure 4 Profile of the SIPs

The National Strategies Regional Adviser (RA)

I originally asked the RA if I could interview him for the project. He agreed in principle, but said he had to check with his line manager. He was told that I could interview him after the General Election in May 2010. However, the General Election resulted in a change of government and there was a continuing 'purdah' and I was not permitted to carry out the interview. As a result of the changes in government policy, particularly the end of the SIP role, he was made redundant and I was able to interview him in April 2011 when his contract with the National Strategies ended. The views he expressed were his own and not governed by policy or what he was 'allowed' to say.

Data collection

One of the features of case study methodology is that it employs a range of different methods of data collection (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009; Patton, 2002; Gillham, 2000). For this study I used semi structured interviews and documentary analysis. This section of the chapter explores these choices in more detail.

Interviews

Kvale (1996) describes interviews as an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest. Knowledge is constructed through the participants as the interviewees are able to talk about the 'interpretations of the world in which they live and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view' (Cohen et al., 2000, p.267). The interview constructs knowledge as the discussion takes place. It also gives 'direct access to experience' (Silverman, 2000, p.36). I used semi structured interviews for the study. These allowed for flexibility and enabled the participants to develop ideas and speak widely on these issues (Denscombe, 2003, p.113) and so the person interviewed could answer 'at some length in his or her own words' (Drever, 2003, p.1). I also chose them because they allow 'greater depth than is the case with other methods of data collection' (Cohen et al., 1989, p.308). Having selected the headteachers and SIPs that I hoped to interview, I contacted them by email with details about the study and a consent form (Appendix Two). Everyone I approached agreed to be part of the study. I asked the interviewees to choose the venue for the interview to make

them feel most at ease and to minimise disruption to their schedules and so the interviews took place in a range of settings.

I interviewed the participants twice: once in July 2010 in the academic year 2009/10. This was after a year and one term of the LA SIP programme. The set of questions were open ended, designed to begin the conversation and solicit views of the headteachers and SIPs (Appendix Three). I carried out the second set of interviews in February / March 2011 in the following academic year when the role had developed further and the content of the White Paper (2010) was known. These followed the preliminary analysis and so explored some of the issues that had arisen in the first set of interviews, followed up some of the themes from the NRwS and other issues that my research diary indicated might be relevant (Appendix Three). At the beginning of the study I believed that this time interval would show changes in perceptions since anecdotal evidence from the programme showed changes in views of headteachers and SIPs over a very short period. This covered the time of transition in the SIP role in more ways than we had anticipated. This was because in summer 2009 there was a national consultation on extending the SIP role (DCSF, 2009). This enhanced role was to develop and extend the role of the SIP further to make SIPs a key element of supporting and challenging schools causing concern. Suggestions included the allocation of more days for SIPs in schools in inverse proportion to success and giving the SIPs the authority to 'sign off' actions plans for school improvement for schools considered to be causing concern. There was talk of SIPs for these schools having more training and development opportunities to better equip them for the challenges. The divide between doing school improvement work and monitoring and evaluating the impact of such work seemed to disappear with these suggestions. These proposals did not make it through parliament. The change of government resulted in a period of uncertainty while the new government redesigned policy. In December 2010 the White Paper '*the Importance of Teaching*' suggested that the role of SIP would no longer be statutory and the emphasis would be on system leadership and development. In 2011 several LAs ended their SIP programme and some 'rebranded' it.

Documentary analysis

The journey from policy to practice and the resulting evolution is one of the interests of researchers and a feature of this study. I felt it was important to have multiple sources of information to strengthen the quality of the study, to cross check and validate findings (Patton, 2002, p.306). In addition to interviews I also used a range of documents. I used government policy documents to examine the planned role of the SIP, including the SIP Brief, various consultations and reviews and documents from the LA such as the School Improvement Strategy to review the impact of the SIP programme and explore the LA's intentions for school improvement. I took 54 SIP reports, from the six schools of the headteachers I had interviewed, from the summer term of 2008 when the programme started to the spring term of 2011. I used these reports (which are in the public domain) to track the story of school improvement and look for signs of a developing relationship between headteachers and SIPs. Finally I used my own research diary in which I recorded ongoing thoughts on the development of school improvement over the time - including my response to meetings I attended and comments made to me by other headteachers, LA officers and colleagues and government officers. These were used as part of the evidence base.

The policy documents have within them the embedded assumptions and beliefs about school improvement that underpin the beliefs of the policy makers. There is a strength in using documents as they are stable, were not created for the case study and give another view over time, but they also reflect the bias of the author (Yin, 2009, p.102), and the policy context set by the government. The LA documentation revealed the LA response to that policy, which the SIPs alluded to in their interviews and which will be discussed later in the thesis. Although documents and records do have these limitations, not only from the embedded nature of ideas as above and a range of detail, they do provide a 'behind the scenes look at the program that might not be directly observable and about which the interviewer might not ask appropriate questions without the leads provided through documents' (Patton, 2002, p.307). The different sources of information

give a more complete picture of different aspects of the case. My research diary, in which I wrote notes and thoughts on the development of the role of SIP in the LA, reflections on the theory and methodology, questions that arose and notes of comments from headteachers and others as outlined in Silverman (2001, p.193) contributed to the reflexive nature of the study and supported the triangulation as discussed earlier.

Data analysis

Patton (2002) writes of the challenge of qualitative analysis, as it 'transforms data into findings' (2002, p.432). To analyse the different data I began with a 'careful reading of all the data' as recommended by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p.210) and then aimed to 'use the data to think with' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p.210). Listening to the recordings, reading the transcriptions and reading and rereading the SIP reports and documentation, I looked for patterns and whether anything stood out as surprising or puzzling. This inductive analysis identified a range of patterns and themes that the headteachers and SIPs mentioned as important. This is also described by Guba (1978) as the challenge of convergence, figuring out which things fit together and making a 'set of categories'. This set of categories needed to be inclusive of the data so that everything is covered and 'should be reproducible by another competent judge' (Patton, 2002, p.466). Then after testing for convergence, I needed to test for divergence, 'fleshing out' of the patterns or categories identified and carefully considering the data that does not seem to fit. These categories were tested against each other in the second block of interviews. I also used deductive analysis by taking the four themes of the NRwS itself, trust, support, challenge and networking and collaboration, and using them to explore how they were interpreted 'on the ground' by the SIPs and headteachers and how they were defined in the literature and seen on a wider scale by the National Strategies officer. I carried on with this until a stable set of categories was defined and then I worked with them to clarify their meaning and explore their relations with other categories, using the 'constant comparative method' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

In addition I examined how the findings fitted with 'common sense' knowledge, official accounts and theory about school improvement as well as considering elements of Fullan's (2003) complexity theory as part of the analysis. I used the data to try to make meaning and make sense of what was happening in the relationship between the SIP and headteachers in schools in the LA and to examine the tensions in the role of the SIP.

It is often thought that in this framework it is not possible to eliminate the researcher's identity, values and beliefs from the process and that this should be acknowledged in the research. I have made it clear that my position and role means that I am very much in my research and the aim in part is to improve professional practice in the LA in which I work. As discussed earlier, the 'researcher's self plays a significant role in the production and interpretation of qualitative data' (Denscombe, 2003, p.208). However, by using Denzin's (1978) 'theoretical triangulation' and approaching it with multiple perspectives and hypotheses in mind, I kept going back to the data to ensure that I was listening to all the voices.

I completed a first analysis after the first set of interviews. This gave some preliminary findings and suggested some themes to follow up in the second set of interviews. The second phase of the interviews was based on these findings as well as some of the changes in policy. The political landscape changed tremendously during the project and so I adapted the focus in the second phase to accommodate this change and keep the study relevant to the world of school improvement. Rather than an expansion of the SIP programme (which the previous government was contemplating) we were facing the end of the programme. A major part of carrying out the study was to contribute to practice and LA policy in the realm of school improvement and so the views of the headteachers and SIPs were very valuable for that and the impact of their views on LA policy is discussed in the final chapter.

Chapter Four: The Data: Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews and identifies and analyses the themes that arose from the different data sources. It begins by discussing the different ways that headteachers perceived the role of School Improvement Partner (SIP) and the place of the SIP in school improvement. It looks at the evidence gained from the SIP reports before looking at how the four themes underlying the New Relationship with Schools (NRwS) were experienced and explaining emerging themes from the study. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the impact of the Local Authority (LA, on the role of SIP, considering how the culture of the LA shaped the role and the way it was given meaning.

SIP as adviser

The role of SIP was designed to replace the LA link adviser role, to bring more rigour to a set of procedures and processes set out in the job description of the SIP (DCSF, 2007) (Appendix One). One of the reasons identified for the creation of the role of SIP by the Regional Adviser (RA) was that the government felt that LAs did not generally offer enough challenge which, 'allowed schools to be unsuccessful' (RA). Before the introduction of SIPs, several of the functions that formed part of the SIP role were carried out by LA Primary Link Advisers who made a series of visits to primary schools, each with a different focus: data and target setting, the quality of provision and leadership and management. One of the headteachers interviewed said that he did not see any difference between the two roles of SIP and adviser. The Regional Adviser (RA) said he could remember being at a conference where the role of SIP was described and someone saying, 'why are you proposing this role, because we've got these people already and they're called advisers?' The only element of the SIP role that the advisers did not carry out was that of external adviser to the governors for headteacher performance management.

Another of the premises of the SIP role was that the role of 'doing' was kept separate from the role of 'validating or moderating' and this was clear in the national guidelines. This was a difference from the practice in the study LA where the link adviser did both. The study LA began to try and separate these elements, but one of the SIPs interviewed said it proved impossible to separate them completely and it was not what the majority of headteachers wanted or found helpful. It also undermined the idea of a 'single conversation', an element of the NRwS. The headteachers and SIPs interviewed said that when the headteachers had an educational professional they could trust working in school, they wanted that same person to carry out lesson observations, have discussions with teachers and do other 'hands on work' such as discuss the progress of the school improvement agenda. It also meant that the SIPs became more knowledgeable about the school and formed relationships with the staff which enabled them to work with them on school improvement. This policy was also changed nationally over time and the recommendation for practice changed during the time of the SIP.

Headteachers and LA primary advisers did not feel that the relationship was 'too cosy'. In the study LA the primary team had been judged as 'good' in LA inspections and in the 'Tellus' survey of headteachers. All members of the advisory team were assessed and qualified to be SIPs which meant that some schools had the same people who had been their advisers as their SIPs. Some schools felt that this was an advantage as the advisers knew the schools well.

'She had been our adviser, seen us through Ofsted and followed the process through. xxxx has known us a long time. She can see all the data and see how we have moved on' (HT1).

The SIPs who worked for the LA knew more about the areas of good practice in the LA and about the different LA teams that could be called on to support schools. The LA tried to address this imbalance by including development sessions for SIPs run by other teams in the LA, by information sharing and by

sharing good practice in SIP training and development. Even so, this was still perceived as a concern by some headteachers. It was also identified as a national concern in the review of the SIP programme (Halsey et al., 2005). Other schools welcomed the 'fresh pair of eyes' that SIPs from different schools and LAs brought with them. One example of this was where a SIP facilitated visits to schools in different LAs to widen experience of the headteachers in the study LA.

SIP as critical friend?

The SIP Brief and the job description (Appendix One) suggest the SIP would be a 'professional critical friend'. Chapter 2 outlined the discussion in the literature about how far the SIP could be considered a critical friend. The headteachers had different views about this: some of them thought that the SIPs could be described as critical friends, because they listened and helped the school reflect on the priorities. One of the headteachers talked about the SIP as a critical friend who stopped her being too complacent, but another headteacher felt that there was an agenda behind the SIP role that stopped the SIP being a real critical friend.

It was clear from the interviews that the headteachers did not want the SIPs to talk too much about themselves and their own experience or to be too anecdotal. What they appreciated was the listening and questioning and the opportunity this gave them as headteachers to reflect on their own practice. Some headteachers also said that they wanted the SIP to appreciate that successful schools can look different and operate in a range of ways. They did not want to be told what to do and how to do it. There was a strong view from the headteachers that there is no 'one size fits all' or particular way to 'do' school improvement that automatically leads to success.

SIP as 'spy?'

The SIP Brief states that the SIP is accountable to the LA and so should report any concerns about the school to the LA. This made some headteachers think of the 'SIP as spy' and this is certainly a theme in the literature as described in Chapter Two. It was expressed by several headteachers. This view changed as

the relationship and trust developed and most headteachers felt that the SIP was acting in the interests of the school, was supportive and would respect confidential conversations. As stated earlier, three of the headteachers said they wanted the LA to know about possible problems and concerns in schools. There were exceptions to this.

‘They are here to judge you not here to improve you – you keep having to explain yourself’ (HT2).

‘You can’t have it both ways – you can come in and give advice and share good practice with other schools, but if you see something that alarms you, you can’t keep it to yourself’ (HT5).

One headteacher said he felt that the systems from the LA needed to be completely transparent and the role of the SIP to be clear to all or he would hide things from the SIP and paint the best possible picture of the school, rather than admit to concerns because it could lead to unfavourable judgement from the LA. He felt that if a school was vulnerable to Ofsted then the headteacher needed solid evidence to protect him and that he wanted the SIP reports to be positive and provide the evidence that would support the evaluation of the school.

‘Kindly letters mean nothing, kindly words mean nothing. What I need is my Performance Management to be at a high level. I need my SIP report to be at a high level. We are a vulnerable school’ (HT2).

However, the majority of the headteachers expressed a high level of confidence in the SIPs. The SIPs did not see themselves as ‘spies’, but as professional partners. They told headteachers that there were some things that they would have to pass on to the LA, such as safeguarding concerns, but were keen to develop trust and positive relationships with them. The SIPs interviewed said that the headteachers had said to them that they would want the LA to know what was happening in school in case anything went wrong and everything ‘blew up’. One mentioned that

he felt there was 'no secret agenda' and this was appreciated by the headteachers. This links strongly to the theme of trust from the NRwS which will be discussed in the next chapter.

SIP as 'partner'

The very term School Improvement Partner suggests that partnership is an important facet of the role. NRwS introduced the SIP as a 'credible and experienced practitioner' (DfES, 2004, p.9). The Oxford Dictionary defines partner as 'sharer (with person, in or of thing)'. The SIP is a 'sharer', but only to a limited extent. The SIP was a visitor to the school and only in the school for a very few days each year. It is the headteacher who is accountable for the performance of the school. This was mentioned by some of the headteachers.

'I'm not sure whether it is a partner. Partner suggests someone who is there every day. This is a professional relationship: that is a better word. You are partners so far as they are in a professional relationship' (HT4).

In addition, the limited number of days in the school meant that the SIP could not know everything about the school. If headteachers chose, they could restrict the SIP's access to the school and limit the information that they gave. If the school did not include the SIP in a full and honest discussion then this showed a lack of trust and the SIP was not a true partner.

'The word "partner" is a misnomer. I have a SIP from the outside; he only judges the school on a tiny bit of information. He does not have enough local knowledge of the school' (HT2).

The word 'partner' suggests equality and the SIP/ headteacher relationship could be seen as having unequal power balance which could lead to tension and this is discussed later in the chapter. The SIP had the power to write things about the school and report concerns (although all SIP reports were shared with the headteacher before being sent to the LA) but the headteacher had the power to

restrict access and information to the SIP. At the beginning of the programme the LA records show there were some headteachers who made it difficult for the SIPs to access the school by not responding to requests and then changing the dates of meetings, or not being available for the expected time of the meeting. On the other hand, one headteacher interviewed said that she felt that because she could contact the SIP at any time and had many conversations out of school hours with the SIP it was a partnership: she and the SIP discussed many issues about the school. She said that she also really valued that 'special time' and the quality of the conversation and that, for her, the SIP was a partner.

The SIPs also held mixed opinions about the role of partner. Some of them felt that they were partners and there was a true partnership; others less so. It was in the area of accountability and the necessity to make 'objective' judgements in the SIP reports that made SIPs think that the relationship was not really 'partnership'. Conversely, some SIPs found it difficult to keep a distance from the schools and interpreted their role differently. Several SIPs mentioned in the second stage of interviews how important it was to remember that it was not 'their' school and that they should not interfere too much, or suggest that there were 'right' ways of doing things, rather that they should let the headteachers decide.

'I find a tension between the coaching role, letting the heads come to their own decisions and wanting to tell the heads what to do – letting them come to their own decision. I'm so bossy!' (SIP3).

This SIP/ headteacher relationship was also an imposed one, which affected the power balance. Every school had to have a SIP and was expected to work with the person they were allocated – all they could do was veto a particular SIP. The majority of headteachers interviewed were positive about their SIPs. The interviews showed that the partnership looked different in different schools and this seemed to depend on a range of factors such as the character / leadership of the headteacher, their length of service, the effectiveness of the school as judged by Ofsted and where the school was in the Ofsted cycle. The headteachers also

interpreted the role of SIP differently. The interviews showed that they needed / wanted different things from the SIP. Some headteachers, particularly newly appointed headteachers, used the SIP very much for general advice on a range of issues in the school and contacted the SIP outside the visit schedule with queries about a wide range of school management issues. Those headteachers considered the SIP to be a partner.

The story told by the SIP reports

The SIPs had to write a report after each visit (except the Headteacher Performance Management which was confidential to the headteacher and governor panel). These reports were for the headteacher, governors and LA and could be requested by Ofsted inspectors during inspection. National guidance on how to write SIP reports was given in the booklet 'School Improvement Partner Reports' (DCSF, 2007). The purpose of the guidance was to make sure the 'SIP programme has the maximum impact on schools, contributing to their effectiveness and raising the achievement of all learners' (2007, p.3). The quality of the SIP reports was assessed and changes to the reports requested in light of these guidelines and criteria. The SIP report was expected to show the challenge and support provided by the SIP. The RA described this as 'hearing the voice of the SIP in the report'.

'The SIP has advised that it is good practice to regularly update the SEF as a self-evaluation tool' (School 6, SIP Report 2).

SIPs in the LA were given this guidance and also received training sessions from the RA in report writing. It was expected that the reports would follow the guidance and they were judged against the criteria. The SIP team and SIP Manager critically read them and gave feedback to ensure consistency and that the guidelines were followed. The RA also took a sample of reports each term, which formed part of the assessment of the LA's implementation of the SIP. At the beginning of the SIP programme both headteachers and SIPs felt that the structure of the reports was too complex and as a result, the draft paperwork was presented at headteacher

meetings each term for comment and feedback. Each term the SIPs contributed to the development of the report format. This made the reports more comprehensive as they brought experience and examples from a range of different LAs where they also worked as SIPs and it increased their ownership of the process.

It is difficult to trace a theme through all the reports because the above processes restricted individual style and promoted consistency, although what can be traced is the growing conversation and relationship between SIPs and headteachers. In School Six the development of the safeguarding procedures in the school can be tracked. The level of challenge appeared to vary from school to school, as did the support. Some SIPs used questions in the reports to challenge.

‘How do subject co-ordinators monitor provision and standards – have they developed a knowledge of SWOT [Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats] in their own subjects? What is the level of their direct observation of their subjects being taught?’ (School 4, SIP Report 3)

One development of the report system was the completion of some elements of the reports by the headteachers in advance of the SIP visit. This meant that the bulk of the time spent in the school could be used for discussion and for school improvement activities such as lesson observations, learning walks and discussion, rather than sitting in the headteacher’s office completing the form. It also gave the school the opportunity to put their own views forward. The quality of the reports mirrors the quality of the relationship between the school and the SIP. In one school where the relationship with the SIP had been unsuccessful and a new SIP allocated, a more informal style and deeper relationship can be seen in the language and the style of the reports.

Sometimes schools were described by LA colleagues or the RA as ‘not on the school improvement agenda’ and evidence of this was seen in a few of the reports where the school identified and highlighted a wide range of issues not concerned

with pupil outcomes or the published SIP agenda. The actions identified in the visit were not followed through.

‘The results analysis was not sent’ (SIP Report School 6, Report 2)

In other schools actions were followed through and the reports showed a clear story of school improvement over time. This is reflected in the self evaluation grades in School 1 which showed an improving story.

The reports were analysed in the light of the themes identified in the NRwS: support, challenge, and networking and collaboration and the themes that had arisen in the interviews. There were features that could be tracked. This was seen very clearly in School 1. The tone of the reports for School 3 changed when there was a new headteacher: there was much more detail and information about school improvement. Previous reports felt a bit ‘distant’, were more general and less focussed. One feature of the reports was the very positive support for the headteacher and the challenge was strong and couched in positive terms. In School 4 there was an Ofsted inspection that had not gone as expected and the subsequent SIP visit was a discussion about the inspection, the school’s reaction to it and possible ways forward. The SIP showed great support of the headteacher by turning the SIP report into a mini inspection report that contained the judgements that the SIP felt were a true reflection of the school, but also ways forward. This deviated from the SIP agenda, but led to a more trusting relationship, a very clear school improvement agenda and an increase in the challenge offered. It allowed the school to move on and get back on track.

The majority of the reports were very supportive at the beginning of the programme. This supports the SIPs’ comments in the interviews about the importance of building a relationship. They then became challenging to a different degree in different schools – which, with my knowledge of what was happening in the LA, appeared to be directly affected by what was happening in the school. For example one school had an unexpected and disappointing Ofsted outcome (later

overturned in appeal) and it was clear from the report that a great deal of support had been given to the school by the SIP.

In School 1 the journey from satisfactory to outstanding can be traced through the reports as term by term the grading of self evaluation improved and the SIP confirmed the judgements. The tone of the reports changed with changes of SIP. It is possible to see a more positive approach and relationship between the SIP and headteacher in the school improvement report conversation with the third SIP than the previous two. This is further supported by the experience of School 6 where the Ofsted team commented positively on the SIP reports and how they told a story of improvement and showed challenge and successful intervention from the LA. In the reports the 'SIP voice', mentioned as so crucial by the RA was very clear and the challenge for school improvement in a range of areas clearly expressed. School 2 was reported as 'doing very well'. The SIP reports showed a very positive picture, with high grades confirmed, until the Ofsted inspection, when the overall effectiveness was judged as lower than expected and lower than the SIP reports indicated would be the case. At the following visit the SIP lowered his judgements. This caused a breakdown in the relationship between the headteacher and the SIP, as the headteacher felt that the SIP had not been an independent voice. However the relationship was repaired over time, the SIP reports became more positive again and stated that the school had improved. This was mirrored in the comments of the headteacher about losing trust in the SIP when this happened and then regaining it over time and also links to differing views of school effectiveness held by the SIPs, headteachers and government.

The reports also showed whether or not the schools acted on the advice given by the SIP. In some schools the same comments /actions reappeared term after term, but in the end were not mentioned and were never completed. In other schools they were always completed. The analysis of the SIP reports also showed growing networking and collaboration between schools. I tracked the comments of schools asking for support and the instances of the SIP writing about where schools could go to find out more about an aspect of school improvement and these increased

over time. There are also several incidents of SIPs recording the support that schools would like and then several where the SIP has taken this back to the LA and support has been put in place. This links with the underpinning themes from the NRwS.

Themes from the NRwS

Figure 1 in Chapter Two showed the elements of the NRwS, which set out a new paradigm for school improvement that the Labour government wanted to implement. The model is underpinned by four themes: trust, support, challenge and networking and collaboration. In the interviews it became clear that the most important of these for the SIPs and the headteachers was that of trust. This arose both from the interviews and was also a theme identified in the literature.

The importance of trust

Every SIP talked about trust. This was the most important element to them and their first aim when working with headteachers was to engender and then develop it. Trust takes time to build, but there is general agreement as shown in Chapter Two, that the first thing to do was to offer support and to 'do what you say you are going to do' (SIP2). Trust developed at different rates in different schools, depending on the SIP, the headteacher and the context of the school. The statutory nature of the SIP function, the initial views of 'SIP as spy' and 'SIP as inspector' meant that some headteachers were wary of this new role. Before they talked about the challenges they faced and the barriers to success in their schools with an 'outsider', they wanted to be sure that they could trust the SIP. The SIPs were generally successful at gaining and developing trust.

'He came across as someone I could trust. He was up front and honest and there was an open dialogue from the start' (HT5).

'For me, the biggest things are relationships and trust. I think school improvement is all about relationships' (HT2).

All headteachers interviewed talked about the importance of trust and in the main were very positive about the SIPs. Despite being a positive relationship, the headteachers did not see it as a 'cosy' or 'comfortable' relationship.

'You have to have a good working relationship. That doesn't mean you have to be all pally pally' (HT1).

One aspect that grew as trust developed was that the headteachers shared concerns about their schools and the interviews showed they valued the opportunity to have someone to talk with about different aspects of school life, someone that they could share these concerns with as well as explore and share problems and barriers to school improvement. The SIPs saw this as crucial to carrying out the role of SIP successfully. Headteachers needed to believe that the SIPs understood the context and unique nature of their schools' needs. Headteachers also wanted to believe that the SIPs had the skills and experience to do the job well. I discuss the nature of trust further in the next chapter and explore how it developed in the SIP/ headteacher relationship. The reverse proved to be equally the case. On the few occasions where the relationship broke down, the headteachers and SIPs cited lack of trust as the main reason for this. Trust takes time to develop and so for the schools where there were changes in the SIP early in the programme, it meant that the school had to work with a series of people over time. Due to staff changes in the LA a small minority of schools had several SIPs in a short period of time. However good the handover process, it was still a new relationship and these headteachers kept having to 'start again', building trust.

'I have found the process disjointed. I am on my third SIP now.' (HT1)

There was also the theme of 'two conversations' (the conversation in the report and the conversation in the meeting) that the headteachers had with the SIP (discussed later) which is key to this study. This shows the level of trust of the headteachers in the SIP, that they could discuss issues that concerned them and

knew that they would be treated as confidential and that they could ask more questions and discuss wide ranging aspects of school life and would not be judged. This also relied on a clear culture of trust from the LA with the SIP: that the SIP would do the role in the way that was best for the school. The fact that some of the headteachers expressed the view that they would want the LA to know the challenges and difficulties in school too showed a level of trust in the LA. The LA aimed to have a positive relationship with schools: to celebrate their success, but also to hold them to account for performance. This was also reflected in the culture of the LA, discussed later.

‘We have a close relationship with the LA. If something major happened and I tried to cover it up. It would break the relationship down’ (HT5).

‘I am very honest because if there is an issue or a problem then the LA needs to know about it. If it all blows up in my face I want them to know’ (HT3).

As trust grew and the role evolved some of the headteachers used the SIP time more widely around school to contribute to their school improvement agenda. They showed trust in letting the SIPs leave their office, wander more freely and go around the school unsupervised. One of the SIPs reported that a headteacher had said:

‘I’m not going to come with you on the tour. I completely trust you to go around and check for evidence’ (SIP6).

This wider way of working looked different in different schools and was a development and extension of the original SIP role. Examples of the activities in which SIPs were involved were: work with the senior leadership team on leadership skills, joint lesson observations with middle leaders to improve their skills, carrying out pupil interviews and work scrutiny and following one of the school priorities through from the plan to practice. This in turn gave the SIPs a

fuller picture of the school and more knowledge on which to base their challenge conversations. One headteacher said that the wider role enabled him to use SIP visits to moderate and contribute to school self evaluation. It also showed how the headteachers took control of the relationship in different ways in relation to their own experience, confidence and the position of their schools. Several of the heads and SIPs gave examples and instances of different elements of the trust.

‘I think it’s about making it work for you – feeling confident in the relationship so you can speak honestly and trust that person, but also making sure that there is that element of challenge’ (HT4).

‘It takes about 2 – 3 years to build up that trust and then staff realise that what you want to do is help and support. Once you have that level of trust you can say things without offence or defence being taken’ (SIP2).

SIP1 also felt that it took about three years to develop that strong relationship of trust. She also felt that sometimes there could be a positive SIP / headteacher relationship, but it was good for the school to have a change of SIP when ‘you feel that you have done all you can with a head’ (SIP1). One of the other SIPs agreed with this, citing the example of a headteacher who she felt had developed so much over the years that: ‘sometimes you feel that you can be of no more use to a school and they need fresh pair of eyes’ (SIP4). This supports the idea that the SIPs in the LA were not trying to create a ‘cosy’ relationship. The original SIP Brief recommended a change of SIP after three years. This was seen by many to be insufficient time for the relationship to make a difference and was changed to five years. The SIP programme ended before five years had passed so we did not find out what would have happened if change of SIP had been ‘enforced’. I think it would have been controversial as each year headteachers and SIPs were offered the opportunity to change if either felt the relationship was not working out and this rarely happened. There was also a view from one headteacher that the relationship of trust was important for her, because on several occasions she had not been able to complete the actions agreed and the headteacher wanted to

know that she could trust the SIP to listen and then support or challenge appropriately.

‘That relationship is so key because you have to be able to say “I haven’t got very far on that priority because that is what happened” and she’ll listen and support’ (HT6).

Support and challenge

Trust was seen as the most important feature of the relationship and the foundation for it to develop further. When trust was established the SIPs said that they could look to offer support and challenge. These two themes will be considered together in the analysis as they are closely related.

‘First of all you have to build up a rapport of support, that you do value the work they have done. This is in order for them to feel comfortable and trust you enough that you can challenge’ (SIP1).

The former Regional Adviser (RA) described the support and challenge of the SIP role thus:

‘What makes a good SIP? It is challenging in a supportive way and supportive in a challenging way. It is someone who is asking those difficult questions, asking when and why and the so what and the impact’ (RA).

All the headteachers interviewed said that they found their SIP supportive and all the SIPs interviewed said they thought that the role of SIP had a great deal of support within it. There was a shared belief held by the headteachers and SIPs that people respond better to support and supportive challenge than challenge alone and it was important to show and establish that support and then build on it to offer effective challenge. Some SIPs expressed how different the nature of the role was when they were supporting and challenging schools judged to be outstanding and schools in challenging circumstances. Two SIPs said they found

those schools judged to be outstanding harder to support and challenge than schools judged satisfactory. This was because there was so much good practice already in the schools that they were not sure what they could contribute to school improvement. Several of the SIPs interviewed commented that that they found that the headteachers of the schools judged to be outstanding were always keen to be challenged and to look for ways to improve further, it made them 'keep looking at their practice' (SIP1). The majority of the headteachers of schools judged to be outstanding were positive about the SIP role. They commented on the fact that they were pleased to have time from an external educational professional, as the previous policy of 'support in inverse proportion to success' had meant that they had not had as much support and challenge from LA advisers. These headteachers appreciated the opportunity to discuss their schools and help them to develop them even further.

'As an outstanding school we have to find challenge and he is quite creative in the way he "digs deeper"' (HT4).

'The headteacher is particularly challenging in x school, but open minded and wanting to do things in different ways which is why the school is successful' (SIP2).

The headteachers interviewed felt that the use of challenge and support helped them reflect and develop their schools further. The SIPs too felt that they offered both challenge and support successfully. Schools judged as satisfactory were felt to be 'more straightforward' (SIP5) to challenge as the data suggested clear priorities or the barriers that were easier to identify. Interviews with the SIPs showed that this was done in different ways, but all SIPs mentioned the importance of this role. The different ways that support and challenge were offered again reflected the different cultures of the schools and the styles of the headteachers and SIPs.

‘I challenge all the time but from support. You can’t carry on doing that (being positive and supportive) all the time. You have to use that platform and push and push and push a bit more’ (SIP1).

‘It is about challenging the comfort zone; it is not about successful relationships it is about school improvement’ (SIP2).

That appeared to be a key feature of the SIP role and understood by all the SIPs. The success of the role should not be judged on successful relationships, it should be judged on the impact on school improvement. Although it is difficult to isolate the impact of the SIP, as there are so many elements that affect school improvement, it is easier to talk about school improvement, to hold a mirror up to someone and offer challenge when the relationship is positive and people listen more to challenge when they respect and trust the person offering it. This challenge and support was also stronger when the SIP used the time in schools well, using the knowledge of the school and the priorities that the schools had in their school improvement plans to anchor the conversation and this is set out in the NRwS: that the school priorities should be central to the process, not those of the LA. However there is a tension within this as the NRwS also says that schools should ‘align their priorities to the national ones’ (DfES, 2005, P.5). None of the headteachers or SIPs mentioned this in the interviews. All the headteachers and SIPs interviewed said that they felt that it was not a ‘one size fits all’ model. Although there were similar aims and purpose, to make it effective, the SIPs changed the way they carried out the role depending on a range of factors, such as personality of the headteacher, how the school was approaching improvement issues and how successful this was judged to be.

All headteachers interviewed said that they welcomed and valued the challenge the SIPs brought. As already mentioned, for several outstanding schools it gave them the chance to meet with a SIP and reflect on and improve practice further. A few headteachers said they also welcomed the sense of accountability and the external pressure from another educational professional.

‘She has to be bossy with me to get me to do things. She does challenge me’ (HT6).

This headteacher talked about the challenge the SIP gave over actions that were in the School Development Plan. She knew that the SIP would follow up on the actions and she said that part of what motivated her was the knowledge that the SIP was going to come back and ask questions. This kept her on track with school improvement despite the other distractions in headship. The SIP held her to account for the key features of school improvement. This aspect of ‘keeping on track’ was identified by one of the SIPs:

‘The ones where I feel like I’m most effective are where I just don’t tick the boxes. ...Take xxx, I am constantly on his back, really challenging difficult conversations, but he is very positive about me’ (SIP3).

It felt to her that the headteacher was not listening or engaging, but he welcomed the challenge because it ‘made him think’. The most effective challenge appeared to be challenge offered in the ‘right’ way. Challenge was initiated in a variety of ways: from a specific area of school life that could be clearly evidenced and reported, from the ‘dropping’ of information and questions, encouraging headteachers to reflect on practice in their schools (but leaving the action up to them) to the relentless following up of the issues identified. Support was seen as equally important. One headteacher talked about the staff’s view of the SIP as supportive and someone who was there to support the whole school community.

‘They don’t see the SIP as someone who is sorting me out. They see it as a support for the school’ (HT6).

In one school where there had been a change of SIP and the school had received an outstanding Ofsted report, the headteacher was very positive about the revised role and attributed some of the success of Ofsted to the new SIP.

‘Ever since we have had our new SIP we have felt supported and encouraged. We know what to do and why we are doing it. She was interested in the school; she hasn’t pushed her own agenda’ (HT1).

Several headteachers commented on the personal support offered by the SIPs: these include support for difficult conversations with staff members and with governors, making a special trip to the school during the Ofsted inspection. The support received could also be positive in terms of staff confidence.

‘She made me see that we were better than we thought because Ofsted had damaged our confidence so much last time – the Ofsted team said they had never seen such a terrified staff’ (HT1).

The support and challenge came through the different ways that the SIP role was interpreted. One of the most important aspects for the SIP was to know the school and see the evidence behind what the headteachers said. Two headteachers said that it was possible to ‘tell them what you liked’. In the relatively short time the SIPs were in school (the average time was three days over the year actually in the building) it was possible for headteachers to ‘control’ the visits, to disguise some elements of practice and keep the SIPs away from certain teachers or classrooms.

‘It can be sheer and utter camouflage’ (HT2).

Knowledge of the school, the priorities and the stage of development were seen by the SIPs to be crucial so they could ask the ‘right’ questions. This tailoring of visits to the school was seen by all parties as crucial and something that developed over time in the study LA. As the SIPs spent more time in the schools, seeing different aspects of school life and the progress the school made, they felt more able to carry out the role effectively. However some headteachers chose to expose the areas for development they had identified in their schools because they felt that this would be the best way of addressing

them. They were clear that they wanted to use the SIP to help them improve areas of the school and were happy to reveal these to the SIP. These were the headteachers who saw the SIP as partner and also critical friend.

‘You have to understand what makes the school tick. You have to start from where they are’ (SIP1).

‘You judge the stage of development and provide for that’ (SIP2).

‘School culture is really important. In the most successful schools it is about “how about?”’ (SIP2).

Where the school was reluctant to work with the SIP it could cause problems, both in the short and longer term. One SIP commented on a ‘robust conversation’ in a particular school which tested his relationship with a member of the senior leadership team. He felt that the challenge had made the headteacher feel uncomfortable and he did not want to hear or reflect on the questions raised.

‘What do you judge success by? I have made a big impact on one person in a school which at the moment seems negative, but maybe it is what is needed, a situation which really needs to be resolved’ (SIP2).

The SIPs were clear that whatever the headteachers said and however they felt about the school, the role of SIP was to challenge and support to enable the school to improve. They were also sure about the definition of ‘improve’. Whilst making use of the structure from the guidance, the reports also included a wider view of school improvement and the celebration of different aspects of school life and ‘Every Child Matters’. Although this wider picture is mentioned in the SIP Brief and in supporting documentation provided for the SIPs, it was an aspect that the national evaluations mentioned as an underdeveloped and neglected element of the SIP role (Cowen, 2008, Halsey et al., 2005).

Tensions could appear where headteachers and senior leaders felt the challenge was too strong. This was not the case in any of the headteacher interviews, but in my LA role this did occur and I recorded these instances in my research diary. In one situation the school felt unable to work with the SIP other than the minimum number of visits and requested another member of the team to do any school improvement work or additional time the school was allocated. In another school the relationship broke down and was deemed by the headteacher to be irreparable. In this case the SIP asked to be moved to another school and at the same time the school asked for another SIP as both felt that the relationship was not working. These situations had to be handled carefully as the purpose was to support and challenge the school, but where the trust had broken down we found that this meant that school improvement did not happen. It also showed the importance of relationships and the match between SIP and school.

There was a view from a few of the SIPs that the aim of increased challenge for schools was also behind linking the performance management of the headteacher (HTPM) with the role of the SIP. Previously this role of external adviser to the governors had been undertaken by an educational professional, but not often one who was familiar with the school. One of the aims of the NRwS was to 'join up' the different elements of school improvement so that there was a 'single conversation' and that the person having this conversation would know about the school. Headteachers had different views on this role, depending on the relationship they had with their governing body. One headteacher felt very strongly that the SIP should not be involved with HTPM. This was because he saw it as a form of line management and so felt this undermined the notion of partnership. He felt he could not share some of his concerns about the school and his work with someone who was also reporting to the governors.

'I feel it is a different relationship with someone who is a line manager and I consider PM to be a sort of line management. Why would I present my vulnerability to someone who reports to my governors and to the LA?'
(HT2).

On the other hand, some headteachers said they welcomed the support of the SIP in dealing with governing bodies to ensure that the targets set were realistic and fair. They liked the fact that the targets were linked to the work of the school over the year in a more meaningful way. This links to the importance of trust. One headteacher interviewed recalled that he had mentioned that he had not yet completed his School Development Plan as a chance remark and then found it on his SIP report as an action and then as an objective in his HTPM. He said that he would not have admitted this to the SIP had he realised the impact, but that he did need to write the plan. This challenge had helped him fulfil his role.

Networking and collaboration

The fourth theme of the NRwS is that of networking and collaboration. Although an underpinning theme in the policy, it was not mentioned at all by SIPs or headteachers in the first set of interviews. The subsequent findings showed that it had become more important as there had been time for it to grow and develop. It was the element where the SIP role was judged by headteachers as less successful in the study LA and the two national surveys of Halsey et al. (2005) and Cowen (2008) show that this was also the picture nationally. With a combination of SIPs from outside and inside the LA, it was a challenge to find a way to ensure that everyone had enough information about the good practice in other schools to be able to link schools and signpost to good practice. Headteachers appreciated the information that the SIPs brought about good practice from wider sources and wanted to know more about what was happening in other schools. It was also hard to keep up to date information about the schools and to know where all the good practice existed as schools develop and change so quickly. Where SIPs worked with several schools they often linked schools from within 'their' group. In addition the external SIPs recommended practice from their 'home' LAs and others used the information provided about the LA schools to network.

'It is one of the things he does – when he sees good practice' (HT4).

‘One of the best things is the cross fertilising and pollination. I see something in one school and then pass it straight on’ (SIP4).

There was a view from the LA SIP that this was a strength, because it is a small LA and there is an assumption that as ‘everyone knows everyone’ the information is widely held.

‘Networking is very good – schools link well together. We know the strengths and we put people in touch informally, “why not give so and so a ring and go and see that”’ (SIP6).

This was not seen as the case by all SIPs. SIP2 said that he felt that networking had been a weakness, but that it had got stronger and stronger over time. He mentioned that he did spend time putting headteachers in touch with each other, both formally and informally, both in the study LA and others he knew. He took one headteacher to a school in a different LA so that she could see a school in a similar catchment to hers yet which was away from colleagues so she could be completely honest and not feel pressured by any possible judgements from local headteachers.

The LA attempted to collate the areas of good practice identified by the SIPs and schools and distribute the list to both schools and SIPs, but many schools were reluctant to put aspects of practice forward. One SIP interviewed said she believed that this was often the case because schools did not always realise how successful they were in some areas because they had nothing against which to benchmark. She felt that one of her roles as SIP was to take this experience and knowledge of what constitutes good and outstanding and share it with schools. With the increased focus on schools supporting schools and schools working in partnership in the future, this area of work is likely to be important in the future.

System leadership

The Coalition government is clear that the future of school improvement is schools working together and sharing the good practice that they have: for schools to support schools. Some of these partnerships are growing from existing informal networks, others from a shared need or focus for development. The role of the LA looks likely to change as this becomes more established.

‘Networking is best when it is sustained by fairly stable groups, not too small or too big. Eight schools seems good, the heads know each other and so link up person x to person y’ (SIP2).

Effective partnership working will rely on schools being prepared to be honest about their strengths and priorities for development. My experience shows that schools do not always want to link with nearby schools, or with people they know well and the SIPs were aware of potential sensitivities around this area. The ‘schools supporting schools’ approach to school improvement relies on schools sharing their strengths and priority areas, supporting each other and taking responsibility for the outcomes of the city as a whole. This relies on a high level of trust. Some concerns were expressed by both SIPs and headteachers about networking. There is a concern that some schools would be ‘left out’.

‘There are some schools that are insular and so there are some schools that don’t fit into a cluster or don’t engage’ (SIP4).

One SIP commented that in her work with another LA, she had tried to develop an effective cluster of schools which had taken time and successful in some areas and not others. That group had taken about two years to come together and at the time of writing worked as a unit, discussing priorities and allocating funding. At a headteacher meeting in January 2011, some headteachers said that they felt the performance and priority areas for all schools should be public and shared, because they were all responsible for all the children in the city. This new spirit of openness and the expression of moral purpose will be interesting to track as

schools increasingly rely on schools for support and this is discussed further in the next chapter.

The RA talked about his view of why networking and collaboration was seen to be the least effective element of the role. He felt that there had been a flaw in the system because action planning was missing and he saw this as a vital step in the school improvement cycle. He felt that the inclusion of this would have enabled a more coherent system.

‘They should have had action planning and then you would have had the full cycle:

1. What is the evidence that identifies the issues?
2. What are we going do about it – what do we need to do internally and what extra support might we need?
3. How you are going to do it?
4. Monitoring the impact as it goes through the school and then 1. Back to the evidence’ (RA).

Schools have been responsible for their own improvement for some time, but there is a feeling among some senior officers in the LA that they do not all appreciate this fully and are too dependent on the support of the LA and that the role of SIP contributed to this dependency. The LA has been trying to develop partnership working and to develop networks of support amongst schools. Schools were allocated into geographical ‘clusters’ for the Extended Services funding. When this funding ended many schools decided to stay with those partnerships and develop them into networks for school improvement. A few headteachers asked if schools in the partnership could have the same SIP, other partnerships have said that they will fulfil the SIP function amongst themselves. Emerging elements from changing policy also affected the role of SIP. The Local Leaders in Education (LLEs), headteachers judged to be outstanding or good whose schools have good achievement, can apply to the National College of School leadership to take on this role. 18 headteachers have been accredited as LLEs in the study LA.

However, to date the role of LLE has been seen as working alongside the challenge role of the LA or SIPs, rather than one of direct school improvement. There was also a view from some headteachers and existing SIPs that the LLEs may be the 'new SIPs' and concern has been expressed that they will not be willing to offer a sufficient level of challenge to colleagues.

Another view of partnership: Two conversations and the importance of confidentiality

'There's what goes on informally and what goes on in the report' (SIP1).

An emerging theme from every interview was the existence of two conversations: one that went into the SIP report and one that stayed in the headteacher's office. SIPs interviewed saw this as part of the role. They were happy to talk about a wide range of school issues and were clear that they would maintain confidentiality when the headteacher requested it as long as it was not an issue such as child protection or safeguarding, something that the LA 'needed' to know. Headteachers interviewed also said that they discussed many things in the SIP visit that they asked to be 'off the record' and that the LA 'did not need to know about.'

As former headteachers the SIPs appreciated the pressures of the headteacher role and as they had been through similar times of difficulty they understood the need for someone to talk with about such issues. They saw no conflict in this approach and were comfortable with the dual nature of the meetings. They all identified support for the headteacher as important, both for the development and progress of the school. It was also seen as a positive way to cement and develop the relationship between SIP and headteacher.

In the second phase of interviews, this feature was still mentioned, but was talked about less frequently. A few SIPs said that this was partly because the headteachers asked them to write concerns into the report, but not in such an obvious way, rather they were woven into the text. One SIP suggested it was

happening less because headteachers saw the report before it went to the LA and they knew that they could alter it if it was felt to be inappropriately or insensitively written. Because governors see the report and they are 'open' documents, it was agreed that it was important that they were written sensitively. One SIP said he wrote an initial draft of one report in quite 'a hard-hitting / stark way, expecting to be asked to change it, but the headteacher had been happy to leave the report written in that style and did not ask for changes. He wondered whether this headteacher was using him to get difficult messages across to staff members through the SIP and aiming to distance himself from the 'bad news'. SIPs were clear that they would not keep some things confidential. The fact that the majority of the headteachers felt that the SIPs respected their confidences, but also accepted that there were some things the SIP would say, shows the strength of the relationships and averted one of the major tensions mentioned in the literature.

The importance of the LA: culture and systems

A second theme that emerged from interviewing the SIPs, many of whom worked in a range of LAs, and the RA who worked in the south east, was how the SIP role looked and felt in different LAs and that the culture of the LA defined to a large extent how the role was played out. The study LA is a small unitary authority. At its largest the primary team had eleven SIPs, four of whom were LA advisers in addition to their SIP role. It was possible to have all the SIPs together in a room and talk informally about the role and the 'way we do things here' and to involve the SIPs in the development of the role. The SIPs who worked with other LAs reported that in a large LA where there are hundreds of schools and many SIPs, it was impossible to do this. They felt that this had led to the messages becoming less clear and less ownership of the role. This almost personal engagement with the role in the study LA led to strong bonds in the team and very positive culture and partnership. The SIP interviews showed that they were very positive about this and welcomed the opportunity to be part of the team. The RA interviewed said that he felt that the mixture of SIPs from different backgrounds and different LAs had made the role more successful in the study LA. A series of subthemes emerged in this area that supported the view of the importance of LA culture and systems.

The positive relationship between primary schools and the LA

A key factor of the success of the SIP programme seemed to be related to the positive relationship between primary schools and the LA. I have worked as an adviser only in the study LA and, whilst I met colleagues from other LAs at SIP training and other conferences, I had not really considered the different culture at that level. However, during the time of the study I worked as a SIP in a different LA and I attended the regional meetings of SIP Managers where there were discussions and sharing of practice. These highlighted the different approaches of different LAs. This was also apparent to the SIPs who worked in a range of LAs and to the SIPs who were serving headteachers in other LAs and so themselves were allocated SIPs. It was commented on by all the SIPs who worked for several LAs.

‘SIP has evolved because the LA has been really good and not interfered with the nature of the role – because you gave us feedback’ (SIP2).

The type of SIP

In the study LA the SIP team was formed from a range of different groups including LA advisers, serving headteachers from the LA and from other LAs, retired headteachers and independent consultants. The feeling of the headteachers and the LA advisers was that this variety was an asset and made the team stronger. This varied in different LAs.

‘Some used all their own advisers as seen previously, other authorities saw it as an opportunity for changing their relationship with the heads and their schools and actually getting the heads much more involved in their school improvement processes, so took on SIPs who were heads’ (RA).

It was sometimes difficult for serving headteachers to be SIPs and this is explored further in the next chapter. One of the SIPs who was a headteacher in another LA decided to resign as a SIP because he felt he was too distant from the role, both geographically, it took him a long time to travel to the study LA, and because he

could not offer sufficient flexibility to the schools he worked with because of the demands of his own school. He had to change visit dates because of events in his school which caused the headteachers in schools in the study LA some frustration. A headteacher from the study LA who was a SIP found it uncomfortable to be involved in discussions about other schools in the LA. In contrast, another of the SIPs, himself a headteacher in a different LA, said that he did not have any concerns about being a SIP. He said he had developed a strong team in his school so he was not 'called back' and he felt that his current experience made him more effective as a SIP than the LA advisers. This was because headteachers could see that he knew and understood what they were talking about and he could offer relevant advice from firsthand experience, whereas it was some time since the advisers had been headteachers. One headteacher said she liked the wider experience of the LA SIPs because they could draw on experience of work in many schools. Two of the retired headteacher SIPs said that they felt that their extensive and varied headship experience was very valuable in the role of SIP, but that they were worried about their 'shelf life'. How long could they stay up to date with the fast moving world of education and 'know all the acronyms'? Some of the headteachers said what they valued was the breadth of experience across the local area – so that there was a range of schools that the SIP knew about and could use in their work to highlight practice.

When a SIP left the study LA headteachers were offered a choice of SIP from the SIP team. Half of the headteachers chose an external SIP as a 'fresh pair of eyes' the other half chose LA adviser /SIPs because they knew the schools well and had the respect of the staff and headteachers themselves. Reputation or 'word of mouth' from the headteachers in the LA also played a part. The RA said that there had been a debate centrally about whether experience of headship had to be recent or could be more distant. His feeling was that there were some headteachers who would not make good SIPs but some who had been 'out of headship for ages but who would make superb ones' (RA). His conclusion was that it was not about the amount of time and distance from the serving headteacher role but how reflective they were. In the SIP Brief (DCSF, 2007) it

does not stipulate headship experience as a requirement for the role of SIP, but in the study LA, when the headteachers were consulted about the role, they asked for this as a requirement. This reflects the original government idea of a 'credible and experienced practitioner'. Different headteachers valued different skills and experience and this is why I think the SIP process needed to be carefully tailored and the match of SIP and headteacher was crucial.

The match of SIP and headteacher

In the SIP allocation at the beginning of the programme, great care was taken to try to match SIPs and schools: by phase, experience and leadership style, but the promotion and departure of the Primary SIP Manager and one of the SIPs after only one term of the programme meant that the LA had to appoint new SIPs. It was decided it was impractical to reallocate all the SIPs to schools, as relationships were forming. There was a national database composed of potential SIPs who had completed the rigorous training programme and identified the LAs in which they would be able to work as SIPs. Two new SIPs were appointed from this database, but, these appointments were less successful. They did not stay with the LA long, which meant that a handful of schools had three SIPs in a relatively short period of time. As shown earlier, this was commented on by one of the headteachers interviewed who felt that she had not managed to develop a relationship over time to discuss school improvement and had found the process 'disjointed'. However she was very happy with her third SIP, a previous LA adviser who had worked with her school before and she identified the things she was looking for in a successful SIP:

'You have to want to do more than paperwork, you have to want to see things on the ground and not want to seem to catch the school out and want to make your own paperwork look good' (HT1).

Another headteacher who had to be allocated a new SIP in the same circumstances said 'I don't want someone who is going to tell me what to do and I don't want someone who is going to tell me what he has done'.

The clarity of the SIP Role

It was apparent from the evaluations of the headteachers and the interview with the RA that some headteachers felt that there had not always been sufficient clarity from the LA about the role of the SIP. In some LAs they replaced former link advisers with SIPs. In the study LA it had been decided to keep the role of adviser for schools as a separate role: for the LA adviser to work with the schools on the wider, more general school issues and the SIP to focus on the specific school improvement areas of the visits. In practice, as the relationships between the SIPs and the headteachers developed, the headteachers contacted the SIPs rather than the LA advisers for advice and discussion. One of the headteachers interviewed said he had only just starting using his SIP for wider activities because he had not appreciated he could do that and colleagues had told him. This tension was identified in the feedback from headteachers about the SIP programme and to me in my LA role. Having the two roles also seemed to contradict the stated aim of the NRwS for a 'single conversation'.

Primary school SIP systems in the LA

The LA regularly discussed the SIP role with the headteachers and SIPs and the minutes of headteacher meetings and SIP development days reflect this as does the format of SIP reports and the guidance given to SIPs. However the 'SIP Handbook' which formally documented the process, although revised several times during the role of the SIP, was not always published to keep up with these discussions. This supports the views of the headteachers that there had not always been enough clarity. One of the SIPs, also an LA adviser, said that she thought that the SIP programme had led to improvement in the systems and practice in the LA. The LA team learned from the external SIPs as they brought knowledge of good practice and expertise from a range of different contexts. The greater number of educational professionals meant that advisers did not have so many schools to support and colleagues could focus on supporting fewer schools. It also ensured consistency for schools. Although prior to SIPs there had been a visit report format for the schools and an expectation that all visit reports would be completed, with the exception of the target setting, the systems lacked rigour and

so the quality and consistency of knowledge about schools was improved with the SIP process.

The data from the interviews showed that the Ofsted inspection process was a real concern for headteachers and most headteachers talked about how pleased they were with the support from the SIP, both in the lead up to inspection and the aftermath. As referred to earlier, one exception was the headteacher who talked about the tension he felt when the SIP changed his judgements at the visit to match those of the Ofsted inspection, even though the end of Key Stage results were higher than the previous years.

‘This was not an independent judgement because he changed them. It is the independence of the judgement. After the Ofsted that graded the school as satisfactory not as good as previously, I expected to be supported by my SIP. The LA and others were supportive, but the SIP, who ostensibly knows the school best, should have been there to support this’ (HT2).

In the second year of the SIP programme one of the measures used by the National Strategies to judge the quality of the SIPs’ work was to look at the accuracy of the prediction of inspection judgements against actual outcomes, particularly the final grade for overall effectiveness, but the SIPs did not feel that the Ofsted grade was a real measure of their effectiveness. One SIP said;

‘You might think I am a good SIP because all the schools I work with are judged good or outstanding but this is more about the nature of the schools I have been assigned’ (SIP2) .

He did not think it was necessarily his work that was making the difference. Although his challenge and support were making the school reflect on their performance, there was too much else going on and many other elements that contributed to success. This was also mentioned by the RA who said that there was more pressure from Ofsted on schools where the attainment data did not

suggest that they are doing well, but where the progress data was good. One headteacher described the comments of a parent who came to visit because his child had been allocated the school. He said the parent was very impressed with what he saw on the day, but was holding the most recent Ofsted report and using it as a reason why he did not feel the school was the right place for his child.

A lot more freedom and autonomy is given to schools judged to be good and outstanding. One of the roles of the SIP was to discuss the school's self evaluation and judge how robust it was. This sometimes translated into 'helping with the SEF' (the School Self Evaluation Form, which was part of the evidence Ofsted used for inspection). When schools felt they were due an inspection they often used the SIP as they had previously used link advisers, to prepare for the inspection and this further blurred the roles of SIP and adviser. Some of the SIPs supported the schools through inspection, meeting with the inspector and discussing issues with the headteacher over the phone. Others, because of their other commitments, were unable to do this and so this role was carried out by the LA. The RA was quite clear that he felt that this was not the role of SIP, but the schools asked the SIPs for this support and the SIPs gave it.

Tensions in the role of primary SIP

When the headteachers were asked directly about any tensions they had found in the role of SIP, the majority were very positive and said that there had not been many, if any, tensions or concerns. This was interesting and somewhat surprising, given the initial reluctance to engage with the programme and the implications of the NRwS discussed in Chapter Two and expressed by the headteachers. Once the SIPS and headteachers had forged positive relationships, the headteachers valued the dialogue and in some cases felt they had more time with SIPs than they had with the LA advisers previously and so valued this opportunity. Even so, there were tensions expressed on a range of issues, such as accountability, the views of school improvement and the focus for the meetings.

The role of the primary SIP in school improvement

The rationale for the NRwS was to put the school and its improvement at the centre of the school improvement process, rather than 'sending policy down' to schools:

'to give schools greater freedom and autonomy and thereby release greater local initiative and energy in schools, helping them to raise standards.' The role of the SIP was, 'to provide school leaders with challenge and support that is tailored to their needs and delivered to nationally consistent standards' (DCSF, 2007, p.3).

However, there was a view from some headteachers that the NRwS was another accountability initiative, rather than rebuilding a more positive relationship, it was an interlocking set of criteria to 'drive' schools down a certain path, determining and defining for them what was considered to be important, rather than respecting their beliefs about the purpose of education and school improvement. This created tension for some headteachers because they did not feel that the policy of NRwS represented their values and yet they held were accountable to and judged by the criteria. This was identified by one headteacher interviewed.

'School improvement is linked to data and to Ofsted, the new framework is too linked to Ofsted. The SIP comes in and everything is focused around the results and learning and the other stuff - well the 'other stuff' is school improvement.... it is not developmental enough' (HT2).

He saw these links as a barrier and limiting factor to what schools could achieve.

'We first thought that Ofsted should be developmental, but people jump through the hoops* and everything else gets neglected' (HT2).

*Curriculum, SATs, Ofsted.

As such he was opposed to the role of SIP and did not see it as an improvement on previous school improvement systems. In his interview he was clear that he

preferred the local approach, working with people who knew him and the school well, rather than an 'outsider' who did not know the local context and situation coming to 'judge' the school. This relates also to 'type of SIP' which was discussed earlier. Other headteachers interviewed were more pragmatic about the role of SIP and saw it as making a positive difference to the schools.

'Ultimately the SIP is there to do a job. They are there to make your school better and I think that any headteacher worth their salt wants that too. We're good, what can we do to make it better?' (HT4)

'There is a set agenda and very limited time' (HT4)

One of the tensions mentioned in the interviews of headteachers and SIPs was that they felt that the time allocated was insufficient and the agenda fixed which meant the headteachers could not focus on their own school issues. One of the headteachers said that he felt that if his school had more SIP time it would help him to improve it more quickly. He felt as a new headteacher that the SIP was helping him with school improvement.

The LA responded to the feedback about the set agenda by stressing the importance of the agenda negotiated between headteacher and SIP. The prominence of the school agenda is emphasised in the SIP Brief, (DCSF, 2007) but was not interpreted in that way by the LA at the beginning of the programme.

As the programme developed one of the things the LA tried was to make the report format simpler and the visit more school focused and school led. This is clear in all the SIP reports. They begin following the format very closely using the tight structure. As time goes on they become less structured as the school drives more of the agenda. There are only two reports out of the 54 I used for the study that showed a complete abandonment of the structure. This happened when there were unexpected and unusual circumstances in schools. One SIP was unable to do her 'official' SIP visit because on arrival at the school for her visit, the headteacher was too distressed to concentrate and so the time was spent

addressing her immediate leadership needs. The SIP went back on another occasion to carry out the planned visit. In another school there had been a serious staffing issue which affected the way the SIP role developed. When interviewed, the headteacher said that he felt that the school / SIP relationship was 'running behind' that of other schools. He discovered this from headteacher colleagues and from the SIP himself. He felt that the SIP had supported him through the difficult time, but that this had been at the expense of the school improvement agenda and the SIP had got involved in areas of school life that would not normally be seen as part of the role. The headteacher said that at the time he had welcomed the change of focus and the flexibility of the SIP. He felt that because of the difficulties in the school he had not been able to focus on the school improvement agenda, but also that it was the SIP who tried to get the school 'back on track' with its own planned improvement and action.

'We lost sight of the school improvement role (of the SIP) and he brought us back' (HT5).

Clarity of the wider role of SIP – a developing role

Headteachers and SIPs felt that the 'loosening' of the SIP role had enabled the SIPs to work more effectively and contribute more to school improvement. Most headteachers interviewed used the SIPs to do some element of school improvement activity, including carrying out learning walks, interviewing pupils and working more widely with staff members. This was in complete contrast to the role as originally defined. Several headteachers mentioned this in the interviews. They talked about how much they appreciated the wider role and the difference it was making to the schools. The SIPs felt that they could do this role.

'It is all very well looking at the systems, the impact, the management, the data – but what is actually making a difference in the classrooms?' (SIP6).

The RA talked about the development of the wider role of SIP in the national context. At the beginning of the programme one of the directors in the central

government unit did not feel this was appropriate and so would not permit it to be part of the role. The RA reported that the National Director had said 'SIPs aren't Ofsted inspectors. They shouldn't be going in to classroom and making judgements.' One of the headteachers commented that by staying in the headteacher's room the school could:

'pull the wool over the SIP's eyes, because all heads can talk for England' (HT2).

This is related to the issue of trust. If schools were concerned that what they said would be reported back to the LA they would have been less likely to let the SIPs 'find out too much' in the school. Several headteachers talked about how this wider role led to the SIP's ability to make judgements about leadership and management and about the school as a whole: for example one headteacher said that he had spent some time with a new member of staff looking at her planning, advising her on teaching methods and assessment and from doing this had learned a lot about the systems in the school, how widely they had been shared and how accessible they were to a new member of staff. His plan was to ask the SIP to do this because of the good quality information he would receive about the school which could be used for self evaluation. Allowing the SIPs to work with other members of staff also gave the opportunity to build capacity in the schools' leadership teams. One of the headteachers linked this with the issue of trust, headteachers trusting the SIPs to work in the school, but this was also a tension. One SIP described being asked by the headteacher to look at how a policy was being followed in the school. She discovered that it was not consistent in all classrooms. The leadership team was 'embarrassed', but followed it up the same week. In this case the SIP was following the guidance of the headteacher and was able to 'hold a mirror' up to the school. The headteacher had assumed that all staff were following agreed policy, but the SIP found that this was not the case and the leadership team addressed it quickly.

Some headteachers of schools in challenging circumstances had been allocated extra SIP days as part of their support package and these had proved very popular and effective and encouraged the LA to trial the enhanced SIP role. The support was seen as making a positive difference to those schools, but this also caused tension for some of the SIPs as it was different from the original premise of the role. If they started 'doing' school improvement, could they then judge the outcomes? This shows the development of the policy from central government.

'Does that compromise my independent judgement? Because I want to think that my work with them has been effective' (SIP3).

This was something about which the RA also felt very strongly.

'The role is not about doing – it is about validation and there should be a distinction which is not necessarily made clear – "I'm not here to write your SEF or to make your judgements for you". You can say that on the basis of the evidence the SIP's view is that it is nearer a 3 than a 2 or whatever, but if the school believes that is what it is, that is fine' (RA).

One headteacher talked about the support she had received from another member of the SIP team in response to her allocated SIP's concern that there were some issues with data analysis in the school. This was at the time when the LA was trying to keep the SIP and adviser role apart, which was why a different person was asked to work with the school. The headteacher said she found the visit very helpful and was impressed with the speed that the SIP could analyse the data to ask her questions and get to the main issues in the school.

All the headteachers interviewed said that they felt that they could use the final visits of the SIP programme to concentrate on the school priorities. Schools are at different stages in their 'journey' and wanted to make different use of the SIP. The activities SIPs were asked to do varied and there was a choice over agenda. The paperwork no longer asked for the SIP to validate so many judgements, rather to

focus on fewer elements but more deeply. Putting the school at the centre and appreciating that every school is unique and special is another theme in the literature and made a difference to the SIP programme.

‘It is not one size fits all’ (HT2).

‘It looks different in different establishments. What are the different factors?’

The factors are:

- The confidence of the headteachers
- The stage of where they are in their role
- Security in their role
- Balance of strength on the staff
- Challenge from the staff

It is completely unique and it has to be tailored’ (SIP2).

Successful SIPs adapted their style to the different schools they worked with. It may have been that SIPs had strong views about how ‘best’ to carry out school improvement, but their role was to support and challenge headteachers about the way the headteachers identified and addressed the priorities in their schools, not to recreate their own school in another place. One headteacher, newly appointed, said that what he liked about his new SIP was that she recognised there was no ‘right way’ to do things.

The SIP model – how close was it to the government brief?

When asked how the way the SIP role was lived out in comparison with the role outlined, one headteacher stated that he had ‘no idea what the book said’. I was interested in this and followed this up in meetings with other headteachers in the LA. The majority of headteachers said that they are so busy in their schools that they do not have time to read government policy directly. They said they rely on summaries from the LA, information from colleagues and from their professional associations. This has implications when policy is presented to them. One headteacher said:

‘I come to the meetings that you hold and then I know the main things that have happened and where to go if I need to find out more. They save me hours of reading’ (HT4).

This showed that the way that the LA introduces and translates policy is crucial and makes a real difference to the way it is perceived. As discussed earlier, some headteachers were concerned when SIPs were first introduced that the role of SIP was like a mini Ofsted inspector and that the SIPs would be ‘spies’. One of the SIPs said she felt that was because of the way it had been originally introduced to headteachers, rather than about the role.

‘It got marketed as something that could be harsh, a mini Ofsted, but the booklet [The NRwS and SIP Brief] wasn’t like that’ (SIP1).

This could account for the anxiety of some headteachers at the beginning of the programme, but with the SIP focus on making strong relationships and building trust, this did not last long. SIPs interviewed felt that they had changed this perception and made the role their own, based on their beliefs about education and the best way to work in professional partnership with headteacher colleagues. The White Paper *‘The Importance of Teaching’* (DfE, 2010) suggested that the SIP role would no longer be statutory, leading to some anxiety from headteachers who said that they felt they had formed good relationships with their SIPs and valued this professional dialogue, support and challenge.

The SIPs too felt that they had taken the role and developed it further from the SIP job description and person specification (Appendix One) which lays out clearly the range of tasks to perform and the SIP’s role within them.

‘The government role is a very dry basic minimum and I think we cover that and do more and I think as a result we get more from it. I think if we just did

that dry SIP role you get answer and evidence but not the result. The results in xxxx are evidence that it is working well' (SIP4).

In some cases, the SIP Brief was very similar to existing LA procedures – for example the role of the SIP in target setting. This process was carried out by SIPs in the study LA in exactly the same way as it had been done with link advisers and was judged by the National Strategies to be outstanding. At the same time, in other ways the SIP programme was more developmental. As said earlier, at the beginning the visits were felt to be too prescriptive. Feedback from headteachers in the LA said they felt driven by the report format and several of the headteachers interviewed were concerned that the role of SIP was more about LA compliance than school improvement. The RA mentioned that this was the case in several LAs and may have been about the LA's interpretation of the guidance. This was addressed as the role of SIP developed and as relationships between schools and SIPs grew and the LA invited schools to contribute to the development of the programme. The report structure and content was shared with headteacher colleagues each term and feedback requested. Headteachers said that the completion of the paperwork was one thing that 'got in the way' of the visit and the SIPs felt they spent too much time in the headteacher's office filling in forms. The LA trialled different systems, such as pre-populating the forms, widening the visit brief, giving options for schools to choose and agreeing a focus with the SIP and feedback showed that these changes made a difference. The SIP Brief states that the agenda should be designed in partnership and not imposed upon schools. This links with the literature about successful school improvement taking place where there is joint ownership and everyone is involved, which is discussed further in the next chapter.

Whilst I can see looking back at the SIP Brief that there was flexibility in the guidelines to work in this way, at the time of introduction it did not feel that this was the case. A National Strategies officer visited the LA each term and the progress towards implementation of the SIP programme was judged and recorded and formed part of the assessment of the LA itself. At that stage the role seemed to be

fixed. Messages from the National Strategy changed each term as they received feedback and also as members of the National Strategy team changed. This led to more flexibility.

‘I think to a certain extent we are moulded by the external framework, we can’t help it’ (SIP1).

The SIPs in the team also felt that the LA had changed the role from the original intention and also commented that it looked different in the different LAs in which they worked. Several of them worked in a number of LAs and could compare the approach with other LAs across the region.

‘It was a model of accountability and certainly like that in other LAs I worked in as a SIP. In this LA it was not like that. The SIP manager always had a clear message, “how can we support schools to improve” and everyone is conspicuously pleased when a school does well at inspection’ (SIP2).

‘You used a strong teamwork approach and involved the SIPs in the development of the programme’ (SIP5).

Did many LAs carry out the role as envisioned by government? Some of the judgements that SIPs had to make were to say whether they agreed with the school’s grades on a range of issues, for example: were the targets set sufficiently challenging? The RA said that

‘Few SIPs in the region were prepared “to stick their necks out” and record a judgment that was different to the schools’ (RA).

He said he thought that the government had hoped that the SIPs would be much ‘more cut and dried and evaluative’. From his visits to LAs he felt that in some cases SIPs were ‘rubberstamping’ the judgements of schools and that it was difficult to find a record of the SIP challenge or conversation in the reports. He also

said that in some regions in the country there was a real reluctance of headteachers to engage with SIPs.

‘Some LAs said “why should I talk to you about that and what are you going to do with this information? Who is going to know about it?”’ (RA).

He talked of one highly performing LA that refused to employ external SIPs, trained all their link advisers and carried on with minimal changes to their systems. Their grading as an LA of outstanding meant this was allowed to happen. The regular visits from the RA provided accountability for the DCSF. This mirrors the flexibility that schools judged to be outstanding have with national policy and guidelines.

Part of the RA’s role was to monitor the LA implementation of the SIP role and report to the DCSF. He talked about his role in promoting the importance of shaping the SIP role to the school needs and that this was not always the case nationally and regionally. There was nationally produced ‘guidance’, but most LAs interpreted it as expectations. This included a programme of visits throughout the year and recommended time allocations, which was omitted from later editions of the SIP Brief because LAs used it as a ‘straitjacket rather than guidelines’. The RA went on to cite one example where he had been observing a SIP visit as part of his quality assurance role in a school (in another LA) where there had just been an Ofsted inspection. He felt that it would have been sensible to abandon the ‘official’ agenda because what the school needed was a conversation about how to move the school forward from the inspection, but the SIP stuck to the visit agenda.

Several of the SIPs commented on the ‘loosening of the agenda’ over time; that they started with the SIP remaining in the headteacher’s office asking the questions, then moved to a controlled agenda and then it became a mutually agreed agenda. SIP 3 talked about interpreting the role.

‘I feel that I am doing it wrong because I am doing it in a slightly different way from the actual brief’ (SIP3).

She felt that the headteachers told her things that they had not told advisers previously and she felt that this enabled her to discuss the key issues and support and challenge appropriately. This is a link with trust and the quality of the relationships the SIP made with the headteachers.

The role evolved over time and the fact that the majority of headteachers asked for it to continue is evidence that it was valued. I needed to reflect on whether the role had become so flexible that it had lost all accountability. Yet, the message from headteachers was that they would like the role to continue because they welcomed that objective view and discussion, the support with difficult issues and the discussion with an experienced colleague who had a wider view of the educational landscape than felt possible when running a school full time.

If SIPs disappeared tomorrow?

With the uncertainty around the future of school improvement, in the second round of interviews I explored views of what might happen if the role of SIP were to disappear. Several concerns were expressed by headteachers and SIPs, from the personal impact to a wider view about school improvement. There was a feeling from headteachers that they would still welcome the ‘challenge conversations’ around school improvement.

‘I would want someone to support me with school improvement’ (HT1).

‘Reality tells me that schools are always going to need some support and there is going to be an accountability role and that has to be somebody’ (SIP4).

There was a feeling that the SIPs, who had experience of headship and had proved to be supportive in times of difficulty and positive about the success of the schools, made a difference to school improvement.

‘We need wisdom and experiences and a perception from outside our school’ (HT1).

The SIPs too had a range of views and in the second round of interviews in February 2011 I took this as the starting point. There was uncertainty from both SIPs and headteachers and a lot of speculation. One view was that the new group of headteacher leaders: Local Leaders of Education (LLE), a role for headteachers, might replace SIPs.

‘How will the SIP develop? Who knows? It could be interesting; can all SIPs be advisers as well? Do they all have the skills to go in and support a school?’ (SIP5).

‘I foresee overlap between the LLE and the SIP. Will other heads accept them or will there be professional jealousy? There could be a clash of roles’ (SIP2).

Several LAs decided to stop their SIP programme as soon as the funding ceased and this decision left schools in some LAs with no school improvement professionals. Some of the SIPs who work in these LAs have been ‘bought in’ by the schools who wish to have that continuing high level conversation. In the study LA the overwhelming feedback from headteachers was that they would like the role to continue in the short term as a time of transition. The LA was keen to develop and extend the existing Learning Partnership (a high level strategic group made up of leaders in education across the city) and formalise arrangements for schools supporting schools in April 2012 to enable schools to organise the services they felt they needed.

A changing context

‘They have taken away a framework, but not suggested anything to replace it’ (SIP1).

The period from March 2010, as preparations for the General Election started and the government went into Purdah, was one of uncertainty and change. I observed this at meetings within the LA, with the National Strategies and in meetings with colleagues in other LAs. It made planning for the future challenging and local elections added another dimension of uncertainty. The change of government slowed some changes down. The primary curriculum review was one example of this. The ‘new’ curriculum had been printed and delivered to schools across the country, but did not get through the final stage of statute and was abandoned. In the study LA there was also a change of council leadership which affected local education policy.

Ending the SIPs?

The end of the statutory role has been a huge disappointment to the SIPs, not least because it is their livelihood, but also because it was seen as very successful within the study LA.

‘It has been very successful, especially in this LA. I don’t understand why they are stopping it, both as a head and as a SIP. Why stop something that is so successful and has worked so well?’ (SIP5).

The view from the headteachers interviewed was that they still felt that they needed the role of the SIP:

‘I really value it. It’s kind of unique really – it’s a link with the LA and I know that you know what is going on in the school, but it is also time just for me’ (HT3).

‘If you removed the SIP then I would consider buying someone in because things could slip. In schools where they kept the LA at arm’s length and then Ofsted came – then they have gone into a category. This was because nobody was going in and giving an external perspective. You need a view from someone who goes into a range of schools and who can compare and contrast good practice; who can say – “oh no, focus on that instead of this” and boost you if you are doing the right things’ (HT1).

In contrast, some of the headteachers were looking forward to schools leading the system.

‘I still worry about removing that accountability, but I’m very prepared to explore new avenues and I like the idea of LLEs. I like the idea of partnership working’ (HT4).

So do you need a SIP?

Views from the headteachers interviewed were mixed on this question. Of the six headteachers interviewed, three said that that they felt they needed a SIP and three were excited about the possibilities of working in a different way.

‘Yes I need a SIP – I’m the sort of person that has to have that professional there to support what I’m doing and have dialogue with. Some heads have no need – I have a real need, so if the SIP system wasn’t in place I would go and seek it anyway. I need it as well as support from local heads. It is like support at a different layer. There has to be someone to pull you up – that’s what I need’ (HT6).

‘There is nothing to say that, there’s no reason why, what the SIP brings to the table can’t be supplied by someone like xxx (a headteacher) for example’ (HT5).

There is a concern as to whether the LLEs have the 'right' knowledge of school improvement systems. One programme that has been associated with rising standards is the Improving School Programme (ISP) which has a range of tools and systems and data shows this has been very effective across the country. Some of the headteachers of more successful schools are unaware of these systems and tools. At the same time, some of the schools who have used and embedded these tools and processes successfully are not eligible to be LLEs because of the criteria for selection.

SIPs and headteachers expressed concern about schools supporting schools because they felt some schools could be left out and become isolated. At the time of the study there were 'clusters' of schools that had been set up to deliver the extended services agenda. With the end of that programme some clusters disbanded and some new ones were started. As a result there were schools that were no longer in partnerships. A mapping exercise carried out in the summer term 2011 showed that there were schools that were not part of any group, who preferred to work alone, but at the time of writing it is not evident whether this will impact negatively on school performance. Other SIPs felt that it was important for schools to have someone to celebrate their successes and were not sure that the school partnerships would do this effectively.

SIP5, a serving headteacher, identified the need for schools to have the capacity to release headteachers to work with other schools. This could be an issue for school improvement as shown by the slow progress in a project that the LA has funded where schools support each other as the schools try to get diaries to match and often cancel visits. This was also mentioned by the RA who was concerned that headteachers would be out of their schools much more and wondered whether their schools would suffer and also whether governors would be happy to release their headteachers for extended periods.

Conclusion

The findings from this study indicate that, in the study LA, the SIP programme was largely successful. Firstly, both SIPs and headteachers were positive about it. The headteachers found the SIPs both challenging and supportive and the SIPs found the headteachers positive and enthusiastic. If the success of the SIP role is judged by the resulting Ofsted effectiveness judgements, then it has been successful. At the time of the study the number of schools in the study LA judged to be good and outstanding was well above the national average and no schools were judged to be inadequate (there had been schools judged inadequate before the SIP programme). However, I think that there are too many factors to attribute this only to the work of the SIP. The impact of the SIP programme was judged by the RA as at least good and in some aspects outstanding.

Part of the success may have been because the study is LA small, relationships are strong and there is a similarity of views and approaches.

‘There are very close relationships in xxxx, phoning each other to talk about it. Always ready to help each other but the flip side is that everyone knows your business’ (HT3).

The SIP team was small and all the SIPs were involved in developing the SIP role. The majority of the SIP team carried out the role in other LAs as well as the one in this study and they commented on the strong positive culture of the LA and the strength and expertise of the headteachers.

‘When I started in xxx I didn’t feel that I was doing such a good job. It didn’t matter what the school needed or wanted, we had a list of things we had to do’ (SIP4).

However the evidence suggests that the LA can sometimes be too informal and lack clarity over systems and procedures. The SIP handbook revised versions took a long time to publish and the SIP evaluation showed that a few headteachers did

not feel positive about the role. What the LA tried to do was to enable schools and SIPs to work together on the agenda of the school, but within boundaries. The headteachers felt that relationships with SIPs were vital and particularly trust, which developed over time. They felt that their relationships with the SIPs were positive relationships and one headteacher mentioned the fact that where the relationship had not worked out, the SIP was no longer working in the LA and this had led to further trust between LA and headteachers. Yet analysis of the interviews with SIPs and headteachers shows that there were several shared concerns. One theme that some of the SIPs and one headteacher mentioned was the accountability framework of the role. One headteacher felt that the role of SIP overlooked elements of what makes a good school and focused on too narrow a definition of school improvement. Despite this, this headteacher had still felt he could use the SIP role to support self evaluation of the school, gather evidence and have a professional dialogue with the SIP. The schools did not see the SIP as a 'spy' or the role as 'dishonest'. Rather, they had developed positive relationships with colleagues from a range of backgrounds and used the external view as a support for their leadership. The next chapter looks in more detail at these tensions and the elements of the NRwS to discuss the role of the SIP in light of the literature.

Chapter Five – Discussion: The Role of the SIP and the Tensions within it

Kent (2009) proclaimed ‘SIPs that drive us to drink’. Was it the case that the SIPs were ‘spies’, ‘Ofsted inspectors by the back door’ and ‘people doing the government’s bidding to drive us down a particular view of school improvement?’, or were they critical friends, trying to make schools ‘better’? The data highlighted a range of tensions.

Policy context: A New Relationship with Schools (NRwS) and the School Improvement Partner (SIP)

The ‘new’ relationship between government and schools was designed to give schools ‘greater freedom and autonomy’ (DfES 2004). It was believed that the NRwS would lead to a further rise in standards and meet the education promises made by the Labour government in 1997. The aim was for SIPs to support:

- ‘a simpler, streamlined school improvement process based around a school’s own annual cycle of planning, development; reflection and evaluation’ (DfES, 2004).

What sort of SIP?

The different types of SIPs were a tension for headteachers. The study LA followed government guidelines and appointed a range of professionals as SIPs: former link advisers, serving headteachers from both the LA and other LAs, retired headteachers and independent consultants (who were former headteachers). The breakdown is shown in Figure 2. Different LAs took different stances on this. The RA when interviewed said that the government challenged some LAs about their choice of SIPs, but if outcomes for pupils were good then the LAs had the freedom to do as they wished. Having new people in the LA brought a wealth of experience and a detached critical eye to the ways of working and to the systems and practice. This was the feeling of the LA adviser / SIP, who felt that it brought ‘fresh eyes’ and new ideas which resonates with Stoll and Fink (1996), who talk of the

potential of the role of external change agents who do not have a 'particular axe to grind' (Stoll and Fink, 1996, p.145). Headteachers' views were split fairly evenly. Some headteachers interviewed preferred to have an existing adviser as their SIP, others preferred the external SIP. In her evaluation of the NRwS, Cowen (2008), found that generally primary headteachers were less positive about the SIPs who were also serving headteachers. This was because headteachers were not always perceived to have the right skills for the role or because they were not able to make time because of the demands of leading their own school. This was the case for one of the SIPs in the study LA, who said he found it very difficult to carry out the role because of the demands of his school. He had to change meeting dates, which was frustrating for both him and the school and he resigned as a SIP after two terms. On the other hand, I met a headteacher at the National Consultation in 2009 who was a SIP for more than ten schools who had used the funding this brought in to grow and develop staff in his school. He felt that seeing practice in other schools and LAs helped him reflect and improve practice in his own school. There were other tensions for serving headteachers. One SIP, a serving headteacher in the study LA, felt uncomfortable attending meetings where the performance of schools was discussed. Attitudes have moved on since the end of the SIP programme with an increased emphasis on the potential of system leadership where 'headteachers of successful schools accept responsibilities beyond the boundaries of their own schools and are prepared to help with other schools' (Hargreaves, 2010, p.5). Headteachers in the study LA are working as Local Leaders of Education (LLE) and National Leaders of Education (NLE) and DfE officials are signalling these leaders as the 'new SIPs'.

SIP recruitment and training

The SIP recruitment process comprised an online application form, followed by a 48 hour online assessment. Successful candidates then went for a two day selection process which was one day of training and one day of assessment. The focus was very much on data analysis. Although the SIP Brief (DCSF, 2007) identified the evaluation of the 'Every Child Matters' agenda as part of the discussion a SIP should have with a headteacher, the RA and Cowen (2008)

stated these wider themes were not really embraced in the same way as laid down in policy. The SIPs believed that this was because of the perceived agenda and the way the training and development was organised and because of the limited time in school. The focus on data analysis was reinforced by the assessment criteria of the SIP programme, carried out by termly visits from National Strategy officers. These visits each had a focus and criteria against which the LA was assessed: for example how closely SIP judgements of schools matched Ofsted outcomes. The SIP Brief (DCSF, 2007) also made it clear that the discussion of performance was a crucial element of the role. In the study LA each term there was an opportunity to discuss 'celebration' of any areas of school life the headteacher wished to mention and the SIP reports showed that these often included elements of 'Every Child Matters' (DfES, 2004).

White (2008) identified this in his own experience as a SIP. He described how the tension became evident early on in the training when after the introductions, a powerpoint about the 'Role of the SIP' appeared and the second bullet point stated, 'For the first time we will have a real lever on school improvement, i.e., the headteacher' (White, 2008, p.1). His feeling was that 'by this very statement, the "powers that be" seemed to be of the opinion that the SIP role was essential because of the intransigence of headteachers, evidenced in the fact that schools have not performed well enough to meet the government's target of Level 4s to be attained in the Key Stage 2 tests and the training was designed to make sure this was addressed' (White, 2008, p.1).

Choice of SIP

One tension was that SIPs were statutory and headteachers only had the opportunity to veto the appointment of one SIP that was offered. As MacBeath (2006) says, it is hard to engage when really you have no choice! The LA tried to use its knowledge of the SIPs and the headteachers to do the allocation, but LA staff changes early in the programme meant that there had to be some changes. When there was a change of headteacher within the LA, the LA decided that the SIP would remain with the school, rather than moving to the new school with the

headteacher, because the SIP would know the school and be able to support the new headteacher. This was largely appreciated, although one headteacher was very keen to take 'his' SIP with him to the new school because he felt that the relationship was established and he wanted that person to work with him. This shows the importance of relationships to the success of the role.

Every school engaged in the SIP process, whereas in some LAs the RA said that the headteachers refused to engage. The study LA tried to involve the schools in the process and carried out evaluations and also took feedback and acted on it. One example of this was an issue raised by a headteacher that it had not been made clear what a school should do if they were unhappy with their SIP's performance and this was addressed. The SIPs' knowledge of the schools grew over time as the trust developed. One SIP said that he believed that the speed at which he became effective depended on how quickly he built the positive relationship with the headteacher. He felt that this had been affected by the length of time the headteacher had been in post, the effectiveness of the school and the headteacher's confidence and leadership style. The interviews showed a difference in approach to the role of SIP that was related to these factors.

Whose agenda?

There was a view from several of the headteachers that the agenda was not set by schools, but by the government, despite what the SIP Brief said (DCSF, 2007). This was one of the tensions in the role of SIP: that it did not feel to schools that it was 'their' agenda, but the SIP Brief was quite clear that this should be the case:

'The job will concentrate on building the school's capacity to drive improvement in its performance. The SIP's contribution will be evidence based and will focus on the school's plans and targets. He or she will:

- identify the needs of the school, using the school's own evaluation and evidence from other sources
- agree the school's priorities for improvement, and help the school align those with national and local priorities

- offer support and access to support from outside, including access to useful networks
- act as the main conduit between the school and the external agencies of local and national government' (DCSF, 2007, p.10).

MacBeath and McGlynn (2002) saw the importance of self evaluation for schools, the systematic collection of data, to be able to know the strengths and opportunities for development and so move forward. This was supposed to be the starting point for the conversation between the SIP and the headteacher. In practice, the introduction by Ofsted of the SEF (Self Evaluation Form) drove the way that the majority of schools completed self evaluation and several headteachers talked about the SIP 'helping with the SEF' which was not the SIP role. Stoll and Fink (1996), in outlining the features of schools well placed to improve, identified the use of clear priorities as one of the features. This mirrors the part of the SIP role to discuss school priorities. They do not mention the alignment of them to national priorities and this was another tension for some schools where the headteachers did not share the government's view of school improvement priorities.

The SIP was described as the 'conduit' between central government, the LA and the school and MacBeath (2006) saw that this description caused tension. It suggests that the direction of communication was from the government to the LA, to the SIP to the school. The government had an agenda for school improvement and tried to use the SIP as a change agent to make it happen. In early meetings about the introduction of the SIP role, there were termly visits to each LA where LA staff had to outline their preparations. As the role began we had to answer questions about the implementation of the role and as the visits took place and reports were written, sample SIP reports were taken and analysed to make sure we had covered the 'right' things. The RA interviewed said that he felt this 'tight' beginning, which loosened as the role developed, helped shape the role in the way it was designed. I think the 'two conversations' mentioned by both the SIPs and the headteachers were a way of developing the relationship in a way that was

helpful to the schools and gave them freedom to talk about the issues that concerned them. It was also an example of 'negotiated policy' as discussed by Hajer and Wagenaar (2003) and Ball (1994). One headteacher talked about the SIP role as a way of delivering the government agenda, and mentioned the interlocking pieces of the NRwS, especially the link with Ofsted, as one of the reasons he was less positive about it than the previous system of LA link advisers.

James and Connolly (2000) explain how the importance of school leadership has been seen as a key factor in school improvement and the role of SIP, designed to challenge and support the headteacher, acknowledges this. White (2008) saw this relationship as adversarial. With the exception of one, the headteachers seemed to expect to have these conversations about attainment and the percentage of Level 4s achieved in the tests. White suggests that maybe he as SIP is a 'lever' for school improvement, but in a different way from that expected in his training as his reports showed a positive side to education in the UK.

'Perhaps my writing is as it should be. Perhaps it is a lever in another direction not considered before. I am perhaps reflecting the reality of our "first class, world-renown, 21st century education system", one that truly does meet the needs of children, parents and society to a very large degree' (White, 2008, p.2).

My analysis of the SIP reports reflects White's views and gives a picture of schools committed to doing their best for every child. The reports show analysis of results, but also the wider picture of achievement. Perhaps White would feel that the reports from the schools in the study LA show that 'first class education system'.

SIP as critical friend

As mentioned earlier, the SIP Brief also described the SIP as a 'critical professional friend'. The previous chapter saw that the headteachers interviewed held mixed views about whether this was the case. The SIPs generally felt that,

when the relationship was working as they would wish it was one of critical friendship. This was one of several tensions identified both in the literature and by the headteachers interviewed in the study.

The expectation was that the SIP would spend the equivalent of five days in the school. These visits would include the statutory headteacher performance management, target setting and other visits connected with the schools' own priorities. Can a SIP be a critical friend? Costa and Kallick (1993) characterise a critical friend as:

‘a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person’s work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work’ (1993, p.50).

If that is the case, then it would seem that the SIPs could be critical friends. The SIP Brief (DCSF, 2007) supports the activities above. The majority of the SIPs described themselves as critical friends and did not see any tension in the role. Several headteachers also felt that the SIP was their ‘critical friend’, whilst a few headteachers listed the tensions identified by MacBeath (2006) and Swaffield (2007) in the role. How can you be objective if you have a duty to report back to the LA who has to report to a government representative each term?

The Improving Schools Effectiveness Project (ISEP) examined the role and effectiveness of school improvement consultants or ‘critical friends’ (MacBeath and Mortimore, 2001, p.39). ISEP identified behaviours of a critical friend and asked whether or not they supported school improvement. These can be grouped into three main areas:

- treating the staff and community with respect and sensitivity and listening and learning

- helping to identify issues and using experience to make suggestions to help the school improve
- offering a thoughtful critical perspective on learning, culture or leadership as appropriate (adapted from MacBeath, 1999, p.129).

All these features can be seen in the SIP role. With one exception the headteachers interviewed commented very positively that the SIPs were good at listening and showed respect to everyone in the school. Concerns were raised about the behaviour of one SIP who they felt was 'almost bullying' and 'pushing his own agenda and hobbyhorses' (HT1). Most headteachers talked about the SIP as 'being there for them' and it is clear in all the documentation the relationship should be focused on the school and not the SIP. One headteacher in the LA commented on this when her SIP left and we discussed the qualities she was looking for in a new SIP. She said, 'I want someone who is going to listen about my school, not talk about theirs.'

These features led to successful relationships with headteachers. When Swaffield's (2005) research team carried out interviews with the critical friends from the project they identified their views of what had made the relationships successful. These included the importance of supporting reflection, questioning, supporting development (moving people on) and spreading good practice as key. These features were all mentioned by the SIPs and headteachers interviewed. However, critical friends do not repeat their judgements to another authority. There are essential tensions and contradictions in the role. How can the SIP listen and build a relationship of trust and then report to the LA that the school is heading towards special measures?

The SIP Brief (DCSF, 2007) mentions the importance of reporting to the LA when, in the SIP's opinion, things are not going well.

‘The school improvement partner is responsible for giving the school's local authority a judgement on whether the school should cause concern and what action is needed’ (DCSF, 2007, p.4).

This sits uneasily with the role of critical friend. Swaffield (2007) raises the fact that the SIP is the person supporting schools and working to develop partnership, but if s/he feels the school is not making progress, s/he is the person who has to report this to the LA and this can lead to LA intervention and that this is one of the reasons why a SIP is not a critical friend.

The four themes of the NRwS

Around the interlocking ‘pieces’ of the NRwS were four themes that underpinned the whole NRwS policy (Figure 1). Three of these were identified as vital by the headteachers and SIPs without prompting and therefore could be seen to be important to them.

Trust

Trust was seen as crucial by the SIPs and headteachers. Several SIPs talked about the strategies they had used to build a trusting relationship. This took time, but the strong trust helped make the relationship effective. MacBeath (2007) points out the inherent tension in the relationship as a possible barrier to trust. The SIP was a person that headteachers talked to about their schools, but who also reported to the LA, which could bring about intervention. Even so, the vast majority of headteachers interviewed said that they would want the LA to know if there was a problem and if the LA knew about the concerns it would give them the opportunity to intervene before that happened.

SIPs interviewed said they made sure they listened to the headteachers and got to know them well. From the analysis of the early SIP reports it was clear that the SIPs had read a range of documentation about the school to prepare themselves for the familiarisation visit. SIPs interviewed said that they were keen to build trust and the interviews with the headteachers showed that this had largely been

achieved. This was reflected in the positive feedback received from the headteachers in the LA survey of the programme. The different levels of trust identified by Bottery (2004), calculative trust and role trust, can be seen in the development of the relationships between headteachers and SIPs over time. Calculative trust was present because although the role of SIP was statutory, the headteachers calculated that it was sensible to work positively with this person. The involvement of their colleagues in the appointment of SIPs and the insistence that all the SIPs had been primary headteachers led to more role trust because the headteachers felt that the SIPs would understand the world of the primary school and the pressures and 'relentless, full-on, treadmill pace' (Gronn, 2003, p.148) of headship. The three kinds of trust identified by Reina and Reina (1999) are also evident: competence trust because the headteachers know that the SIPs have all been headteachers and colleague headteachers had been involved in the selection of SIPs: contractual trust was developed when the SIPs started and they followed through on promises and commitments and did what they said they would do. This led to practice trust identified by Bottery (2004) and then to identificatory trust after several years. This did not happen in all schools, for a variety of reasons: some schools had a series of SIPs which meant they kept having to 'start again', others did not get beyond 'role trust' as a minority of SIPs did not deliver what they had promised, or because the headteachers did not have confidence in them. Yet, in some schools this became 'thick' trust, where there were strong shared values that were understood by both parties and here the relationship was very effective. But trust could also be broken or weakened. In one school the headteacher felt that the relationship had broken down when the SIP downgraded his judgements to match those of a disappointing Ofsted inspection. The headteacher described this as 'very demoralising'. It took a year to repair the relationship and another six months before the headteacher said that trust was regained.

Another way that trust was built was through the respect of confidentiality. This was a feature of 'communication trust' identified by Reina and Reina (1999). The SIPs appeared to be very good at keeping confidences of headteachers, which led

to the 'two conversations', described by both headteachers and SIPs. There was the conversation that appeared in the report and another conversation that stayed in the headteacher's office. This was when headteachers talked freely about things in school that were worrying them, particularly human resources issues or sought advice on a range of aspects of leadership and these were wide ranging discussions. In my LA role I was unaware that these were happening until I contacted one of the SIPs to tell her something about a school, to discover that she had known it for several months. Derrington (2000) also found this more informal use of advisers in his research about LA and school improvement before the NRwS was introduced and Swaffield (2008) identified 'low level listening' as a feature that had happened in the past with some LA advisers. However, what the headteachers and SIPs described was more than this. Some of the conversations were about aspects of school life that the SIP role was not envisioned as being involved with, or things that the headteacher did not want recorded in the reports (which would be in the public domain) and the SIP agreed that this could be the case. Over time the SIP reports show that some of these conversations were recorded in the SIP reports in various ways and the headteachers were more comfortable about this. Initial fears from the headteachers that the SIP was going to be a 'spy' were dissipated as the SIPs built up relationships with the headteachers.

'All that criticism and worry was ill-founded. It hasn't become that big issue we thought it would be, that the person somehow was some sort of mole who would sort of get closer to the schools and then once he had got under the belly of the school, "dada", flush you out and all would be revealed' (HT5).

These relationships were seen to be very strong. When, in my role as SIP manager, I asked all primary headteachers to let me know if they felt their school would benefit from a change of SIP, the majority of schools contacted me to say that they would prefer that I did not change their SIP. But does this mean that the so called 'cosy' relationship that the government felt that schools had with the LA

had just been replaced with a cosy relationship with the SIP, that there was too much emphasis on the pastoral? The responses to the interviews about challenge given by the SIPs would indicate not.

Challenge and support

The RA talked about 'support through challenge and challenge through support' and many of the headteachers and SIPs interviewed talked about the two together. The headteachers interviewed were happy to have challenge - in fact they said they welcomed it. The SIPs interviewed said that one of the things they found most difficult in their role was challenging the schools judged to be outstanding and one of the things headteachers of those schools wanted was challenge and independent conversations which would help them reflect and move their thinking on further. Cowen (2008) also showed that SIPs and headteachers felt that there was challenge in the relationships:

'SIPs themselves are most commonly in agreement that they had been able to provide informed challenge to the schools they work with (95% of those responding), and LA representatives support this view in the majority of cases, (85% of respondents)' (Cowen, 2008, p.26).

'70% of primary headteachers agree that their SIP has been able to provide informed challenge to the school' (Cowen, 2008, p.26).

Analysis of the SIP reports showed more challenge as the relationship developed. Aspects of school underperformance and school focus were clearly identified in the reports and followed up on successive visits which showed the progress made. Analysis of the sample of SIP reports also showed a conversation over time as headteachers became more open about challenging situations in schools. SIP reports were sent to Chairs of Governors and could be called in by Ofsted during inspection and this could explain the caution from headteachers about the content. The LA changed practice so that the reports went to the headteachers from the SIP before going to the LA which gave the headteachers more control over the

final version. One SIP said that he had sent a draft report to the headteacher fully expecting to have to change it, because of comments about the quality of teaching, but the headteacher wanted the comments left in to use for a conversation with the teacher involved. In another school Ofsted commented favourably on the effectiveness of the SIP report in bringing the school's attention to an area for development and on the school for tackling it. Headteachers saw this as a positive aspect of the SIP reports as the headteacher of the school inspected told her colleagues what had happened.

It is difficult to support a causal link between the SIP and the performance of the school because there are so many variables that can affect it and this point is made in the national evaluation (Cowen, 2008). The data shows that, in the study LA, the proportion of schools judged to be outstanding rose to double the national average in the time of the SIP programme. In 2010 there was no validated KS2 data for the LA because of the high number of schools that took part in the national boycott of tests, but the 2011 data for KS2 showed that both KS1 and KS2 improved slightly from 2009 position. However it is comparisons like the one above which disturbed some headteachers, who believed that the role of SIP was an accountability measure put in to carry out a government agenda which measured success and achievement in limited, specific terms. This is endorsed by White's comments (2008) about the 'lever' for school improvement and the interlocking pieces of the NRwS jigsaw which all support a specific improvement agenda. When newspapers report that schools are 'teaching to the test', the response from a headteacher was: 'we are judged on pupils' performance in those tests, we would be foolish not to prepare pupils well for them'. The DfE response to the 2010 boycott was not to accept the schools' own teacher assessment for that year and 2010 appears as a blank in the RAISEonline reports for all the schools that took part in the boycott. This is further evidence for the headteachers that it is the results of the tests that are all important to the government. One headteacher said it added to his frustration when the school was inspected and the Ofsted inspector said, 'We want to give you "good" because we believe you are a good school, but in terms of these criteria you are satisfactory'. The NRwS

was the government's vision for school improvement, but not all headteachers 'bought into' that vision.

There was potential for conflict for schools that did not have the same priorities and vision as the NRwS and the SIPs too could have been under pressure to conform to the defined role. This is where we saw the gap between policy and practice or the rhetoric and reality. The SIPs were committed to making the relationship work and promoted the role as a partnership. Their interpretation of the role made it more positive to the headteachers. The SIPS had a strong vision of education, and a passion for learning which recognised the commitment of headteachers (as White (2008) did) and interpreted the role in the light of their vision for education. Cowen (2008) also found that the challenge and support provided through the SIP programme supported:

- 'the development of more evaluative and accountable school structures and culture;
- a more consistent focus across schools on improving pupil outcomes and addressing areas of under-performance;
- the development of challenging but realistic targets;
- the identification of school support needs and, for many schools, the provision of advice and support to address priority areas for school improvement' (Cowen, 2008).

Networking and collaboration

The NRwS saw collaboration and partnership as very important, citing programmes such as 'Excellence in Cities' where schools worked together with 'firm objectives that bear on pupils' attainment and well-being' (DfES, 2005, p.28). They also stated that schools with the necessary capacity could support others which were 'failing to provide an adequate education, perhaps brokered by the School Improvement Partner' (DfES, 2005, p.28). This was seen as the least successful element of the SIP role, both locally and in the national evaluations by Halsey et al. (2005) and Cowen (2008). Part of this was because there were some

SIPs from other LAs, or who were independent, who did not gain a very full knowledge, despite sharing sessions in the SIP development days, of where there was good practice. In addition, some LAs were keen to promote their own services (Cowen, 2008) rather than allow SIPs to broker more widely. Schools for a range of reasons were not always willing or able to identify good practice within their schools. The SIPs said they felt that sometimes it was because they did not appreciate that their practice was good. The SIPs said they tried to link schools and share good practice wherever they saw it. One SIP described this as being 'like a honeybee'. It will be interesting to see how this changes with the increase in 'schools supporting schools', as outlined by the Coalition government and developed by Hargreaves (2010) in his thinkpiece for the National College of School Leadership. One view, expressed by SIPs and headteachers is that this element will become more important as reductions in LA teams will mean that schools turn more to each other for support.

How close was the SIP role to policy?

The RA and one of the SIPs said that they did not feel that the role of SIP was as pernicious as MacBeath (2006) and others have described it. When reading the NRwS, there is a focus on the importance of the school's priorities. The RA said that it was the way that the LAs interpreted policy, which he described as using the guidance as a 'straitjacket', rather than guidance, which led the government to omit some of the suggestions and models from later editions of the SIP Brief. This was echoed by one of the SIPs who also said that the LA had introduced the SIP programme as something 'harsher' than intended which had made the headteachers anxious. This was also reinforced as headteachers interviewed said that they were unfamiliar with the policy documents, relying on the LA to inform them. This gives scope for the LA to 'doctor' policy and interpret it in different ways, as suggested by Ball (1994) and Hajer and Wagenaar (2003).

Translating policy into practice is a key concern for governments as they want their changes implemented and is a theme through the literature, expressed by Ball (1994) and Hajer and Wagenaar (2003). The LA tried to take policy and translate

it, using the knowledge of the local context and the personalities involved, into an approach which worked for the local context. This echoes Trowler's observation that:

'Policy making is the result of negotiation, compromise and the exercise of power and as a result, laden with multiple agendas, attitudes and sets of meaning' (Trowler, 2003, p.98).

Fullan (2007) said:

'The crunch comes in the relationship between these new programmes or politics and the thousands of subjective realities embedded in people's individual and organisational contexts and their personal histories' (Fullan 2007, p.37).

Several of the headteachers interviewed felt that they did not know whether the role had been followed closely as they had not read the original government documentation, but accepted the role of SIP as it had been presented to them by the LA. One headteacher said 'we have more important things to do' (HT5). The extent to which the headteachers read policy or waited for the LA to tell them about it varied considerably. The SIPs felt that they 'interpreted' the role according to their beliefs about what would help the school, their own style and that of the headteacher of the school. Two of the SIPs worked as SIPs in other LAs and said that they carried out the role differently in the different LAs. Joyce (1999) talked about the importance of tailoring support to schools because all schools are different and this appeared to be one of the successes of the programme. This was confirmed by the RA who talked about a time he had observed a SIP at work in another LA and felt that to best help the school the SIP should have addressed the issues brought up by the headteacher rather than keep to the formal agenda. There were instances of this in the study LA. Unplanned events in schools such as an Ofsted inspection or a staffing situation, for example, that meant that the formal agenda was not relevant to the school at that time and resulted in the SIPs

modifying their visits accordingly. The SIPs felt that they interpreted the role in a way that they believed worked for the school whilst remaining true to their own philosophy of education and beliefs about school improvement.

Changes in policy

The government agenda and role of SIP changed over time and the RA acknowledged this. Changes were made in successive editions of the School Improvement Partner's Brief. At the beginning of the programme it was made clear at national meetings and at national SIP induction sessions that the SIP should stay in the headteacher's office and not get involved in any actual school improvement work. This raised concerns with the SIPs and with LA officers. If the SIP was kept in the headteacher's office then the data would be confined to what the headteacher chose to share. Some of the headteachers talked about how headteachers could 'pull the wool over the SIP's eyes if you wanted to' (HT1). When the policy change came from government the SIPs went out into classrooms and worked with other members of school staff. In fact a few SIPs said that in the interviews that they had done this from the very beginning, further evidence of negotiating policy. This seemed to vary according to the confidence and trust of the headteacher in the SIP and in their personal leadership style. In some schools the SIP was used to gather evidence and validate school judgement and the headteacher gave the SIP free rein in the school, in other schools it was very controlled; certain pupils and teachers were identified to talk to or work with the SIP.

There was also a debate about whether the same person could both give the support and then quality assure the impact. As the SIPs said:

'I have had to go back and look at the impact of my work. I want to say that it has been successful' (SIP3).

Part of the consultation on the future of SIPs (DCSF, 2009), was about the role of 'enhanced SIP'. This was based on the success of the National Challenge

Advisers in areas of the country such as the London Challenge. It included some features that were not part of the existing SIP remit. This did not reach statute before the election and change of government and so was abandoned. The study LA had already started using some elements of the enhanced SIP model, such as more days allocated to schools in challenging circumstances and more 'delivery' of school improvement. It was effective in schools that responded positively and engaged fully with the school improvement agenda where there were systems and structures in place, but in other schools it proved more effective to separate the roles and use two or three school improvement professionals. There were also schools where it was helpful to have more than one person working as it gave the SIPs support when working in a particularly challenging situation. Cowen (2008) had similar findings. This calls into question the notion of a single conversation as headteachers used all the professionals working in the school to discuss issues.

In two aspects of the SIP role the study LA followed government policy closely. They were in headteacher performance management (HTPM) and KS2 target setting. Two headteachers commented directly on HTPM being carried out by the SIP. One said he did not agree with having the same person doing his PM as the SIP was also having a termly discussion with him about his school. He felt that there was the possibility for governors to be able to put unnecessary pressure on the headteacher and follow their own agenda. The other headteacher said that she had found the SIP very supportive when discussing her role and setting targets because he knew the school and 'stood up' to the governors. A third headteacher said that it made more sense to her to have the SIP, as it meant that she did not need to explain her school to another person and she could be confident that there was a conversation about the 'right' priorities, based on shared understanding.

The LA was judged outstanding by the National Strategies for KS2 target setting, but as one headteacher interviewed and one SIP, also an LA adviser pointed out, 'we just did what we had done when we were link advisers'. SIPs were trained in those procedures which were the same as when the LA advisers did target setting. This would seem to support the view of the RA who talked about the introduction

of SIPs to overcome the 'cosiness' of LA and supports Cowen's (2008) findings that where the LA had effective systems, the SIP programme was seen to be more effective. The study LA already had robust procedures for this element of work. In other aspects the LA was more flexible and this flexibility increased as time went on in the SIP role. There was a gradual loosening of control and a louder voice and input from schools. This reflects Fullan's views of 'too tight too loose' and 'capacity building with a focus on results', which combines bottom up and top down approaches' (Fullan, 1997).

Further tensions in the SIP role

Adviser or SIP? The clarity of role

The role of the primary link adviser traditionally comprised challenge and support and each adviser had approximately 13 schools assigned to them, with a varying number of days allocated. With the advent of SIPs every member of the primary advisory team was accredited to work as a SIP. Interviews with the headteachers showed that the role was not seen very differently. One of the link advisers said that the main difference was in the structure and rigour that the SIP programme brought. Originally advisers visited each term and some schools were assigned an additional number of days, but without a consistent framework.

The SIP programme enabled the LA to maintain knowledge of the progress of schools. At the beginning of the programme schools were assigned both a SIP and an adviser. This was because the study LA was trying to keep the two roles separate as there was a view that the same person could not do both the support and the quality assurance of the support. In Derrington (2000) schools talked of the importance of credibility of the link advisers. In a way this was addressed by the headteachers themselves who, in the consultation, said they wanted SIPs who had been primary headteachers. Derrington (2000) found in his research that the response to this was mixed. He found that headteachers said it was the quality of the person that made all the difference. This was also the case in the SIP programme - there were SIPs who were perceived by the headteachers as

particularly good. One headteacher said, 'if you have a good one you don't want to let them go'.

Partnership and power

Several headteachers interviewed mentioned the lack of control they felt they had in the partnership. Another tension in the role of the SIP was the distribution of power. Who had the power in this relationship? The set agenda for school improvement, the criteria for school effectiveness, judged by Ofsted Framework and the focus on data were all designed to contribute to the government's view of school improvement and a few headteachers saw it as an accountability framework. At the beginning of the programme it appeared to them that the LA was planning and driving the agenda and that their own concerns and priorities did not matter. In the first year of the programme the agenda was set by the LA which meant that there was little, if any, time to discuss the aspects of the school that they wanted to focus on. This was also identified in the evaluation of the SIP programme (Halsey et al., 2005). It was changed over time to put the school's agenda at the centre and at the end of the formal SIP programme, the agenda was school led although the vast majority of schools chose to follow the established pattern of visits.

The SIPs also identified these concerns at the beginning of the programme. In the SIP development days there were discussions about the most effective ways to work with schools and it was one of the SIPs who suggested tracking the school improvement priorities throughout the academic year to remedy this. As a result, the SIPs did not feel a tension with working with schools to identify the 'right' priorities. They felt that it was right to support schools with self evaluation to identify these priorities and they interpreted the role in a way that fitted with their own philosophy and beliefs. Time allocated for each school was another tension in the SIP role: the length of time they actually spent in schools and the wide range of topics they were supposed to discuss. There was a lot to get through in the visit time and SIPs struggled to fit it all in. This led to a 'narrowing down' of focus where the school and SIP agreed a focus for the meeting in advance and schools

completed some of the forms before the meeting, which meant that the time in school could be used to best advantage and flexibly.

The role of SIP in the Ofsted process

As discussed in Chapter Two and highlighted in the interviews with headteachers, the introduction of Ofsted in 1992 was very significant. The framework for inspection has been reviewed several times since then but remains a major cause of concern for headteachers. The 2005 revision was part of the NRwS policy. The main changes in this review were that inspections became shorter, sharper and more frequent with a focus on the school's own self evaluation. One of the roles of the SIP was to support the school with self evaluation, discussing whether the school priorities chosen were the right ones and to examine the robustness of the evidence for the school's judgements. This self evaluation then fed into the SEF (Self Evaluation Form). MacBeath (2006) highlighted the fact that self evaluation should be embedded in school practice, but most schools used the SEF for their self evaluation, rather than making that a summary of a more comprehensive self evaluation. Although the SEF was not statutory, there was an expectation that schools would have this ready for inspection. Headteachers could submit their SEF on line so that the Ofsted inspectors could access it. The headteachers interviewed found the SIPs supportive in the area of inspection, in preparation, during and following the inspection. They commented that the conversations with the SIPs helped them think through their own actions and the discussion about self evaluation, with relevant challenge, ensured that they were confident about their priorities and plans. The Ofsted framework launched in 2009 had a few 'teething problems' which affected headteacher confidence in the inspection process. One school had a difficult time, due to the interpretation of one of the limiting judgements from the new framework and the SIP helped her write a letter of appeal, to listen, to reassure and to celebrate the revised outcome. The headteacher said how valuable this had been and how supported she had felt. The SIP felt that he had been able to support the headteacher with his external perspective. In a third school, there was a carefully orchestrated parental campaign and again the headteacher confided in and discussed issues with the

SIP. In this school the situation escalated after the inspection and the headteacher felt that it took the focus away from school improvement. It was the SIP who, through challenge, made him aware of this and brought him back to teaching and learning. A minority of the headteachers expressed the opinion that the SIPs were too concerned about Ofsted, but this seemed to depend where the school was in the Ofsted 'cycle' and the school's grading of overall effectiveness. Ofsted inspections are important to schools. The grading of overall effectiveness is one of the factors that governs whether certain professional opportunities are open to headteachers, for example the roles of National Leader of Education (NLE) and Local Leader of Education (LLE). All the headteachers interviewed talked about their concerns about inspection and the potential or realised impact on them and their schools.

Educational change

Reynolds (2001) discussed the fact that change does not look the same in every school: it is not 'one size fits all' and there is no 'magic bullet' and strategies for change should be designed around each school according to its needs. This is consistent with the SIP programme at its most effective, where the SIP had to be the 'right' SIP for the school, choosing the tools and strategy to support and challenge the approach to school improvement used by the school. They did not impose their own views or try to recreate their own school systems. It was not for the SIP to dictate what this should be, but to meet the needs of the school. There are also characteristics, identified by Stoll and Fink (1996) and outlined in chapter 2 that indicate that a school is well placed to enhance pupil progress, achievement and development and the SIP Brief (DCSF, 2007) and the interviews with the SIPs showed that they were working towards these:

- 'Enhance pupil outcomes
- Have a clear focus on teaching and learning
- Build capacity to take charge of change, regardless of source
- Define their own direction
- Assess their own culture and work to develop positive cultural norms

- Have a strategy in place to achieve their goals
- Address the internal conditions that enhance change
- Are able to maintain the momentum of improvement even when conditions are not favourable
- Monitor and evaluate their process, progress and achievement and development' (Stoll and Fink, 1996, p.43).

The data and target setting visit and the termly follow up on the progress of the school against its targets, showed that the SIP focused on pupil outcomes for all pupils. The visit on teaching and learning showed that there was a focus on this crucial area and the section of the visit for the SIP to support and challenge around the school's priorities is also linked. The role of the SIP was to encourage the school to focus on these aspects and thus lead to school improvement.

Fullan's (2007) identification of 'too tight and too loose' strategies highlights the dilemma of the SIP and the SIP programme: too tight and it becomes just a compliance process to drive through a particular view of school improvement and schools do not feel they own the process, too loose and there is the danger that the aims would be lost and it becomes complicit. This was a tension and an area of discussion and negotiation throughout the SIP programme. The government rhetoric around the NRwS claimed to empower schools. It claimed to bring about educational change, built on self evaluation and the availability of higher quality data, combined with the accountability of inspection, all driven by the single conversation with a SIP. However, not all the elements of the NRwS were in place right away. There were delays for example in the launch of 'RAISE online' mentioned earlier. There was also a rolling programme of implementation of the SIP role and the study LA was in the final 'phase' of implementation for primary schools, which meant that the primary SIP programme did not start in the study LA until April 2008. Looking at change using Fullan's stages of implementation of policy (1991) showed that there were positive influences at the initiation stage. Although some of the elements of the NRwS were not ready, there was funding, advocacy from government and a field force (the National Strategies officers) to

support implementation. The SIP was only statutory for two years in the study LA, but the fact that the vast majority of headteachers were keen for the role to continue, at least for another year, shows that it was perceived as useful.

Pettigrew's model (cited in James and Connolly, 2000) shows the importance of context in change. The change in government led to rapid national changes in school improvement policy, from the consideration of an enhanced SIP role to the ending of the statutory role in a few months. The response of the study LA and the headteachers to this and the way it affected school improvement systems in the LA was due to context, the culture and relationships. SIPs could be said to be 'change agents'. They brought a wealth of experience of school improvement and different ways of looking at and doing things. They had complementary skills and knowledge which was shared and helped the team with their own development and learning.

Joyce (1999) asks 'Can a reform agenda that has school improvement as its core resolve balance the tensions of accountability and development?' Headteacher views of this varied. Headteachers of schools that were successful in terms of the improvement paradigm thought that the changes in the NRwS were reasonable. One headteacher said: 'it is about making us better and surely anyone worth their salt would agree with that'. Other headteachers disagreed that the NRwS was about making schools 'better', because they did not share the view of 'better' that they believed the model contained. They believed that the model was based on a restricted view of school improvement measured by the 'outcomes of a week of tests held in May' (HT). Throughout the period of the SIP programme the interpretation of the role from a few headteachers was that the SIP was there only to look at data and to request / demand ever more challenging and, they believed, unrealistic targets for attainment. The headteachers wanted to see a wider debate about schools and learning and a definition of school improvement that led to the creation of independent learners for a changing society. This tension links with different views of 'what education is for', which is always a subject for debate.

The problem of meaning is central to making sense of educational change, 'It is those small changes at school level and meanings for individuals that have been neglected and which have led to a spectacular lack of success of most reforms' (Fullan, 2007). There were schools where changes were made. Sometimes they seemed small things, but they were different ways of looking at an aspect of school life or the senior leadership team. In some schools the SIP's work led to those small changes. The question which made the headteacher reflect on how or why s/he did something or another way of looking at an aspect of school life promoted that possibility.

In the summer of 2009 it seemed that the government view of educational change was that the 'new' relationship was effective and at the regional SIP Manager meetings, there were discussions about an 'enhanced' role. This was for schools causing concern and designed to enable the SIPs to become 'increasingly effective in supporting and challenging all schools in addressing their priorities' (from handout given in SIPS in 21st Century schools conference). It was based on the success of the London Challenge and part of the model was an increased allocation of days for schools in challenging circumstances. The government saw the role of SIPs to move schools forward in the following areas:

- Developing leadership and management
- Supporting the narrowing of gaps
- Supporting improvements in teaching and learning
- Taking account of the wider context

(from handout at SIP manager meeting 2009)

This was followed by a consultation (DCSF, 2009) about the future of SIPs in the White Paper. The consultation included the request for responses on questions such as: what extra roles and responsibilities schools needed, the match of SIP to schools, whether certain SIPs suited certain types of schools, what support SIPs would need for this enhanced role, whether different accreditation was needed for different types of schools, to make the SIP the main gatekeeper for support and to 'sign off' the school improvement plan. These proposals were based on the

National Strategies evaluation (unpublished) and Cowen's earlier evaluation of the NRwS (2008). These concluded that the SIP programme had been very effective, but that 'in order to meet the needs of 21st Century schools, the SIP programme must adapt and evolve' (Cowen, 2008). This report also stated that there was high level of support for the SIP role from headteachers, but that this varied between LAs. It concluded that 'effective LAs have an effective SIP function'.

Culture of the LA

The survey looked at the role of the LA and concluded that LA messages and culture affected the SIP role and said that the survey and case study evidence also indicated:

'resistance to change amongst some primary headteachers which may be influencing their perceptions of SIPs. This reflects the more significant culture shift required by the introduction of SIP challenge in the primary sector, given the previous tradition of strong pastoral LA support' (Cowen, 2008, p.iv).

This was the case in the study LA where there was initial concern about the SIPs. The interviews showed that headteachers wanted both aspects. They welcomed the pastoral support, because headship is a difficult and challenging job, but also welcomed challenge to make them reflect on their performance and that of the school. The interviews also showed that over the life of the study the balance of pastoral support and challenge needed to be different for different schools and headteachers depending on the context. There is also a difference in perception between pastoral support and support for school improvement. Whilst the interviews showed that the SIPs would not leave a colleague struggling, they always went back another time to carry out the 'challenge' visit. It is the skilful balance of support and challenge that effective SIPs displayed that made the difference. It showed that the way the SIPs had made meaning of the role was proving highly effective for the schools in the LA.

The culture of the LA and the relationships with schools played a part in how the role of SIP was shaped and played out. From the interviews with SIPs who worked in different LAs, working as a SIP in a different LA myself and observing meetings with colleagues from different LAs at National Strategies events it became obvious that the role of SIP looked different in different LAs. One of the key aspects that came out of my research was the importance of the strong SIP team and maintaining knowledge of what was happening in schools. The SIP interviews showed that the SIPs valued the Continuing Professional Development Days (CPD) and liked being part of a team that helped co-construct the role. The size of the study LA, with a relatively small team of SIPs meant we could all be in one room to discuss procedures and protocols, SIPs could be given the opportunity to contribute to the format of reports and the purpose of visits and we could use their extensive expertise to contribute to training sessions. The interview with one of the SIPs who worked in several LAs showed that he saw and valued the culture of celebration of success and the positive relationships between primary schools and the LA in the study LA. Some of these elements of the LA culture are similar to those seen in the Knowsley model (in Fullan 2007), particularly those of high support and engagement with schools. This is changing as the role of the LA is changing. However at the time of writing there are developments underway, such as increasing the development of co-leadership, schools providing the support and challenge for other schools and working in peer driven networks where the 'peer factor replaces the fear factor'. These are features of Hargreaves' (2010) Self Improving School System.

Culture of the school

Fullan (2003) believes that society needs schools that have moral purpose at the heart; where leaders and everyone within are committed to narrowing the gap between the highest and lowest achieving pupils. This was also one of the aims of the NRwS. The SIP visit about data analysis and the target setting visit, both concentrated on the achievement of 'vulnerable groups' and asked headteachers to outline the actions that they were taking to improve the performance of these

pupils. Schools were asked to present their tracking for these groups of pupils and SIPs were asked to raise awareness and the profile.

SIPs are part of that conversation about reform. That 'reform is not just putting into practice the latest policy. It means changing the cultures of classrooms, school districts, universities and so on' (Fullan, 2007, p.7). It means changing what people do in school every day and changes that they make to their plans and the way they talk to children. At the beginning of the SIP programme the impact on classrooms and teachers could have been minimal as the SIPs often stayed in the headteacher's office and talked about different issues, but as the trust grew and the framework loosened, the SIPs went out and worked with teachers and other staff and interviewed pupils. This led to conversations about culture in schools. It helped one headteacher see that the changes he thought had spread through the school were in fact not being followed in some classrooms and this made a difference to his practice. The discussions around the support for all pupils in the city and for schools taking wider responsibility for the progress of all pupils, not just the ones in their schools was a conversation that was just beginning when the role of SIP ended.

The Labour government's 'Vision for 21st Century schools' (2009) proposed the 'segmentation' of schools to assign them to categories with different perceived needs and different levels of support. Although the change of government meant that the vision was not implemented, schools in the study LA were assigned different categories for support. This has echoes of Rosenholtz's (1989) model of schools as moving, cruising, struggling, sinking and strolling. SIPs were trying to ensure that all schools were 'moving', both effective and improving. Where schools could have been described as struggling, sinking or cruising, the SIP used challenge and support to help them get moving. They did this by focusing that support and challenge on the schools' priorities for development: questioning whether the priorities would be the ones that would move the schools on and asking about the progress made each term. The majority of the headteachers interviewed found this focus helpful – both from a personal and a school wide

view. One headteacher said that she valued the persistence and also the understanding that the SIP brought to their discussions about school improvement. Other headteachers felt that the SIP was there as an accountability measure: to promote a certain view of school improvement and who was not always focused on the 'right' or the 'important' things.

Nevertheless, all the interviews, anecdotal evidence and evaluations carried out about the role of the primary SIP support the idea that it was well regarded and made a positive difference to school improvement. However, one of the first things that the new government changed in education was the statutory role of the SIP and indeed, in some LAs, the role was ended by the end of the March 2011. This was in complete contrast to the previous government's plan for education. The study LA, following requests from headteachers, decided to carry on the role, slightly modified, until March 2012 when schools had the choice of whether or not to purchase elements of the SIP role.

Changes since the end of the study: school improvement and educational change

This study took place against a backdrop of change in education, at national and at local level and at the time of writing, this is still the case. As mentioned earlier, the change of government in 2010 led to the end of the statutory SIP role, the aim of academy status for schools and the removal of several 'top down' procedures such as target setting. The message to schools is that they are to be freed from unnecessary bureaucracy. This was also the message from the NRwS in 2004.

'The Act supports the Department's commitment to reduce bureaucratic burdens on schools by removing unnecessary legal requirements on governing bodies, teachers and local authorities' (DfE website accessed 10.4.12).

Again this is also accompanied by sharper accountability: a revised Ofsted framework, changes to capability procedures for teachers which 'fast tracks' the

process. There has also been the introduction of Teaching Schools with their remit, which includes Initial Teacher Training, Continuing Professional Development, Succession Planning for Leadership and School to School Support. Funding streams for schools causing concern are beginning to move to the Teaching Schools with the expectation that the support and challenge for schools in challenging circumstances will be provided by National Leaders of Education. This is based on the premise that the expertise to improve schools is held within the schools themselves, rather than with the LA and a development of Hargreaves' (2010) work. He identifies four building blocks of a self-improving system: clusters of schools, the local solutions approach, co-construction and system leaders. As the LA redefines itself in light of these changes, these are the areas we are trying to support. The role of LLE has also been developed and changed. The LLE was introduced as a coaching role. Recent developments from the National College of School Leadership are promoting the role as significant in driving up improvement. The LLEs in the Study LA are deciding whether they wish to take on this different role.

At the time of writing, all primary schools have 'bought in' to the role of School Partnership Adviser, based on and largely carried out by the former SIP team. I think this shows that the schools found the role, as interpreted by the SIPs and the LA, valuable.

Chapter Six - Conclusions and Looking Ahead

This case study of practice in one Local Authority (LA) set out to explore the role of the primary School Improvement Partner (SIP) in particular and school improvement more generally, through an intrinsic case study carried out as 'insider research'. The study arose from my own experience working as a primary SIP in one LA and the preparation for, implementation of and development of the SIP role in the study LA where I was a member of the primary education team, SIP and then SIP Manager. The fieldwork started in 2010 as the Labour government was considering extending the SIP role and completed in 2011 just before the role was ended by the Coalition government. It set out to answer four questions:

1. How did headteachers, SIPs and national government officers of the time perceive the role of the SIP?
2. How closely did the role of SIP as practised match the brief as created by the government in 2004?
3. What did SIPs, headteachers and national government representatives see as the main tensions of the SIP role?
4. Did the SIP role contribute to educational change, and if so, how?

1. How did headteachers, SIPs and national government officers of the time perceive the role of the SIP?

My study found that the introduction of the role of the SIP initially caused anxiety and concern amongst some headteachers. Some were anxious that the role would be a government 'spy' or 'inspection by the back door'. They had some concerns about losing the relationship that they had developed with the primary link advisers and moving to a different way of working with new, unfamiliar people.

Headteachers interviewed commented that the majority of headteachers felt that the LA link adviser role was effective and saw no need to change it. The role of SIP also brought uncertainty and a concern from headteachers that the role would have an agenda that they did not share, although some of this emanated from the way the SIP role was presented to them by the LA. My study found that in the

majority of cases this did not happen as a relationship of trust built up between the headteachers and the SIPs. The SIPs perceived the role positively and were keen to develop positive relationships with the headteachers and their approach and professionalism helped the role succeed in the study LA. The SIPs and headteachers found a way to negotiate the inbuilt conflicts in the role as they felt able to discuss wider issues than suggested by the SIP Brief and in the most positive cases headteachers viewed the SIPs as 'critical friends' as outlined by Swaffield (2005), who offered both challenge and support. As the relationship developed the SIPs felt able to increase the challenge element and the headteachers in the main welcomed this because of the trust that had developed as suggested by the literature (Bottery, 2004; and Reina and Reina, 1999). However, this was not the case with all SIPs and headteachers. The study found that personal style, of both headteachers and SIPs, played a large part in the development of the role.

The SIP Brief introduced the SIP as a positive role: one that would 'aim to provide school leaders with challenge and support that is tailored to their needs and delivered to nationally consistent standards' (DfES, 2007, p.3). MacBeath (2006) identifies the tensions within the role as contributing to the 'essential dishonesty of the package' (2006, p.130) because SIPs reported to the LA and Swaffield (2007) shared this concern. Kent (2009) and White (2008) described how representatives from the DCSF described the role as a 'lever' for school improvement, assuming that headteachers were not working hard enough to raise standards. It is clear from Cowen (2008) that the 'New Relationship with Schools' (NRwS) (2004), of which the SIP was one element, whilst claiming to be based on school self evaluation and priorities and moving away from 'informed prescription' and directives outlined by Barber (2002), was also very much about accountability. It had a clear brief to raise standards through the measure of national tests for 11 year olds, sharing data with parents and the wider community and a more rigorous inspection regime through a new Ofsted framework. When the role was formally ended by the Coalition government the headteachers were clear that they wanted a similar role to continue, using the same professionals.

2. How closely did the role of SIP as practised match the brief as created by the government?

The SIP Brief outlined the role of the SIP to challenge and support the school in the areas of target setting, data analysis, advise the governing body on headteacher performance management and the school's performance management systems, discuss the support that the school could use and report to the LA through the agreed systems and to National Strategies as required (DfES, 2004). The RA commented on a range of responses across the region to the role of SIP, but he saw the role as one that would support school improvement.

My study found that in many ways the SIPs followed the government brief in that they completed all aspects of the role and were perceived to do so effectively by the National Strategy monitoring process which consistently judged the primary SIP programme to be good or better. This is evidenced by National Strategy reports written each term and the 'RAG rating' given to the LA. The area of data analysis and target setting was already carried out by the primary team as suggested in the SIP Brief and the SIPs followed that guidance and structure. The SIPs also brought to the role their experience as headteachers, of working with headteachers and their own philosophy and vision of school improvement and education. They listened carefully to the headteachers to be able to support them, but were also not afraid to ask challenging questions and 'push a bit further' (SIP1).

The development of trust created the feature of 'two conversations', mentioned by all headteachers in the first round of interviews: the SIP report that was the record of the conversation for the LA which could be requested by Ofsted and an 'off the record' conversation that did not make it into the SIP report. This relationship that the headteachers and SIPs constructed, of which the LA and government were unaware, was a result of the development of a relationship of trust as outlined by Bottery (2004) and Bryk and Schneider (2002) and it made the role more effective. When planning the SIP role for the LA, consultation with the headteachers showed that they wanted the SIPs to have been primary headteachers at some stage in

their careers and this added to the building of trust as there was role credibility. The study found that this relationship of trust was crucial to the success of the SIP/ school partnership and this was illustrated by the headteachers talking about both positive and negative examples of their experience of the role. One example of broken trust was when the SIP regraded judgements of the school following an Ofsted inspection and the headteacher felt that, as the person who knew the school best, the SIP should have maintained them and supported the school. In another school the SIP supported the headteacher through a difficult inspection.

3. What did SIPs, headteachers and national government representatives see as the main tensions of the SIP role?

My study confirmed that there was potential for areas of tension for the SIPs, headteachers and the LA in this 'new relationship' outlined in the NRwS. The first tension was that of the inherent conflict in the role identified by Swaffield (2007) and MacBeath (2006) and expressed by White (2008). However, the SIPs in the study did not see themselves as a 'lever for school improvement' but more as a critical friend for headteachers, as partners in the journey of school improvement. The SIPs and headteachers had conversations about school and personal issues with the headteachers that did not go in the SIP reports, which were technically in the public domain and could be requested by Ofsted. The creation of 'two conversations' shows how the SIPs and headteachers worked around the national policy. The interviews showed that the headteachers had mixed views about how much to talk about and to reveal about aspects of school life. Some agreed that they would not want to show what could be seen as weaknesses to someone who reported to the LA, although the majority of headteachers said that they believed the LA needed to know about challenges to be able to support in times of difficulty. I did not find evidence of this in any of the literature and it could be a reflection of the positive relationship and between the primary headteachers and the SIPs and also between the primary headteachers and the study LA.

The second tension was the notion of the term 'partner'. My study found that over half the headteachers agreed that their SIP was a partner; a few maintained that

the SIPs were agents to deliver a particular definition of school effectiveness as measured by the criteria in Ofsted. A few felt that the way the role was constructed, such as the time constraint (a fixed number of visits) and an inflexible agenda that they perceived as set around compliance, meant that the word 'partner' was a misnomer. The SIPs saw themselves in the main as partners and felt that they worked in partnership with the headteachers. The national government saw the role of SIP as an independent professional who, by using a range of tools including increasingly sophisticated data analysis and revised criteria for inspection, would focus schools on the 'right' priorities to make a difference to outcomes for children. The impact would be judged through the results of the national tests and the Ofsted inspection system, but delivered 'through a partnership model with the school needs at the centre' (DfES, 2004, p.7).

The third tension was the replication of the pressure on schools to raise standards in the short term, balanced against longer term plans for improvement. This reflects the question asked by Joyce in 1999: 'Can a reform agenda that has school improvement as its core resolve contradictions of development and accountability / focus on target setting and also a broader range of outcomes and promote an approach to change that is not just a "quick fix"?' The headteachers said that at the beginning of the programme the SIP stuck to the agenda for the visit and the paperwork felt cumbersome. The SIP Brief (2007) suggests that SIPs should discuss the 'Every Child Matters' agenda, but headteachers said that the SIPs did not always do this. This was also identified by Cowen (2008) as a concern nationally. SIPs said that the pressure to complete the visits based on identification of priorities from the data, the quality of provision and leadership and management meant that there was not always time to discuss the wider issues. As time went on and the programme became looser the SIPs felt that they could have those wider conversations about longer term change and school improvement.

The role of SIP was also supposed to cut down bureaucracy for schools, but my study found that, when the role of SIP was introduced, the headteachers and SIPs

did not feel that it achieved the stated goals of 'less clutter', 'less bureaucracy' or of a 'school driven' agenda. Some headteachers said it felt like more accountability and compliance; that the visits seemed to be about form filling, answering questions and explaining that led to a report that was of little use to them. This was also identified as a concern by Halsey et al. (2005) and in Cowen (2008).

It was commented by some SIPs who had worked in other LAs that some of these initial tensions were because of the way that the LA had introduced the role of SIP, making it seem a 'harsher' programme than had been intended by the government and the quality and clarity of communication from the LA to headteachers emerged as a tension and an important theme moving forward. As time went on the role of SIP developed in a range of ways at different levels in different schools. In some cases this seemed to follow the developmental levels of trust outlined by Bottery (2004). Trust developed as the headteachers saw that the SIPs knew and understood the world of school and the challenges in the role of headteacher because of their experience. However, headteachers found the SIP role less successful in those cases where the SIP spent time talking about how things were done in their own schools, promoted the way they themselves had done something and assumed there was one right answer to a school improvement issue: in short, talked more about themselves than they listened to the headteacher. These elements were not part of the SIP role as defined in the SIP Brief, but more about how the role was interpreted.

Another tension was the place of the SIP in the seven elements of the NRwS. Some headteachers felt that they were philosophically opposed to the paradigm, which they saw as increased accountability and a 'lever' (White, 2008; MacBeath, 2006). Another tension was the limited amount of time the SIPs actually had in schools. The majority of headteachers felt that they would have liked a greater time allocation of support. The previous government had been seeking to address this by the 'extended SIP role' that was trialled in the study LA in 2009 – 2010. It was welcomed by schools in challenging circumstances, the majority of whom had by this time made positive relationships with the SIPs and valued the extra time

and support. Headteachers and schools judged to be outstanding had the greatest variation in their reactions to the possibility of extra time.

The final tension identified was the 'power balance' of SIPs and headteachers. Who held the power in this relationship? Every school had to have a SIP and the school could not really refuse to have one (although the RA mentioned that in some parts of the country this had been the case) and at the beginning of the programme the headteachers said that the fixed, directive agenda made them feel that they were being 'done to' and that they had no ownership. In addition, some headteachers felt that the SIPs wanted them to do things 'their way' rather than letting them come to their own conclusions. Although the SIPs described themselves as partners and equals, this was not the perception of all the headteachers. The termly report that the SIP wrote was also seen as a manifestation of power by a few headteachers and the judgements that the SIP was required to make (e.g. whether targets were sufficiently challenging or whether a school had identified the 'right' priorities) added to this feeling.

4. Did the SIP contribute to educational change, and if so, how?

My study suggests that in the study LA the role of SIP contributed positively to educational change. Some of the features of success were that it led to a 'joining up' of performance management for headteachers and school priorities. A SIP who was also an adviser for the LA felt that the SIP programme improved consistency and rigour in school improvement systems in the study LA and that the views and contributions from experienced school improvement professionals had improved the quality of support and challenge offered to schools, as the external SIPs brought 'fresh eyes' to school improvement systems in the LA. In addition, the culture of the LA and the way the SIPs and primary headteachers worked together enabled the programme to be changed and adapted in a way that delivered the anticipated outcomes and which made it more positive than had been imagined. The opportunity for the SIPs to construct and develop the SIP programme, rather than being told what to do and how to do it (as SIP2 described the role in another LA) led to a high level of commitment from the majority of the

SIPs. Working with headteacher colleagues and external consultants changed attitudes in various members of LA staff and started the journey to system led school improvement, one of the biggest emerging changes of direction in educational policy.

This was not the case for all schools and this seemed to depend on the strength of the relationship that was developed between the SIP and the headteacher. The study showed that the match of SIP and headteacher, the attributes of the SIP and the personal style of the headteachers had to be considered carefully. The role of SIP began with the elements identified by Fullan (2007) as initiating change, including advocacy and funding, but was ended before having the chance to embed. Yet the fact that the role, albeit a modified one, has continued at headteachers' request suggests that it was seen as valuable. Another indication that it was perceived as effective is that in 2010 the Labour government was seeking to extend and enhance the role of the SIP. The RA reported that there was a view in the DfE that the role was costly and ineffective, but there is no evidence of this in the published reports about the role of the SIP.

This study has taken place against a backdrop of huge change in the educational landscape: a change in government and changes in school improvement. The NRwS mentions 'system based leadership' and this has been developed and is the main focus for the Coalition government, underpinning their view of school improvement. With the ending of the National Programmes, there is an expectation that schools will provide subject support for themselves – using the expertise that is already in schools to support schools (Hargreaves, 2010). Whilst the government is keen to say that schools have more freedom from LAs and rigid policy, there are also clear signs that this is alongside ever higher expectations of schools: a 'floor standard' that will keep rising and a new Ofsted inspection framework that has replaced the category of 'satisfactory' with 'requires improvement' (Ofsted, 2012) and an expectation that the majority of schools will seek academy status. The government has taken away some of the statutory elements for which the SIP was responsible (for example schools are no longer

required to set targets but this is balanced with an expectation that schools *will* set targets because this is good practice). What has been removed is the requirement to set and submit them. All primary schools in the study LA set targets in 2011 and all those schools that were inspected under the framework of January 2012 were asked for them by the inspectors. With the end of the SIP role, some schools are looking to develop this role of 'critical friend' amongst themselves and the LA has organised workshops for headteachers to support this. Some headteachers have said that that they will still 'buy in' someone to do the SIP role of challenge and support and critical friend and all primary schools in the LA bought in this role for 2012- 2013. The headteachers said that their SIP provided opportunities for reflection on the successes and areas for development and that it is helpful for them to share their self evaluation with a critical friend.

Contribution to knowledge

My study explored the role of the primary School Improvement Partner (SIP) within the field of school improvement in one LA. This role was part of the policy of the New Relationship with Schools (NRwS) outlined by the Labour government in 2004, described in Chapter Two. Through listening to the voices of the different professionals involved in school improvement in the study LA, I heard about the relationships between the SIPs and the headteachers, the tensions in the relationship and the contribution they felt that the SIP made to educational change. This showed that the practice differed from the planned policy in several ways. In terms of the relationship between SIP and headteacher, the study found that the most important element of the role was that of trust: trust between SIP and headteacher and trust between SIPs and the LA. This trust grew and developed in line with the themes outlined by Reina and Reina (1999); Bottery (2004); Bryck and Schneider (2002) and Swaffield (2007). The elements identified by Reina and Reina (1999) demonstrate this well. There was mutual respect between the SIPs and headteachers. The headteachers knew that the SIPs had been headteachers and understood their world of work. The successful SIPs developed contractual trust by honouring agreements and being consistent in approach. The interviews showed that they also shared information, admitted mistakes and maintained

confidentiality which built communication trust. Their willingness to keep confidences is also an element of that communication trust. This was not seen in all the SIP/headteacher relationships, but occurred in schools where the SIP and headteacher found a 'middle way' where the trusting relationship developed over time and contrasted with the headteachers who talked of the lack of trust in other SIP relationships. The ending of the formal role of SIP by the Coalition government in 2010 meant that 'thick trust' (Bottery, 2004) did not have time to develop which is a consequence of the frequent changes of policy. A further development was the role of the LA in developing the SIP relationship that was suggested by Swaffield (2007) as a possible factor that could affect the relationship and the effectiveness of the role. Headteacher interviews showed that the trust they had in the LA was part of the reason the role was successful and that the LA would be sensitive to issues raised and had a role to play in school improvement as Derrington (2000) suggested and Fullan (2007) identified as the importance of the middle tier.

The study found that these positive, trusting relationships developed in 'private space' between the two adults and often began with 'two conversations', which was another finding of the study. The conversations between the headteachers and SIPs were not the same as the ones that appeared in the reports. Perhaps this was behind Cowen's findings (2008) that the reports were of less use than the actual conversations. The SIPs described this as 'two conversations': the conversation that was the meeting and the conversation that was the SIP report. The interviews with the SIPs and headteachers all mentioned this and reminded me of occasions when I had met with the SIPs in my role as LA officer and they had either said there was information they were not going to give me, or when something was revealed about the school, that they knew but had not said. The SIP reports show that some conversations that began as confidential between the headteacher and SIP and were not reported to the LA, became more public as the trust and confidence developed, others remained confidential throughout the relationship and some were quite personal. Analysis of the SIP reports showed how, along with the loosening of the role and the wider brief of the SIP,

headteachers became more willing for the reports to reflect the discussion as it happened, to mention some of the difficult issues and to accept challenge from the SIPs recorded in the reports.

My study also showed that, contrary to some of the findings of Cowen (2008), schools judged to be outstanding welcomed the challenge that was offered by the SIPs. Several of the SIPs had identified it as an area for their development and one SIP planned and led a training event for the SIP team on 'how to challenge outstanding schools' at the request of the SIP team. In addition to the 'formal' agenda, the SIPs supported headteachers with other issues that arose in school that headteachers wanted to talk through with a trusted person. This was confirmed in the interviews where the headteachers said that they valued having someone to talk to about particular challenges in school. All SIPs interviewed said they felt able to provide this information and support without compromising the SIP agenda and their role.

My study also offers some insights in terms of policy development and implementation. National policies are set and cannot take into account the context of every LA. This study examines how one policy was played out in a particular time and in particular circumstances. The role of SIP may have been 'lived' more informally in the study LA than in others because of the culture of the organisation, the size of the LA and of the SIP team and the relationship between primary schools and the LA. The blurring of the role of SIP and link adviser outlined by Cowen (2008), was also present in the LA and was confusing for headteachers, especially at the beginning of the SIP role when the LA was trying to keep the advisory and accountability functions separate, with primary link advisers who were there to signpost issues not related to traditional school improvement and the SIP. However this changed over time, partly because staffing issues in the LA meant a lack of capacity for the extra advisory role and partly because headteachers, having made good relationships, contacted the SIP rather than the LA when they wanted to discuss school issues – even if it was not part of the SIP Brief. This led to the SIP and headteacher having a closer relationship than maybe

was envisioned by the NRwS. Cowen (2008) highlighted concerns that the SIP role replicated the pastoral role of the LA outlined in Derrington (2000), rather than creating a more formal and challenging relationship. At the same time headteachers were clear that they wanted and needed some sort of pastoral care and also a person to discuss school issues and in many cases the SIP became that person.

This went beyond what Swaffield (2005) identified as 'low level listening' and it covered a very wide range of topics. It showed that it was possible to balance the tensions of accountability and confidentiality, of partnership and power and of challenge and support and for the SIP to become, in some cases a 'true' critical friend, which is in contradiction to the premise of Swaffield (2007), MacBeath, (2006) and White (2008) in their concerns about the SIP as a critical friend. Swaffield (2007) talks of the tensions within the role and these were found in a few headteacher /SIP relationships, but in others it could be seen that the role did not operate in this way. Features such as the leadership style of the headteacher and the personal style of the SIP, as seen in the interviews, the length of time in headship and the position of the school in the Ofsted judgements all affected the way the relationship developed.

The interviews with the SIPs showed that they were driven very much by moral purpose (Fullan, 2003) with a desire to improve outcomes for all pupils and to support the headteachers in their work, rather than to deliver a particular national agenda. The way they interpreted the role reflected this. All the SIPs interviewed were concerned for the progress and outcomes for the pupils in the schools as well as the wellbeing of the headteachers and this was voiced very strongly in the interviews. The values held by the headteachers were also important in this context, building on the work of Fullan (2003; 2007) who looked at the centrality of moral purpose to the work of leadership. The study found that this linked back to the development of trust as the most important element of this process: a trust built through a realisation and appreciation of a shared moral purpose and the keeping of confidences over time and the quality of the conversation. At its most successful, some of the SIPs were acting as 'true' critical friends, providing

focused support and challenge for headteachers to help them reflect on school improvement processes and outcomes through a constructive dialogue, rather than the 'dishonest' version of the role predicted by MacBeath (2006). The strength of the relationships was pivotal and the match between headteacher and SIP, both successful and unsuccessful, demonstrated the importance of trust in the area of partnership in school improvement. As one headteacher said: 'If you get a good one, you want to hold on to them.'

Another successful element was the 'loosening' of the agenda – seen through the move towards a school led agenda later in the programme. This was identified by Fullan (2007) as important in educational change. I found evidence to support the view that there is no 'one size fits all' solution to school improvement, identified by Reynolds (1996) and by Stoll and Fink (1996). A critical friend / professional partner can make a positive difference to school improvement (Swaffield 2005), but there are elements that need to be in place to make it successful. It was in the schools where the SIPs were acting as 'true' critical friends that the role was seen as most effective.

The elements of the SIP role could also be seen to contribute to the development of 'moving' schools as outlined by Stoll and Fink (1996). The stated aims of the NRwS to put school objectives and priorities for development at the centre and the importance of monitoring and evaluation of their process, progress and achievement and development, all seen in moving schools, were also key features of the SIP role. This model of 'moving' schools is transferable to the work of the SIP, as the elements identified can be seen in schools today.

The SIPs needed to display a range of behaviours, attitudes and experience to be effective and part of their success was gauging the 'right' way to work with headteachers. Suggested personal qualities were outlined in the SIP Brief person specification (DSCF, 2007) and mentioned by the headteachers in the interviews with headteachers and SIPs. The relationships grew, but took time to develop and the role was strongest after two to three years. The original SIP Brief

recommended a change of SIP after three to five years, but the programme was stopped before this time span was reached. We do know that the SIPs seen as less successful were the ones who did not stay in the LA very long and that changes of SIP were challenging for the headteacher who then found the programme 'disjointed' (HT1). The experience and style of the headteachers also affected the relationship. Headteachers who felt confident in their role, or who identified it as helpful to them were more open to the role of the SIP and were quicker to take control of the agenda and make the programme work for them. The interviews confirmed that the professional had to earn this trust by showing good listening skills, providing information and up to date knowledge about education. This was also identified by Cowen (2008); Swaffield (2007) and MacBeath, (2006). In the study LA it was felt essential for the SIP to have had headship experience, which was not the case in Derrington's (2000) work on LA advisers. It was also important for the SIPs to use that experience sensitively: to support, rather than to hold themselves up as models of good practice and talk about their own achievements. Headship is a lonely role and so the importance of someone who was 'there for me', as one headteacher described it cannot be overlooked. Several headteachers said they valued the one to one conversation with an objective and 'non judgemental person' who would listen and ask questions, but who was not a colleague. This has implications for the new world of system leadership outlined by Hargreaves (2010) as a few headteachers said that they would prefer not to talk to colleagues about their concerns.

The combination of their interpersonal skills, background in and knowledge and successful experience of developing school improvement made a difference to the way that the role was interpreted and lived by the SIPs. Their own style was very important which was shown by those SIPs who were less successful and decided to leave the role. The culture of the LA enabled the SIPs to work with their own style and the SIPs interviewed said that this culture made a difference to the programme. This has implications for the way that LAs could work with headteachers in the future, especially in this rapidly changing landscape where roles are unclear. The success was dependent on the trust between headteachers

and the LA which is hard won and easily lost and the study shows the need for good communication and absolute transparency between the LA and schools. This was mentioned by the majority of the headteachers. Involving the headteachers in interviews and consulting them about the programme, which felt positive at the beginning of the programme, now seems totally inadequate and could be replaced by the headteachers identifying and commissioning the role of critical friend. How this sits with the LA role in intervention in failing schools is another possible avenue of exploration for the future.

Policy impact

As Trowler (2003) said: 'Policy making is the result of negotiation, compromise and the exercise of power and as a result, laden with multiple agendas, attitudes and sets of meaning'. Over the time of the SIP programme the policy / guidelines from government changed several times. At the beginning the SIP visit was expected to be with the headteacher, by the end the SIP was expected to carry out activities in the school. The different editions of the SIP Brief reflected the changing policy as did the messages by the National Strategy officers in the regular regional SIP Manager meetings and the termly visit from the Regional Adviser who also passed on policy decisions. This study agrees with the findings of Ball (1994) that policy has a 'career' which begins at a point of formality and then progresses and evolves. It is interpreted by the actors in the context of their own culture, ideology, history and resources. The SIPs made the role their own; they interpreted it and fashioned it and tried to make it work alongside their own beliefs and values about education and partnership. This is also reflected in the 'two conversations' that were a way that policy was subverted by the participants.

Implications for the LA in future policy: Contribution to practice

In light of the findings from the study I have changed and developed practice in the LA. As part of my substantive role with the LA I seek views from headteachers about how best we can carry out our role and I did this in the SIP programme. In addition I used the ongoing findings, research literature and reflection from my study to inform the way I worked. My interest in the tensions in the role I experienced as a SIP in another LA was a factor in this study. The views of the

headteachers in the LA were particularly interesting as they talked about the relationships that they had with the SIPs and the different aspects of the role. I also used findings from my study to develop LA policy with the SIPs. Several members of the SIP team were themselves interested in further study and research and said they valued the conversations and it strengthened the team. The study informed the changes in the SIP programme in the LA and, I believe, contributed to its success. I was concerned when the programme was ended in 2010 that the research would be of limited use, but changing the focus of the interviews and applying the knowledge of the SIP role to school improvement has meant that there is valuable knowledge and experience that can be used for further study and to inform LA development and can contribute to the wider school improvement debate.

The government may have officially ended the role of SIP, but as one of the SIPs said: 'there will always be someone needed to support and challenge headteachers' and so the recommendation is that there is a role for a critical friend available to headteachers. In the new educational landscape it may not be a SIP, but consideration should be given to this role of critical friend and who is best to provide it. The Coalition government is promoting system led leadership and headteachers providing support and challenge for each other (mentioned in the NRwS) and has promoted, in conjunction with the National College of School Leadership, two roles that can carry this out: Local Leaders of Education (LLE) and National Leaders of Education (NLE). This way of working is just beginning in the study LA and the experience has been both very positive and very challenging and is another avenue for further study.

In light of the findings of my study I recommend that the LA should consider:

- Maintaining the current team of SIPs to provide support and challenge for schools. This could be part of the support for schools in challenging circumstances and available for other schools to 'buy in'.

- Providing support and development opportunities for headteachers to develop skills that can be used in a SIP type role for colleagues. The study has shown the importance of personal style.
- Developing partnerships and opportunities for schools to work together on school improvement projects.
- Improving LA communication with schools: make it clear and frequent.
- Ensuring all systems and policies are transparent and co-constructed with headteachers and based on school needs.
- Monitoring the levels of accountability so that the developing relationships do not lead to a 'cosy' relationship.
- Being outward looking and learn from other LAs and school improvement professionals.

For the systems led approach to work there needs to be trust and understanding of the different contexts of schools. Fullan's (2003) discussion of moral purpose will be very relevant to the future as the gap between the achievement of different groups of pupils is still too wide. Headteachers, governors and schools are being asked to take responsibility for the whole city and all the pupils – not just for their own schools. In recent times as James and Connolly (2000) identified, competition between schools for pupils has made it more difficult for schools to cooperate and whilst, at the time of writing, there are more children than primary school places in the study LA, this will not always be the case. This study has happened in a time of real culture change and everyone in the profession seems to be finding their way with the future of school improvement.

Reflections on the research and the Professional Doctorate 'journey'

In this section of the chapter I reflect on my approach to the research and how the Professional Doctorate has shaped, challenged and changed me in my professional role and as a researcher. My professional identity has changed during the research as my role has changed twice over the life of the thesis and four times over my time on the course. When I enrolled on the course I was a part time primary adviser with a portfolio that included being the link adviser to 14 primary

schools and the LA responsibility for SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education). Now my job title is full time 'Strategic Commissioner: Standards and Achievement', with a brief from early years to adult education, leading and managing a team of advisers and managers. My research diary charts the journey, the conflicts and the success and shows a picture of a growing understanding of the world of educational change locally and nationally, both through professional development through the LA and the Professional Doctorate.

'Finding yourself in the work'

Finding my voice as a researcher has been challenging. Coming from my professional life where I feel that I have some expertise, to negotiating my way as a 'beginner' through the unfamiliar world and language of research has made me both more confident and more uncertain of the world of education. I now know that there is even more that I do not know!

'What's it all about?' reflective practice

Costley, Elliott and Gibbs (2010) talk about the importance of reflective professional practice on professional development and the part it can play in helping us understand organisations and improve our own practice. The fact that reflective professional practice can also link practice to the body of literature and 'has the capacity to inform, improve and, perhaps most important at the present time, value practitioners' own reflective practice against the imposition of market based policies at national and institutional level' (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, p.118) has been a key element of my motivation. I am keen to improve my own practice and the opportunity to reflect on and research areas of my work was one of the reasons I chose to undertake a Professional Doctorate rather than the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It has enabled me to develop a wider view of what is happening in the educational world and relate it to theory, appreciate the role of education policy and question my acceptance of government policy and challenge some of those policies through the way I interpret my role. My diary records an early tutorial where my supervisor comments on the terminology and phrases I use that have no meaning to him, but that I take for granted until I try to explain them.

As outlined in Chapter 3, I do not think that ‘the truth is out there’ and that we can discover it: rather that we all interpret what we see and do within the frame of our own experience, values and beliefs and by exploring this through the meaning that professionals make of their roles, discover their truths. This study has helped me explore one area of my work in more detail and then apply this learning more widely. Costley, Elliott and Gibbs (2010) also talk about the importance of reflexivity, of being aware of your own place in the organisation and the difference that can make to your own research. I would like to think that I was aware of my ‘place’ within the research. As an established member of the LA advisory team and having been in the LA for several years I had worked directly with many of the headteachers. When I approached headteachers in my role as researcher asking if I could interview them for my research, all of them agreed without hesitation and they did not seem concerned about or hold back in the interviews. In fact they seemed to respond very openly and fully and several commented afterwards that they had been surprised that they had been so open. This could have been because they knew and trusted me and so were happy to talk. They could also have felt that this was an opportunity to get their views across to the LA because even though I was there as a researcher the final report does contain recommendations for the LA. I also found it salutary and grounding that at least one of the headteachers had forgotten the subject of the study in the time between the two interviews. What feels so central to me is, as one of my colleagues says ‘only a tiny part of their working lives’. The SIPs were also keen to be interviewed. The idea of co construction and having a voice in the development of the role in the LA was appealing to them and in an earlier assignment I had interviewed them about one aspect of their experience as SIPs and they had been very positive about this involvement.

Any changes?

I originally felt that case study methodology was the best way to explore the issues and questions I had. I still think that this was the most effective way to find out what people felt and thought about the role of SIP. Case study has proved flexible and relevant and consistent with my epistemological position. I thought the use of

mixed methods was positive as I believe it added to the validity of the data and gave a wider picture of the SIP programme. The wide use of data: the voices of the SIPs and headteachers, the SIP reports and national and local evidence made a strong base and gave the study balance (Patton 2002).

The notion of insider research was very powerful. It brought another dimension and I think that I took appropriate steps to make sure that my position was made clear and the difference between me as researcher and me as SIP Manager was clear to people, especially the SIPs. By being in the 'middle of it' my understanding was real and I understood some of the context in which people were working (Sikes and Potts, 2008). The fact that I have been a headteacher and worked myself as a SIP in a different LA meant that I had firsthand experience of the role of the professionals I was interviewing. This does mean that I brought my own views and bias about those roles and those experiences have shaped my worldview. Part of my professional role was to deliver the SIP programme and so I was very close to the area of research. When I was not actively interviewing and researching I would hear things or notice things about the role of SIP and I recorded these in my journal. These appear throughout the work as 'naturally occurring data' and I think these add strength to the research as they extend the voices and views and remain within the boundary of the case study, (the LA). However the fact that I was so close to the research meant that it took some time to get distance from the material and see the bigger picture and the research more in the abstract, which is important.

The changing landscape

I am aware that I had not anticipated the huge changes in education that would happen in the course of the project and this was very interesting but at the same time frustrating and challenging. The end of the National Strategies and the dismantling of the LA team of highly skilled primary consultants who had become so much more than the deliverers of national messages had a negative impact on schools. This happened during the time of my research. Headteachers felt the loss of these teams which influenced the relationship between the LA and schools. The

messages coming from the senior leadership of the LA such as: 'we won't be here for very much longer' made headteachers anxious about the support and challenge they received from the SIPs and advisers and whether it would continue. It was their positive feedback about the role and the need for a 'critical friend' or external pair of eyes that led me to recommend that the LA keep the SIP role going longer than the government intended so that a transition to a new way of working could be introduced. This proved very successful and at the time of writing every primary school in the LA had 'bought into' the new model based on the successful practice of the SIP identified in this study. Under the previous government the policy was to expand the role of SIP (DCSF, 2009) and it was poised to be crucial to the future of school improvement. There are still lessons to be learned and messages to be taken from the study about what attributes and attitudes the SIP brought to schools and the impact those had on the headteachers.

Although the role of the LA is rapidly changing, the underpinning themes of the NRwS are very current; they are just being played out differently. Trust, challenge, support and networking and collaboration are ever more important as schools form partnerships and we move toward 'system led leadership' suggested by Hargreaves (2010). My research showed that headteachers are in different stages of acceptance and enthusiasm about these new ways of working. Some believe that headteachers do not have the capacity to lead and support other schools as well as maintain their own performance; others are looking forward to the new challenges of doing so. What is certain is that the next few years are going to bring further changes in the educational landscape.

Where next?

My findings suggest a wide range of directions that could be followed and further research as a result of this case study. The role of SIP/ changes to the support and challenge given to headteachers could be explored in other places – especially one where the SIP programme had been run differently, or an LA with a different culture or a different size. Another aspect would be the difference

between the role of SIP in secondary and primary education, or the role in schools judged by Ofsted to be inadequate. The new role of headteachers as system leaders and the role of National and Local Leaders in Education would be a valuable area to research further against this background of change. Finally the extent of conformity of schools and LAs in the new and developing education system of academies where school improvement could become more fractured is another possible area of study.

And finally...

School improvement strategies can come and go and doubtless successive governments will continue to produce policy designed to meet their ideas of the purpose of education. This will always mean 'a political process with competing groups, interests and ideologies continuing to fight over the shape of education policy' (Trowler, 2003, p.36). Trust and tension will always be competing values as educational professionals try to do their best for pupils and these will have to be navigated in any professional partnership.

Glossary of Terms

Academy: a type of school that is independent of Local Education Authority control but is publicly funded (direct from the DfE) with some private sponsorship.

Achievement: the outcomes of the pupils, both in tests (attainment) and the progress they make in a given time.

Assessment of Performance Unit (APU): This was the research arm of the government to look at national capability during the 1970s and 1980s.

Names for the government department with a remit for education

DES Department of Education and Science	1964 – 1992
DfE Department for Education	1992 – 1995
DfEE Department for Education and Employment	1995 – 2001
DfES Department for Education and Skills	2001 - 2007
DCSF Department for Children, Schools and Families	2007 – 2010
DfE Department for Education	2010 -

Every Child Matters (2004): This Act was introduced to ensure that services for children were integrated. It had five outcomes seen as key to well-being in childhood and later life – being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being.

Extended Services: As part of the Every Child Matters agenda schools were expected to provide a range of wider services before and after the school day to the local community. These included, access to support, breakfast clubs, family learning classes, community use of facilities. This was ended in 2009.

Floor standard (primary): the minimum that primary school can achieve – a school will be below the floor if fewer than 60 per cent of pupils achieve the basics standard of level 4 in both English and maths – and fewer pupils than average make the expected levels of progress between KS1 and KS2.

Headteacher Performance Management: a framework to allow the assessment of performance of headteachers. It is carried out by a panel of governors and has to have an external adviser. This was included in the role of the SIP.

Improving Schools Programme: (formerly known as Intensive Support Programme): (ISP) – a National Strategies programme to support the raising of standards, accelerate and sustain progress, build capacity and support self-evaluation. It had three main elements: a focus of achievement, improving quality of teaching and learning and developing leadership for learning.

KS2 SATS: The most common name for the national curriculum tests taken by children at the end of key stage 2, in maths, reading and writing.

League tables: Introduced to show the percentage of 11-year-olds in each school reaching Level 4 – the standard expected for their age group – in both English and maths and published to enable parents to compare schools.

Local Management for Schools: Delegation of funding to schools to enable them to plan their use of resources (including staff) to maximum effect in accordance with their own needs and priorities.

London Challenge: a programme to improve schools and education in London that involved partnerships of schools and the use of Challenge Partners.

National College of School Leadership: an organisation started in 2000 to develop and support leadership in schools.

National Curriculum: Started in 1988, the National Curriculum was introduced to standardise the content taught in schools. It lays out the subjects, content and levels of achievement. It is currently under review.

National Strategies: National programmes and a supporting 'field force' that were introduced in 1997 to raise standards and achievement in a range of subjects and aspects of pedagogy (including maths and English). They were ended in 2009.

Ofsted: Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. Ofsted reports to Parliament. Teams inspect a range of settings and providers including schools.

Purdah: The time between an announced election and the final election results when government officials are not allowed to speak about policy and no new documentation is produced.

RAG rating: the National Strategies used the term RAG (red / amber / green) to judge LA performance: Red was inadequate, Amber 'needed work' and Green was good

Schools Causing Concern: the most recent definition is:

1. performance standards and safety warning notice has been given (section 60) and the school has failed to comply;
2. teachers' pay and conditions warning notice has been given (section 60A)¹ and the school has failed to comply;
3. a school requires significant improvement (section 61);
4. a school requires special measures (section 62).

Target setting: Schools were required to set targets for pupils in Y6 (set when they were in Y5) and submit them to the LA who submitted them to government. The requirement to submit them was ended in 2010.

Tellus Survey: Until 2010 schools were invited to respond on line to rate the LA services.

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Appendices

Appendix One

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PARTNER JOB DESCRIPTION AND PERSON SPECIFICATION (from SIP Brief 3rd Edition, 2007)

JOB DESCRIPTION

Purpose

A school improvement partner provides professional challenge and support to a number of schools maintained by one or more authorities by:

- acting as a critical professional friend to the schools, helping their leadership to evaluate their schools' performance, identify priorities for improvement and plan effective change;
- helping build the schools' capacity to improve pupils' achievement and to realise other key outcomes for pupils that bear on achievement;
- contributing to whole-school improvement in the schools, including effective contribution to the Every Child Matters outcomes;
- providing challenge and support for the senior leadership team in the schools; and
- providing information to governing bodies on their schools' performance and development.

Reports to

- The school's local authority.

Key Contacts

- Head teachers and senior managers of school improvement partner's schools;
- chairs of governors of school improvement partner's schools;
- local authority manager of school improvement partners; and
- regional school improvement partner co-ordinator.

Main Accountabilities

- Discuss and assess a school's self-evaluation and school improvement plan against available evidence including the Ofsted report, and comment on the effectiveness of these;
- Provide an objective review of the school's performance data by considering its most recent national test results, trends over time and data on other pupils' achievement and well-being, and analysing the evidence for the school's improvement;
- Identify areas of strength and weakness and scrutinise the progress made by different groups of pupils to ensure that success for some does not hide failure of others;
- Discuss the school's targets and priorities for the coming year, based on the analysis of the data above, to ensure that they are ambitious but realistic and focused on all pupils making the expected progress and fulfilling their potential;
- Advise the school on resources and strategies which fit priorities;
- Challenge the school where necessary, particularly on its capacity to improve and whether it is focusing on the most important priorities for improvement and development;
- Discuss a package of support and challenge for the school (provided by the local authority and/or external sources) and ensure that this is appropriately managed;
- Report the outcomes of the dialogue with the school to the school's governing body, the head teacher, the school's local authority and the National Strategies according to the cycle and format determined by the local authority;
- Provide advice and guidance to the governing body to inform the performance management of the head teacher; and
- Contribute to the effective development of the school improvement partner programme.

PERSON SPECIFICATION

Introduction

School improvement partners will have a range of essential skills, knowledge, experience and expertise and personal qualities. Some skills and knowledge might have been acquired through training and development rather than as a consequence of experience at work. Some gaps in knowledge are likely to be readily filled by training, but a person should demonstrate the underlying and essential knowledge for the role before working as a school improvement partner.

Skills

Analytical ability

School improvement partners need to:

- understand the construction and use of leading indicators of performance;
- interpret complex and detailed quantitative and qualitative data accurately and quickly;
- pursue challenging and rigorous questions, probe explanations of root causes and apparent inconsistencies;
- identify key issues accurately; and
- give accurate feedback, both oral and written.

Judgement

School improvement partners should be able to:

- develop arguments and consistently make sound judgements on the basis of evidence,
- qualitative and quantitative information and rigorous analysis about performance and potential;
- adapt judgements to circumstances and be able to make accurate, consistent and proportional judgements of performance in different instances (i.e. treat schools in similar circumstances similarly and make proportionate allowances for differences in different circumstances);

- be consistent in the assessment of a school leadership's record in evaluating its own improvement actions; its capability to deliver improvement and evaluate the impact of actions; and its record in delivering improvement;
- make judgements against a background of high expectations for all pupils and an awareness of the complex issues which surround the achievement of different groups of pupils, for example children in care, boys, girls, those of different ethnic or socio-economic groups and those with a disability or special educational need;
- acknowledge a full range of options and their pros and cons and demonstrate aspirational, yet realistic expectations, providing challenge that stretches professional practice; and
- explain how judgements are made and be able to justify them in the face of opposition or challenge.

ICT

School improvement partners should:

- use information and communications technology, including maintaining up-to-date records and making use of materials held on databases.

Knowledge

School improvement partners should have knowledge of:

- the range of approaches to leadership and management in schools in the phase in which the school improvement partner is to work, and understand how to tackle underperformance in different contexts and at all levels;
- funding for schools in the phase in which the school improvement partner is to work;
- school improvement strategies for schools in the phase in which the school improvement partner is to work - national, regional and local dimensions;
- the application of ICT in schools;
- government and local authority education policies and strategies and their implementation, including children's trust arrangements, the rights of the child and extended schools;

- the types and sources of services available to help schools, including the capabilities of providers;
- collaborative approaches between schools;
- principles and practice of quality assurance systems, including school self-evaluation and performance management; and
- equal opportunities legislation and the issues surrounding the achievement of different groups of pupils, for example children in care, boys, girls, those of different ethnic or socio economic groups and those with a disability or special educational need.

Experience and expertise

School improvement partners should be able to demonstrate the following:

- membership of school leadership team or experience of senior local authority advisory work and/or related areas of work relevant to the phase of the school improvement partner's work;
- recent first-hand experience of successful performance improvement in practice;
- evidence of sustained performance improvement as a result of own actions;
- experience of a range of performance improvement approaches and their application in different circumstances;
- significant senior experience in complex organisations undergoing change;
- record of successful organisational and people management and financial planning and control; and
- experience of school improvement techniques and approaches and of using selfevaluation to identify priorities for action.

Personal qualities

School improvement partners should:

- be highly motivated, enthusiastic, strategic leaders;
- be credible, commanding respect in a wide range of circumstances;
- be committed to lifelong learning and up-to-date with the educational agenda;

- be able to collaborate with colleagues and work within the National Strategies and local authority structures;
- be committed to valuing diversity and demonstrate sensitivity to the needs and rights of different ethnic and religious groups, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual people and those with disabilities;
- be open-minded, active listeners;
- initiate and deal with challenge and manage conflict;
- be creative in problem solving;
- communicate persuasively, articulate in speech and in writing and adapt appropriately to different audiences, use influencing skills effectively;
- receive and act on feedback about own performance;
- promote and manage change; and • interpret complex and detailed quantitative and qualitative data accurately and quickly.

Integrity and behaviour

School improvement partners should:

- recognise where private, personal, political and financial interests may conflict with work as a school improvement partner and take steps to avoid any such conflict;
- avoid using their position as school improvement partners to advance any private, personal, political or financial interests and where appropriate declare any such interests to the school's governing body and local authority; and
- report financial or other irregularities to the local authority

Appendix Two

Invitation to be part of the research

Dear Colleague

Information Sheet for research into the role of SIPs

As you are aware, from April 2008, every primary school had to have a School Improvement Partner (SIP). Here in Brighton and Hove we consulted with headteachers and schools before designing the programme and it has been running for just over two years.

I am currently studying part time for a Professional Doctorate in Education with the University of Brighton. I would like to interview headteachers and SIPs across the city to explore the role of the primary SIP and to consider the following research questions:

- How do headteachers, SIPs and national government officers perceive the role of the SIP?
- How closely does the role of SIP as practised match the government SIP Brief?
- What do SIPs, headteachers and national government representatives see as the main tensions of the SIP role?
- Does the SIP contribute to educational change and, if so, how?

I will use the information gathered to help me understand more about the role of the SIP and ultimately how we might work with schools to make the partnership work more effectively.

I will be writing the findings in my dissertation and some further articles may be published in academic journals.

Interviews will take place during June 2010 and January 2011 at a time convenient to you. They will last about 45 minutes and be audio recorded. I will listen to the audio recordings and, if appropriate, will select parts to be transcribed

If you are happy to be interviewed, please sign the consent form attached. Your participation in the project is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

Yours faithfully,

Hilary Ferries

Participant Consent Form

I agree to take part in this research, which is designed to explore the role of the School Improvement Partner. My participation in this project is entirely voluntary.

I have read the information sheet and I understand fully the purposes, principles and procedures of the study.

I am aware that I will be audio recorded during the interview. I am aware that all audio data will be stored in an encrypted file on the computer and any hard copies kept in a locked cupboard.

I understand that any confidential information will be seen only by the researchers and will not be revealed to anyone else.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason. I agree that should I withdraw from the study, the data collected up to that point may be used by the researchers for the purposes described in the information sheet, unless I tell the researchers otherwise.

Name of participant (please print)

Signed Date

Appendix Three

Starting prompts for the Interview Schedules: Phase One

Outline questions for the SIP

Summer Term 2010

1. Tell me about the role of SIP
2. Where do you feel you have been most successful?
3. Why do you think that was?
4. Do you think the role has changed since the programme started in April 2008?
(follow up if so, how)
5. How closely do you think it has followed the government SIP Brief?
6. Have headteacher attitudes to you changed at all? (follow up if so how)
7. Have there been any difficult times / incidents?
8. What is your view overall about the role of SIP?
9. Anything else you would like to say?

Outline questions for the Headteachers Summer Term 2010

1. Tell me about the role of the SIP in your school.
2. Does it 'look like' the way the government has outlined it?
3. What have been the main strengths / helpful elements?
4. Have there been any difficult times / incidents?
5. How do you feel it has changed since the programme started in April 2008?
6. What is your view overall about the role of SIP?
7. Anything else you would like to say

Starting prompts for the Interview Schedules: Phase Two

Outline questions for the SIPs

Spring Term 2011

Recap over views and summary of last interview.

1. Has it changed: if so, how?
2. Exploration of the four themes
3. One area that no heads talked about last time was collaboration and networking.
What role does that play in you work as SIP?
4. What do you think have been the major successes
5. What do you think could have been done better?
6. How do you feel about the decision to end the role of SIP?
7. What changes do you think you have enabled?
8. Anything else you would like to say

Outline questions for the headteachers Spring Term 2011

Recap over views and summary of last interview:

1. Has it changed: if so, how?
2. Has the SIP recommended you or your school to be part of any collaboration and networking?
3. If so, can you give details
4. There will be no requirement to have a SIP, what, if any, support and challenge would you like?
5. What will you miss?
6. What will you not miss?
7. How do you see school improvement developing in this LA?
8. Given the White Paper says that LAs can develop their own school improvement - what would you advise?
9. What does school improvement mean to you?
10. Tell me more about the two conversations
11. Anything else you would like to say?

Outline questions for the Regional Adviser interview Spring Term 2011

1. Tell me about background to the SIP role
2. What do you think makes a good SIP
3. Was the role interpreted in the way the government was hoping?
4. Was the role interpreted in similar ways in different LAs?
5. How did the role change over time?
6. Enhanced role?
7. Best and worst of the SIP
8. What do you think are the lessons we can learn for school improvement
9. Anything else you would like to say?