THE ROLE OF THE CRITICAL FRIEND IN LEADERSHIP AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This research is a case study, which took place at a co-educational public government school in Broadmeadows, a northern suburb of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

This study investigated the role of the critical friend in supporting school leadership and school improvement. Critical friendship is a versatile form of external support for school colleagues engaged in leadership activities, and one that is subject to increasing professional and political interest.

The role of the critical friend as a facilitator of change has become an important component of a range of school improvement, health promotion and professional learning initiatives in school communities. Effective critical friends draw on a repertoire of actions, depending on the context, participants and phase in the change process at any particular point in time. This concept is closely aligned with mentoring and coaching.

The purpose of the study was to explore the notion of the critical friend and investigate the role through a case study, which questioned, the role and impact of the critical friend in supporting school improvement.

This case study used qualitative methods. Data were collected using multi-perspective interviews with thirteen participants within a school setting who have been involved with a critical friend.

This study revealed that schools in the process of improvement can benefit from a blend of internal and external support to become successful. A critical friend contributes an objective perspective which is necessary for a balanced approach in undertaking school change and transformation.

A number of aspects of the role of the critical friend were found to be important for school improvement. First, genuine dedication and a high level of commitment helped to build leadership capacity. Second, a critical friend was considered by respondents as
someone much more relevant to school improvement than a normal coach, developing a high level of confidence in their knowledge and support. Finally, the relationship between school leaders and critical friends is closer than one which has an external agent working at the school.

Keywords: critical friend, educational leadership, school improvement
DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

(i) The thesis comprises only my original work towards the Masters,

(ii) Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

(iii) The thesis is 21,981 words in length, inclusive of footnotes, but exclusive of tables,

maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Signed:

Marcela Huerta
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1. Purpose

The research is an investigation of the role of the critical friend in leadership and school improvement at Hume Central Secondary College. Costa and Kallick (1993, p.50) defined the 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”.

A broad qualitative approach was used for the study which involved an exploration into the perceptions of staff members of this school concerning the work of two critical friends that have been actively supporting this organization. This research used the real names of the participants of this study.

2. Significance of the research

Critical friendship is an under-researched but important phenomenon; indeed, little research has been done on the role of the critical friend. Therefore, the relevance of this study for education is especially significant because factors that have been studied in this research, such as school leadership and school improvement, are highly related to the work of the critical friend. For instance, school leadership is clearly linked to school outcomes (Productivity Commission, 2012), and critical friends have been shown to support the work of school leaders (Swaffield, 2002). This study sought to identify a number of relevant attributes, skills and strengths, which characterise the role of critical friend at school, in terms of, understanding how these cause an impact in the context where they are involved.

The research has implications for emerging leaders at schools and the results may inform them of the benefits and impact of having a critical friend inside the school.
This study will provide further evidence about the critical friendship role, including how it is enacted, the qualities and characteristics of the people in this role, and how this role supports school improvement.

3. Background summary

Hume Central Secondary College, hereafter referred as HCSC, is a co-educational public government school in the northern suburb of Broadmeadows, a suburb of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

HCSC was established in 2007 with the Broadmeadows Schools Regeneration Project, where three secondary colleges in the area merged to create HCSC. This project saw 17 schools cooperate to improve government education in the Broadmeadows area, one of the most disadvantaged communities in Australia. This community has been considered among the states’ 10 most socially disadvantage suburbs, according to data released by The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). School annual reports (available at www.vrqa.vic.gov.au) indicate that the school has an overall socio-economic profile in the lowest category and the proportion of students with English as a second language in the highest category, and national comparisons (available at www.myschool.edu.au) indicate that 77 per cent of students are in the lower half for educational advantage.

The mission statement of HCSC on its website notes that:

“Our College vision is to develop and encourage in our students a love of lifelong learning while equipping them with the skills, qualifications and personal attributes they need for a purposeful and fulfilling life beyond school”.

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In 2012 this school had an enrolment of 1117 students, 126 teachers and 50 non-teaching staff. In regard to the size of this school it has a multi-campus structure with leadership organization, where the head is Glenn Proctor, the College's executive principal, who was appointed in 2008. He has over 30 years teaching experience including eleven years spent as principal of the high-performing Mount Waverley Secondary College, which is consistently placed in the state’s top ten percent of government schools. Mount Waverley, similar to HCSC, is a multi-campus college. Following this organization, there are three campuses principals, who are David Russell, Irene Iliadis and Karen Anderson in charge of the day-to-day operations of Blair Street, Town Park Senior and Dimboola Road campuses respectively. This school also has three assistant principals: Vivienne Caravas, Lisa Robinson and Kate McArthur, as indicated in the school’s 2011 Annual Report (available at www.vrqa.vic.gov.au).

One of the issues for HCSC is that 85% of the students come from non-English speaking backgrounds, mainly Middle Eastern. When the school was established most students were coming into year seven at least a year or two behind in reading and writing, according to The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). For this reason, Glenn Proctor and his team had to close the gap rapidly, putting in place an emergency plan, which consisted of two years of learning in one. In addition this executive principal initiated various improvements through his leadership, and the results have shown significant literacy improvement. Glenn Proctor developed a plan that was based on his educational experience with the purpose of work on building leadership capacity, setting high expectations, having a comprehensive planning strategy, building teacher capacity to improve teaching and learning, restructuring the school, and developing a high performance culture. In implementing these strategies, the school has been using the collaboration of two critical friends, who have assisted them on a regular basis for more than three years.
4. Outline of the thesis

This thesis has five chapters. Chapter one provides the introduction and context, and outlines the purpose and significance of the study. Chapter two reviews the existing literature in three areas most significant to this study: educational leadership, school improvement and critical friendship. Chapter three outlines the methodological design of the project which focused on a qualitative approach. The results are presented in Chapter four, and Chapter five is a discussion of the findings and their implications, including additional research directions.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to explain the empirical and perceived role of the critical friend in an educational context. This is accompanied by what some of the principal researchers of this theme have found relevant.

The contribution of educational leadership to school improvement has been widely acknowledged in the recent literature. For instance, Harris (2002, p. 66) notes that, “Findings from diverse countries draw similar conclusions about the centrality of leadership to school improvement”. In fact, the importance of leadership in securing viable school improvement has been confirmed in research and practice (Harris & Bennet, 2001; Jackson, 2000).

Over the recent years, a new kind of leadership is becoming relevant in education. This innovative participant is called the “critical friend”, and it has been recognized as a potentially important component in helping school improvement (Harris, 2002). This research investigated the role of the critical friend in supporting school leadership and school improvement. It investigated the function of the critical friend through a case study, conducted in a co-educational public government school in the northern suburb of Broadmeadows in Melbourne, Australia.

In the following literature review three areas will be explored. A brief overview of important ideas in educational leadership and school improvement will be followed by a more in-depth exploration of the concept of critical friend.
2. Leadership

Leadership is a complex term and an evolving concept. For Gurr (1999), the definition of leadership is problematic and he exemplifies his idea through the work of Duke (1986:10) who established that “leadership seems to be a gestalt phenomenon; greater than the sum of its parts.” In the area of education, Caldwell (2006, p. 6) describes educational leadership as “a process for establishing direction, aligning people, motivating, inspiring, and achieving change”. This definition could be applied to most leadership situations regardless of whether they are in educational contexts or not.

In a decade long search for a way to describe successful school leadership, Leithwood and colleagues began with a definition that included three elements: setting direction, developing people and managing change (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). This is not dissimilar to Caldwell’s idea and could equally be applied outside of education. However, in later writing (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2006, p. 30) the definition included these three core areas and added an extra area, improving teaching and learning. This then provided a concise way to begin thinking about educational leadership with four areas: providing direction, developing people, leading change, and improving teaching and learning. Whilst this definition was being developed there were three related areas undergoing development: instructional leadership, transformational leadership and distributed leadership. Before we return to consider a definition of educational leadership to use in this thesis, each of these areas will be explored.

2.1 Instructional leadership

There has been considerable debate concerning the success of different leadership styles in improving school and student performance. Instructional leadership is one of these styles, and it implies leading improvement in the instructional actions of the school.

Instructional leadership models began in the early 1980s from early research on effective schools. One of the first researchers to describe this type of leadership was Ronald Edmond (1979), who identified strong, directive leadership focused on curriculum and
instruction from the principal as a characteristic of elementary schools that were effective at teaching children in poor urban communities, where students succeeded despite the probability of failure. Consequently, several important models of instructional leadership were offered during the 1980s (Andrews & Soder, 1987; Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan & Lee, 1982; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Leithwood, Begley & Cousins, 1990; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982, Van de Grift, 1990). Murphy (1990) brought this together in an enduring definition that included: developing mission and goals; managing the educational production function; promoting an academic learning climate; and, developing a supportive work environment. It is a definition that encapsulated the earlier work of Hallinger and Murphy (1985) and which has been subsequently developed further by Hallinger and others (e.g. Hallinger & Heck, 1996a) to the point that Hallinger claimed in 2008 that it was the view most frequently used in empirical investigations.

New conceptual models in the field of educational leadership such as the instructional model focus explicitly on the manner in which the educational leadership exercised by school administrators and teachers brings about enhanced educational results (e.g. Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Southworth, 2002). Hallinger (2000) defines the instructional leadership of the principal in three main dimensions: defining the goals, managing the instructional program and promoting school climate. The first dimension, defining the goals, is represented by two elements (i) developing school goals, and (ii) clarifying school goals. The second dimension, managing the instructional program has three elements: (i) supervising and evaluating teaching, (ii) coordinating the curriculum, and (iii) monitoring the progress of students. The third dimension of promoting school climate has five elements: (i) preserving teaching time, (ii) being visible as a leader, (iii) providing incentives for teachers, (iv) promoting professional development and (v) providing incentives for students to learn. This serves as a comprehensive definition that still has relevance more than ten years later.

Recent research by Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008) has shown instructional leadership to have a large effect on student learning outcomes, and more than four times that of
transformational leadership, and above other leadership conceptions. Their view included five dimensions: establishing goals and expectations, strategic resourcing, planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum, promoting and participating in teacher learning and development, and finally ensuring an orderly and supportive environment. It can be seen that a contemporary view of instructional leadership is aligned with the view of Leithwood and colleagues mentioned previously. There is a sense of building vision and setting directions, developing people through providing professional learning, managing change and improving teaching and learning.

Both Hallinger (2000) and Robinson et al., (2008) have perceived instructional leadership as a model which seeks to influence on student learning. However, it is necessary to take into consideration that according to Hallinger (2003), instructional leaders can present some limitations because they must adjust their performance of this role to the needs, opportunities and limitations imposed by the school context. For example, Hallinger explains that the principal in a small primary school can more easily spend considerable amounts of time in classrooms working on curriculum and instruction. As was the case of an effective elementary school that Hallinger and colleagues studied, there was a consensus among the teachers that the principal knew the reading level and progress of all 450 students in their school (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). However, this type of direct principal involvement in teaching and learning is difficult in a larger school, be it elementary or secondary level. These kinds of constraints are not an impediment for instructional leadership to be considered as one of the foremost models, as measured by a number of empirical studies (Heck & Hallinger, 1999). In fact, the instructional management framework (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985) does not assume that the principal alone will provide the leadership that creates these conditions. Leadership may well be shared, coming from teachers as well as from the principal (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Louis & Marks, 1998; Ogawa & Bosser, 1995).

Whilst there is renewed interest in instructional leadership, the transformational leadership view remains important as it is a view of educational leadership that helps us to
understand how school leaders might work with staff to motivate them and help them to develop professionally. In essence it is an important component of a contemporary view of instructional leadership.

2.2 Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership has been discussed and analysed extensively as a central concept by educational researchers. It is linked to successful school leadership by Leithwood, who is one of the most prominent researchers of this area. In one of his studies, Leithwood (2003) explains how scholars during the 1990s, began to popularise this term in North America, in response to dissatisfaction with the instructional leadership model, which many believed focused too much on the principal as the centre of expertise, power and authority.

Transformational leadership was initially elucidated as a theory in the general leadership literature throughout the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Bass & Avolio, 1997; Howell & Avolio, 1993). The idea of this model was proposed by Burns (1978, p.20) in that it is hypothesized to occur when leaders and followers unite in pursuit of higher order common goals, when "one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality". More recently, Bass and Avolio (1996, p.11) described transformational leadership as:

“a process in which the leaders take actions to increase their associates awareness of what is right and important, to raise their associates motivational maturity and to move their associates to go beyond the associates’ own self-interests for the good of the group, organisation, or society. Such leaders provide their associates with a sense of purpose that goes beyond a simple exchange of rewards for effort provided. The transformational leaders are proactive in many different and unique ways. These leaders attempt to optimise development, not just performance. Development encompasses the maturation of ability,
motivation, attitudes and values. Such leaders want to elevate the maturity level of the needs of their associates to strive for a higher level of potential as well as higher levels of moral and ethical standards. Through the development of their associates, they optimise the development of their organisation as well. High performing associates build high performing organisations”.

Leithwood and his colleagues have developed the most relevant adaptation of Bass’ work on transformational leadership for education. This model has been subjected to rigorous investigation over the past decade. Leithwood’s conceptual model has quite rapidly yielded a knowledge base concerning the application of this leadership model in education (Leithwood et al., 2000; Silins et al., 2002). In Leithwood’s model (1998) there are seven components: individualised support, shared goals, vision, intellectual stimulation, culture building, rewards, high expectations and modelling. This model begins from behavioural components such as individualised support, intellectual stimulation, and personal vision which suggest that the model is grounded in understanding the needs of individual staff instead of “coordinating and controlling” them towards the organisation’s desired ends. In this sense the model seeks to influence people by building from the bottom-up rather than from the top down.

According to Hallinger (2007) these two models of leadership mentioned above evolved their definition over time and this author has consequently identified conceptual similarities and differences between instructional and transformational leadership. In fact, his study shows that it seems apparent that the substantives similarities among these models are more significant than the differences. For example, both would have the school leader focus on: creating a shared sense of purpose in the school; developing a climate of high expectations and a school culture focused on innovation and improvement of teaching and learning; shaping the reward structure of the school to reflect the school’s mission as well as goals set for staff and students; organising and providing a wide range of activities aimed at intellectual stimulation and the continuous development of staff;
and, being a visible presence in the school, modelling the desired values of the school’s culture. These similarities between the models provide a useful point of departure for any principal who wishes to reflect upon his/her leadership.

Some argue that both instructional and transformational leadership qualities are needed by successful school leaders (Day & Gurr, 2014; Leithwood & Day, 2008), whilst others emphasise the importance of instructional leadership (Robinson, et al., 2008). At the same time, as these ideas have been developed, there is now also concern that leadership of schools needs to involve many, and so there has been a focus on exploring the distribution of leadership. One such area of research is distributed leadership, which we now explore.

2.3 Distributed leadership

Leadership in education need not be centered on one person only; it can be, “distributed” (Caldwell & Spinks, 2008, p. 31). Distributed leadership assumes a set of direction-setting and influence practices potentially “enacted by people at all levels rather than a set of personal characteristics and attributes located in people at the top” (Fletcher & Kaufer, 2003, p. 22). This type of leadership refers to particular practices, not job titles or formal roles. In examining distributed leadership, the focus is on which people enact which practices, how different patterns of leadership enactment emerge, and whether variation in such patterns makes a difference for certain kinds of schools and students. As Harris (2004) noted, the definition and understanding of distributed leadership varies from the normative to the theoretical, and, by implication, the literature supporting the concept of distributed leadership remains diverse and broad based (Bennett, Harvey, Wise, & Woods, 2003). Several descriptions of school leadership refer to the leader as a hero (Spillane, 2006, p.4). According to Spillane (2006), leadership practice “involves the many and not just the few”. While seeing the leader as a heroic person can be considered as “focused leadership”, most organizations have always relied heavily on the leadership provided by many other members of the organization to actually get work done (Leithwood, Mascall, Strauss, Sacks, Memon, & Yashkina, 2007, p. 37). In fact, many of the actions and goals of leadership need not necessarily be done by principal. Spillane, Camburn, and Pareja (2007,
describe the need to capture the informal side of organisations to better understand distributed leadership:

“Most empirical work has involved small samples of schools and work on larger samples has tended to focus on the designed organization as reflected in formal leadership/management positions as distinct from informal leaders who might not appear on a formal organization chart.”

The current flurry of interest in distributed leadership could be interpreted as an effort to shift these sources of leadership from the informal to the formal side of the organizational chart to explicitly acknowledge the presence of such leadership so as to better understand its contribution to organizational functioning (Leithwood et al., 2007). For Spillane (2006) this model centers attention on leadership in action, recognizing how individuals interact rather than a single principal at the helm as important. This leadership style requests and needs all involved in the organisation to take part in the decision making process. Hence distributive leadership is essential for successful school leadership where formal and informal school leaders are able to work together in order to share leadership responsibilities between them and to participate in the development of improving the school so that it is viewed as a successful school in the community.

Following this new emphasis in leadership research, the next section will examine the impact of leadership and its connection with school improvement.

3. Leadership and its influence on school improvement

According to Leithwood and Day (2008, p. 1), “the past 15 years have witnessed a remarkably consistent, worldwide effort by educational policy-makers to reform schools by holding them more publicly accountable for improving pupil performance on state or national tests.” For school leaders, and for those who study what they do, the main consequence of this policy shift has been considerable pressure to demonstrate the contribution of their work to such improvement. Indeed, the importance of leadership in securing sustainable school improvement has been demonstrated in both research and
practice (Harris & Bennett, 2001; Jackson, 2000). For example, the literature on sustainability sees the quality of school leadership as a key to continued organizational learning and improvement (Datnow, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2008) and Elmore (2002) noted a similar idea when he indicated that leadership is a key factor in the school improvement process. As a matter of fact, there is substantial and growing evidence that principals can play a fundamental role in initiating and sustaining school improvement, particularly as it pertains to student academic performance.

Leithwood et al. (2004) reviewed the evidence on the relationship between school leadership and student outcomes. They concluded that successful leadership plays an important and often underestimated role in improving student learning. Specifically, the available evidence about the size and nature of the effects of successful leadership on student learning justifies two important claims.

First, leadership is second only to classroom instruction as having the most impact on student learning, accounting for about a quarter of total school effects, and supporting current efforts in improving school leadership. Second, leadership has the strongest impact in struggling schools when the challenge of improving student learning is greatest. As Leithwood et al. (2004, p. 5) noted,

“Many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst. These results, therefore, point to the value of changing, or adding to, the leadership capacities of underperforming schools as part of their improvement efforts or as part of school reconstitution”

A growing body of research suggests that to be successful in such initiatives, principals must motivate and encourage teachers, students, parents and other community members to join their effort in creating positive, engaging school climates that increase the likelihood of improved academic achievement and other forms of student performance (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). While research indicates a positive relationship between leadership and school success, questions still remain as to the underlying causes of such
associations and the extent to which findings can be generalized from one national context to another. Even though research supports a strong connection between leadership and school improvement, it depends on the context in which people are working.

Authors such, as Leithwood and Riehl (2003, 2005), argue that the impact of educational leadership is principally indirect because leadership is basically a process of influence between educational leaders and the rest of the teachers, where they are working together to embrace common goals. Other scholars are focused on the particular practices of types of leadership, instead of seeing leadership as a single construct that influences school improvement (Robinson, et al., 2008).

Hallinger and Heck (1998) have described how leadership influences school improvement. This influence has been explained in four different areas: relating to the purposes and goals of the school; about the interplay between the school organization and its social network; through influence over people; and, in relation to organizational culture. For Leithwood, Patten & Jantzi (2010), leadership influence is conceptualized as flowing along four paths (rational, emotions, organizational, and family) in the direction of student learning. Each path is populated by multiple variables with more or less powerful effects on student learning. Leaders increase student learning by improving the condition or status of selected variables on these paths. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2001), the interest in linking leadership and student outcomes reflects the desire of policy makers in many jurisdictions to reduce the persistent disparities in educational achievement between various social and ethnic groups, and their belief that school leaders play a vital role in doing so. For the same reason, school improvement should be considered by itself to clarify the points of connection among it and leadership. In fact, Harris (2006) declares that this topic has become a dominant feature of educational reform and has gained importance and recognition on the international stage.
4. School Improvement

Over several decades, national and international educational systems have had as one of their main goals, creating strategies in order to promote school achievement. The concept of successful school improvement is described by Earl and Lee (1998) as a chain reaction of urgency, energy, agency and more energy. Therefore, the constant pressure upon schools to improve performance has resulted in a wide range of school improvement programmes and initiatives (Harris & Chrispeels, 2006). However, the need for building capacity to implement those ideas is often overlooked (Fullan & Ballew, 2001) despite evidence of the importance of capacity-building as a means of generating and sustaining school improvement (e.g. Fullan 2001; Fullan & Ballew, 2001; Harris, 2005; Harris & Lambert 2003; Hopkins & Jackson 2003).

Capacity building is concerned with creating the conditions, opportunities and experiences for collaboration and mutual learning. This standpoint embraces the idea of a professional community where teachers participate in decision making, have a shared sense of purpose, engage in collaborative work and accept joint responsibility for the outcomes of their work (Lambert, 1996, p. 11); Building capacity fundamentally involves building relationships, building trust and building community. In this sense, Harris (2010) recommends paying careful attention to how collaborative processes in schools are fostered and developed.

The process of change for school improvement has been broadly categorised into three phases by Fullan (1999). The first one is the “initiation stage”, where schools starts working and seeking a focus for their improvement. The next phase is the “implementation stage” where schools are putting their improvement plans into action, and phase three is the “maintaining and sustaining stage” where the process and practice of school improvement becomes an integral part of school development. According to Fullan, all these phases required different types of external agency to match the particular developmental requirements of the school.
Another approach to exploring school improvement is that of Hopkins and Reynolds (2001), who identified three phases of school improvement:

Phase 1: focus on the individual school, groups of students or teachers

This early phase (1980s) was characterised as practitioner-oriented, located in the work of those involved. School improvement was often defined as executing an innovation or engaging in action research projects. For example, in countries such as the United States and Australia, it was also driven by government funding to address the requirements of disadvantaged schools. According to Hopkins and Reynolds (2001), the first stage of school improvement was typified by the holistic approaches of the 1980s and was characterized by the OECD’s International School Improvement Project (ISIP). In addition, this phase stressed organizational change, school self-evaluation and the ‘ownership of change’ by individual schools and teachers. Moreover, once again these initiatives were not well allied to student learning results.

Phase 2: school improvement focused at the classroom as well as school level

This phase occurred during the 1990s. It was the beginning of providing schools with guidelines and policies for promoting classroom level change. This approach resulted from more systematic interaction between the school improvement and the school effectiveness research communities (Desimone, 2002; Vinovskis, 1996). There was an emphasis upon organizational and classroom change reflected in approaches to staff progress premised upon models of teaching (Joyce & Showers, 1995), linking school improvement to student learning outcomes was the central goal during this stage.

Phase 3: programme refinement and issues of scalability of reform initiatives

This phase was a response to previous limitations, and attempted to draw upon the most robust evidence to produce changes that were firmly based on tried and tested practices. For example: Improving the Quality of Education for All (IQEA) is one of the most successful school improvement projects in the UK. It acknowledges that without an equal
focus on the development capacity or internal conditions of the school, creative work will soon become marginalised (Hopkins & Harris, 2000, p. 7). This stage brought with it the appearance of external agents responsible for contributing to school improvement. Some research has shown that effective support from outside the school is required to build internal capacity and is a pre-requisite of successful school improvement (West, 2000)

According to Harris (2002), some relevant factors that contribute to change and improvement within a school are:

- Participation: it is required for planning and decision-making;
- Commitment: it is required until the change is fully implemented;
- Pressure and support: both are required for the change to occur;
- External agency: can prevent innovation from being blocked and can ensure that the momentum for change is maintained and
- Staff development: it is needed to put activities in place, and provides ongoing support for the new programme.

Indeed, establishing a positive climate for change is an essential prerequisite for school improvement. This climate should enable learning within the organisation and support those engaged in the learning. Harris (2002) also maintains that school improvement denotes the relevance of matching the improvement strategy to the school context, and in this sense, she defines the following components of successful school improvement:

- School leaders need to have a clear vision for the development of the school and an ability to share this vision with colleagues
- Extended leadership: could be understood as a distributed leadership.
- Programme fit: making the right adjustments for school improvement.
• Focus on students: understanding that they are one of the most crucial components of the school.

• Multi-level intervention: taking actions in different ways and levels, according to the requirements.

• Instructionally driven: as guidance to follow the correct pathway.

• External agency: using the support from experts as critical friends.

• Investing in teaching: which is an important help, teach first to learn then how staff can do the things in the best way.

• Building professional communities: team work is a valuable opportunity to learn from others and for the critical need to share his/her expertise and knowledge.

These factors neatly summarise the elements of successful improvement strategies. Importantly, external agents, such as critical friends, are included in the list. They can be seen to provide the expertise for ensuring that all these processes take place.

In the school improvement literature there is evidence that different forms of collaboration can boost school improvement (Ainscow, Muijs & West, 2006). Over the past few decades a collaborative culture has become increasingly evident in education. Therefore, after having reviewed some ideas associated with leadership and improving schools, the review now focusses on the role of the critical friend, someone who can provide the additional support that Harris (2000) believes is important for school improvement.
5. The critical friend

5.1 Definition

“Critical friend” is a phrase which arose out of the self-appraisal activity on the late 1970s and is attributed to Desmond Nuttall (Heller, 1988). This concept has been described by Costa and Kallick (1993, p. 50) as a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques 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.

Swaffield (2002, p. 5) takes descriptions from the literature and elaborates a clear definition of a critical friend as someone who not only sees the school from a different perspective from those within the school, but also assists them to bring the familiar into a new focus. The critical friend’s viewpoint has credibility if it is informed by an understanding of the situation, developed through listening as well as observation. It is a versatile form of external support for school leaders, and one that is subject to increasing professional and political interest (e.g. Butler et al., 2011; Swaffield, 2004). As was mentioned by Butler et al., (2011), the implementation of change initiatives in school communities has increasingly involved the use of staff whose role is specifically to support the change process. Such staff may be called project officers, trainers, technical assistants or facilitators. Critical friends are a recent addition to the support people being used by schools. In fact, professional wisdom can be better developed if some process of cooperation among the teacher-researchers and supporters is present, such as a critical friend’s contribution within a school.

5.2 Some contradictions within the concept

One of the most immediately striking things about the term itself is the apparent contradiction of the two words. Because the concept of critique frequently carries negative connotations, some people tend to perceive the critical friend’s term in a
negative way. However, people often forget that Bloom refers to critique as a part of evaluation in the highest order of thinking (Bloom et al. 1956). Indeed, related to Costa and Kallick (1993) metaphor, the critical component does not imply being negative but rather implies the ability to stand back from the particular situation and view it through different lenses. These authors say: “...you need another person to continually change your focus, pushing you to look through multiple lenses in order to find that just right fit for you...” (Costa & Kallick, 1993, p. 49). The traditional dichotomy and hierarchical relationship between friendship and critique make the notion of a critical friend problematic. Achinstein and Meyer (1997), exploring the practical dilemmas of critical friendship in the context of a novice teacher learning community, found that teachers had differing opinions about the balance between critique and friendship. They agreed on neither how critical friends should be, nor how friendly critics should be. On the other hand, there is clear interpretation given by MacBeath (1998) that explains these two terms in a different manner; the critical friend enters the school first as a friend, with the number one impulse to support, and later, once a relationship is established, moves into the role of critic. Certainly, this seems to be the intent of Swaffield’s (2004) review of critical friends; which emphasises the dual nature of the role.

5.3 The role of the critical friend

The role of the critical friend has been introduced in numerous schools systems that adopt a learning organization perspective, and know that learning requires assessment feedback (Senge, 1990). According to MacBeath (1999), the contribution of an external agent can bring a measure of objectivity as well as a measure of support. Moreover, in order to be useful, a critical friend must be someone with experience of school improvement and with expertise working with a range of groups in a variety of contexts.

The work of the critical friend is a dynamic one, requiring a high level of skill, flexibility, and professional judgement. Rather than following a checklist of scripted “technical assistance”, it is about developing a repertoire of strategies and skills, and learning when and how to use them, taking account of the particular context (Butler et al., 2011).
Effective critical friends draw on a repertoire of actions, depending on the context, participants and phase in the change process at any particular point in time.

This is an emerging area of interest and support for schools and reflects interest in other areas of staff support such as mentoring and coaching. Swaffield (2004) argues that the role of critical friend as a facilitator of change has become an important component of a range of school improvement, health promotion and professional learning initiatives in school communities. Similarly, Doherty, Macbeath, Jardine, Smith and MaCcall (2001) describe the critical friend as helping schools make sound decisions, challenging expectations, patiently playing a role that is interpretative and catalytic, helping shape outcomes but never determining them, alerting the school to issues often only half perceived, and being sympathetic to the school’s purpose.

This work of the critical friend is not so much to provide the answers as to ask the appropriate questions, to gather and present relevant information and evidence, and to challenge people to explore different perspectives and formulate effective responses (Carlson, 2009). Carlson (2009) also argued that the concept of a “friend” describes this relationship: it starts with caring, listening, understanding and integrity and moves to questioning, challenging and providing feedback, not on the basis of finding fault but somewhat as a supporter of the continued progress, accomplishment and fulfilment of all the participants. The critical friend is very often working alone in a particular school or community and the nature of their work means that it is often invisible: nurturing relationships, building understanding and enhancing capacity is work that may not show immediate or tangible results (Hawe et al., 1998).

Critical friends require particular abilities. For example, Block (1999) suggests the following three: technical (expertise about the particular issue), consulting (process skills such as negotiating entry, agreeing the scope of the work and eventually disengagement) and finally interpersonal skills. The first two could be considered as competences, while the third one is more about qualities of the individual (MacBeath & Myers, 1999). In addition, important skills are required for the critical friend such as listening, observing,
questioning, managing conflict and team building, along with qualities such as respect, empathy, genuineness, confidence, optimism, sensitivity, insight, thoughtfulness and commitment (Swaffield, 2002). One of the most valuable abilities is that of providing an appropriate balance between support and challenge (Watling et al., 1998).

One of the challenges of the role is that it requires much professional judgement, taking account of the particular context; therefore it is vital to establish connections with the staff involved at different levels. For this reason, modelling effective communication, attentive listening and respectful acknowledgement of each other’s talents, will assist in the building of an effective team. The development of a shared vision for the team will build a strong foundation on which to put the necessary support structures in place.

Swaffield (2002) describes how have been used metaphors to better understand the role of the critical friend. Many of them are about seeing things from diverse viewpoints and in different ways, reflecting an essential angle of a critical friend’s work. Some examples follow. MacDonald (1989, p. 211) comments that one of the common characteristics of the seven methods that he describes for bringing about change in schools is that they all depend on the different “perspective” that outsiders can provide. Dean (1992, p. 25) talks of “a fresh pair of eyes”, as do Ainscow and Southworth (1996). Thus visual associations are commonly used to conceptualise the work of the critical friend. West (2000) uses two visually related words in his subtitle “Observations on the inside, reflections on the outside”. This also brings in the double entendre of ‘reflective’ as someone who mirrors back to others so that they can see more clearly, as well as thinking about things for themselves (Ross & Regan, 1990; Schön, 1983).

5.4 Direct and indirect influence of the critical friend

The role developed by a critical friend varies according to the context where he or she is working. A critical friend could be involved through two approaches: formal or informal support (Butler, et al., 2011). At the formal level this may occur through project planning meetings involving researchers and practitioners, meeting with critical friends to debrief
and plan and meetings between critical friends and school/cluster coordinators. At the informal level support may occur via casual conversations with colleagues or diaries to record thoughts as “significant moments”. Either way critical friends are providing feedback regarding school issues.

5.5 The importance of the time spent by a critical friend

Swaffield and MacBeath (2005) emphasize the importance of the time invested in a relationship between a critical friend and a school leader. They note that developing friendship takes time, and it cannot be rushed. For example, the early stages of partnership are a time of familiarization and testing.

These authors stress time during self-evaluation, explaining that the degree of support is a factor to be carefully weighed, especially when the intervention or support of the critical friend comes. However, other authors indicate that it is not about quantity or quality; it is related to gaining access to the right type of intervention at the correct time (Earl & Lee, 1998, p.76). Undoubtedly the work of a critical friend in supporting school improvement resembles a cycle where there are phases and a plan of action for each stage.

According to Butler et al., (2011) there are phases that are integral to the successful work of critical friends:

1. Getting in: introductions, courting, establishing relationships and processes;

2. Getting on with it: activating, planning, implementing (visible actions);


Their framework for action is characterized by:

1. Clarifying concepts: helping individuals and groups gain clarity of understanding about key concepts which underpin a project or change initiative;
2. Nurturing relationship: the crucial development and maintenance of strong, supportive and respectful working relationships between all those involved in the charge process;

3. Facilitating processes: supporting participants to plan and implement processes for setting goals, getting started, keeping on track or consciously deviating from plans, recording progress and celebrating achievements.

Each of these processes needs time: to establish an understanding of shared goals and how these are to be achieved to build trusting relationships, to finally evaluate progress.

5.6 Different factors which make up the contexts in which critical friends work with schools

Swaffield (2005) identifies five interrelated aspects that describe the work of school leaders, the critical friend; the person or people she works with; the stage of the relationship; the organisational conditions of the school; and the particular circumstance of the work. Furthermore, Swaffield adds other conditions for the effectiveness of the relationship. These are trust, shared values, purpose and personal qualities, communication and practical action, all in the context of critique. These relationships are often one of utility, where critical friends use, and are used by others in their professional practice or in a related field such as business. This creates a relationship that is deliberately not reciprocal. It is unequal and is not intended to be enduring.

To begin with, critical friends come from a wide range of backgrounds, each with their individual portfolio of experiences both as a critical friend and in other roles, and unique combination of strengths. They bring with them knowledge and understanding, developed to different extents, of a range of factors: the particular school they are working in, other similar schools, educational issues relevant to the school; and the processes of working with schools and effecting change. Secondly there are the school colleagues with whom the critical friend works. The issue of “whose friend?” is a relevant one: as MacBeath (1998) says “…asking ourselves whose friend we really were, aware that the effect, or
effectiveness, of the critical friend may ultimately depend on whose friend you are seen to be.”(p. 119). A third influencing factor is the phase of the relationship and the time that it has been functioning. The knowledge and understanding of a school’s situation takes time to build up, and most people take time to establish a working relationship built on respect and understanding. The conditions of the school as a whole, particularly in respect to its predisposition to change, constitute a fourth factor which will influence the situation. And finally a fifth factor concerning the work of the critical friend is the particular framework within which the critical friend is working, such as school organisations.

While, the urgency to improve education is clear, schools do not want to be targeted as the worst school model, so in this way, a large number of scholars are involved in creating programmes to support schools towards improvement. However this mission is a team project that needs support to complete every stage of the school improvement journey.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this literature review was to explore three central areas, beginning with the notion of the critical friend, then investigating this role through an analysis of educational leadership and its influence on school improvement.

Critical friends are a relatively recent role that is being used to help improve schools by supporting school leaders. A critical friend is considered as an external agent, who has knowledge and understanding to support leadership and school improvement. As Carlson (2009) argues, supporters of the critical friend concept contend that the key to carrying out this function successfully is the quality and nature of the relationship between the evaluator and the client in a relationship built on trust.

Swaffield (2004) says that critical friendship is a versatile and potentially powerful approach to supporting leadership and school improvement, as the range of contexts drawn upon in this article demonstrates. While the role and function of critical friends remain under researched, various studies over the last 20 years provide a considerable source of knowledge. Supported by government policy in England, the critical friend is set
to become an integral part of school improvement practice. As this develops there is a need both to draw upon what is already known about critical friendship, and to extend our understanding of it.

The notion of the critical friend is an emerging concept worthy of more detailed investigation. It is of interest therefore to examine more closely the role of the critical friend from the viewpoint of practice at the school level and to compare perceptions of this role, from the viewpoints of those who are involved with a critical friend.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

1. Introduction

This chapter discusses essential terms related to the methods and procedures used in this study. It will describe why the research used a qualitative approach and justify its use of a case study. Explanations of how the data was collected and analysed are provided.

Thus chapter also refers to the participants involved in the research, and some relevant aspects such as the trustworthiness of the research, limitations of the study. Ethical issues are also addressed

2. Research question

Major Research Question

What is the role of the critical friend in supporting school leadership and school improvement?

3. Approach and Design:

3.1 Personal context

HCSC was established in 2007 after the merger of three secondary Colleges in the Broadmeadows area: Broadmeadows Secondary College; Erinbank Secondary College and Hillcrest Secondary College.

According to Proctor’s statement on the school website (www.humecentralsc.vic.edu.au), the College is a culturally rich and diverse learning community that is committed to giving young people the knowledge and skills they need to thrive in school and life. The College’s goal, "two years of learning in one for all students in 2011" has been their focus as a learning community. The College and Staff have been developing curriculum programs at the College so that Literacy knowledge, skills and understandings are enriched in line with this goal.
The College vision is to develop and encourage in students a love of life-long learning whilst equipping them with the skills, qualifications and personal attributes they need for a purposeful and fulfilling life beyond school.

The academic success of students is ensured by a new and updated Year 7-12 Curriculum and dedicated teachers and support staff. Their focus is keeping all students engaged and interested in their education so as to maximise the total number of students who successfully complete Year 12 at HCSC. As a consequence of these strategies, recent VCE, VET & VCAL results reflect their attainment in this area: 98% of Year 12 students gained a University or TAFE position in 2010. These outstanding outcomes can only happen when students and teachers work together in partnership.

Along with new facilities, this college has a strong commitment as a learning community to nurture and develop confident learners who have the knowledge, skills and attributes to shape their futures and contribute positively to society. HCSC has developed a new Curriculum to ensure all students are engaged and excited by learning, to help them stay on to successfully complete Year 12.

Teachers and support staff appear to be working hard in order to support and nurture students to reach their potential. HCSC has teacher and student teams within learning communities which means students get to work closely on projects and programs with staff, and therefore staff get to know the students well.

3.2 Qualitative research

This study was guided by hermeneutic phenomenology, where the focus is the critical friend’s role as perceived by critical friends, school principals and middle level leaders of HCSC. Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the life world or human experience as it is lived. The attention is toward illuminating details and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives, with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). Phenomenology turn into hermeneutical when its method is taken to be interpretive.
instead of purely descriptive as in transcendental phenomenology. This orientation is manifest in the work of Heidegger (1962) who argued that all description is always already interpretation and every form of human awareness is interpretive.

This research used a hermeneutic phenomenology because the central focus of this study was to explore the role of the critical friend, which is an under-researched phenomenon. This type of research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world and involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers typically study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomenon in terms of the meaning people bring to them.

The chosen methodology presupposes a certain view of knowledge and reality, which is mostly interpretivist, because this research will obtain findings in depth, interpretative, individual, idiographic and context dependent, developing a body of knowledge in the form of “working hypothesis” that describe the individual case. According to Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005), the term interpretivism refers to an assemblage of theoretical variants that guide approaches to qualitative research. Although each variant shares family resemblances with the others, each also embodies some unique methods and practices.

This research can also be described as a single case study using qualitative methods. The most important reason for choosing this methodology is that it allows for conducting an in-depth and richly detailed study. According to Palmquist (2012), case study is well-known as a form of qualitative descriptive research that is used to look at individuals, a small group of participants, or a group as a whole. However, it is important that the participant pool remain relatively small. The participants can represent a diverse cross section of society, but this isn't necessary. Often, a brief "case history" is done on the participants of the study in order to provide researchers with a clearer understanding of their participants, as well as some insight as to how their own personal histories might affect the outcome of the study.
There are multiple definitions and understandings of the case study. According to Yin (1994) a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. Guba and Lincoln (1981) describe case study “types”. These types are factual, interpretative and evaluative. This is an interpretative study linked to using a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology in a study of one site.

A case study is a specific instance that is frequently designed to illustrate a more general principle (Nisbet & Watt, 1984, p. 72); it is the study of an instance in action. “Case studies can make theoretical statements, but, like other forms of research and human sciences, these must be supported by the evidence presented” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2002, p. 182). This evidence was obtained by the method used, which is the interview, and their respective findings. Additionally this research has been construing, synthesizing, clarifying, and producing meanings and understandings about my topic. In summary the purposes of this case study research will be descriptive and interpretive.

3.3 Participants and setting for the study

This study is restricted in size to what can be achieved within a 20,000 word, minor thesis. The quality of a piece of research not only stands or falls by the appropriateness of methodology and instrumentation but also by the suitability of the sampling strategy that has been adopted (Morrison, 1993, pp. 112-17). Therefore the participant sample consists of thirteen participants of a secondary school located in Broadmeadows area in Melbourne.

The participants were selected through a purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). All staff members selected were involved with a critical friend at the school. All participants volunteered to be involved. All were part of the leadership team and included the two main critical friends, all senior principal class members and several middle level leaders of HCSC, involved in the leadership team.
The participants were:

- Two critical friends
- One Executive Principal
- Three Campus Principals
- One Assistant Principal
- Four teachers, members of the leadership team
- One group of two members of the leadership team

One of the reasons for choosing this type of sampling relates to the opportunity of selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. As Patton (2002, p. 273) mentioned: “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth”. He indicates that studying information-rich cases allows for greater insight and in-depth understanding instead of empirical generalizations.

The access to site and participants was arranged by the researcher, who made contact with the executive principal of the school in person and then by email, in terms of seeking permission to conduct the research. Recruitment of the critical friends, principal class members and members of the leadership team was done through direct contact with the participants based on their position and availability, on scheduled interview days.

Participation was, of course, voluntary. The executive principal was already aware of the research and was supportive as were the two critical friends. All the other people approved, none refused. Hence the researchers did not have any problems gaining participation.

4. Data collection

Research strategies, technique or methods are specific practices and procedures that researchers deploy to collect and analyse data and to report their findings. This qualitative
research involved a basic kind of data, which was the interview and the strategy for collecting and analysing this data engage a videotape interaction, with the participants.

The methodological approach consisted of one-to-one interviews and group interviews. In addition some background material was used. Each one of these methods is considered in further detail.

4.1 Interviews:
All school members were asked the same set of six questions. The interviews were semi-structured and additionally each interviewee was asked to describe in-depth the role of the critical friend. Extra questions were asked as part of the semi-structured interview process. Types of interviews used were one to one interviews, group interviews and telephone interviews.

4.1.1 Interview process
Interviews were held at the school during a normal school day at a mutually agreed time and date. The interviews were between 30 to 50 minutes in duration and were audiotaped. During the interviews two researchers (the student researcher and her supervisor) were present with one conducting the interview and the other electronic notes. The questions were semi-structured to allow more flexibility and openness for the interviewer to respond to the information provided by interviewees.

There were six questions asked of each of the participants:

1. Can you tell me about the individual role of the critical friend at the school?

2. We are interested in what critical friends do. Can you describe an example of how Vic and Lawrie work in the school? Please try to provide an example for each person if possible.

3. What has been their main contribution to the school?
4. We are describing people like Vic and Lawrie as critical friends. What does the term critical friend mean for you? What are the qualities and characteristics that Vic and Lawrie bring to the role?

5. Reflecting on the improvement journey of the school, can you summarise how the school is progressing and who have been the key people in this progress?

6. Finally, can you describe briefly your role in the school and how long you have been at the school (including time in the pre-amalgamation schools)?

As well, each person was asked individually to describe in depth the role of the critical friend, giving examples of their function at the school.

4.1.2 One to one interviews

A total of eleven one-to-one interviews were used to collect data. The purpose of these was to set up a condition where each respondent could show their thoughts, ideas, feelings, intentions and sub-contexts (Lichtman, 2010, p. 140).

4.1.3 Group interviews

One group interview was held with two members of the leadership team of HCSC. The benefit provided by the group interview was that it allowed more interaction, and also new thoughts and ideas to appear which might not usually occur in an individual interview (Lichtman, 2010, p. 154).

4.2 Background material

To provide background support material, use was made of a number of significant documents produced by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), master class interviews conducted as part of an educational leadership course at
The University of Melbourne, newspaper articles and a television documentary on the principal produced by the national public broadcast station ABC. Use was also made of the DEECD, My School and HCSC websites.

5. Qualitative data analysis:

The data were analysed as described by Miles and Huberman using three “concurrent flows of activity: data reduction; data display and conclusion drawing/verification.” (Miles & Huberman 1994, p.10). Data reduction involved the use of code words, or words to describe categories, the codes being attached to descriptive or inferential information to enable differentiation and combination of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Tesch 1990).

Data reduction began by highlighting significant phrases, sentences and words that described the role of the critical friend and noting keywords of labels in the right hand margin that characterised the units of meaning. A unit of meaning is “a segment of text that is comprehensible by itself and contains one idea, episode, or piece of information” (Tesch, 1990, p. 116). Then, regarding to the analysis of the data it was essential to represent the interviewee’s perceptions precisely and to clarify and suspend any researcher assumptions and interpretations and eliminate bias (Tesch, 1990). To finish this process, the last data display consisted of the arrangement of the three sets of foremost themes and subthemes. This was done in order to assist in organising the data efficiently, identify themes, using inductive logic, and make deep interpretations (Hurworth, 1996; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The data were then analysed for commonalities.
DISPLAY 1.
An excerpt from an interview with one of the critical friends (see next page, table 1), demonstrates the process of coding and identifying themes.
The interview had questions focused on three main themes, which were highlighted with different colours:

- The role of the critical friend: yellow
- Understanding the work of a critical friend as being different to a coach: turquoise
- Contributions for school improvement: green

At the same time, these main themes show sub themes, which were highlighted as well, and they provide categories that define these sub themes. As table 1 indicates below. For example, these questions are related to one of the main themes, which is the role of the critical friend (yellow colour), and from the answers it can be seen that there are two sub themes with the following categories explaining briefly what the main topic involves:

**1-The role of the critical friend**

1.1 Qualities

1.2 Critical friendship practice

**2-Key role of the critical friend**

2.1 Credibility

2.2 Professional support

2.3 Collaborative leadership

Finally, this process of codification allowed a detailed explanation in the result chapter, and also a further discussion.
## TABLE 1: EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW WITH A CRITICAL FRIEND

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions and answers</th>
<th>Main themes</th>
<th>Sub themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What has been the role of critical friends to the school such as Lawrie Drysdale and Vic Zbar?</strong></td>
<td><strong>THE ROLE OF THE CRITICAL FRIEND</strong></td>
<td>-QUALITIES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My role, Glenn asked me to come and called it the CF. We has never defined what it is/does. I do this as a professional duty. Vic Zbar charges but I don't. I support the Leadership Team and the Principal. They will say what the issues are, and in casual conversations where they expresses what is happening in the classroom. I challenge them and give my support. My role is to support the school, to act and challenge from time to time when I am in a meeting. I am often asked to summarise a meeting. I am asked to lead on the books that they read – this year it is turnaround Schools. I do this within the LT sessions. I sit in on the groups and may challenge them. I sometimes sit and listen in on things that are happening in the school. The principal from Scotch College is coming on Monday and I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>-CRITICAL FRIENDSHIP</strong></td>
<td>-CRITICAL</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>-PRACTICE</strong></td>
<td>-CREDIBILITY</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>-PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT</strong></td>
<td>-COLLABORATIVE</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>-LEADERSHIP</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
I will attend. I participate in LT training. I will talk to Glenn after the meeting and give my views on the meeting. An example, I was in the emerging leaders program and they couldn’t tell what the school direction was, and I told Glenn about this.

Vic comes in less often and he is paid as a critical friend. Glenn gives him jobs to do, sometimes it’s just for feedback. They have used his research as a basis and it talks about schools that punch above their weight, and they have got him to come in and challenge the school, and give presentations. Not the same as me but similar.

Can you describe your role as a critical friend?

I see my role as giving supports, challenging from time to time, and giving critical comment and listening to what is going and if I can contribute ideas/expertise to the school.

I support the principal and the leadership team. I have little interacting with the campus principals.
6. Rigour and trustworthiness

Researchers need alternative models appropriate to qualitative designs that ensure rigour without sacrificing the relevance of the qualitative research. According to the Guba’s model (1981), researchers define four aspects of trustworthiness that are relevant to qualitative studies: truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. Guba's (1981) model identified these four criteria applicable to the assessment of research of any type. Guba argued that these criteria must be defined differently for qualitative and quantitative research based on the philosophical and conceptual divergence of the two approaches.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through the use of triangulation. Triangulation involved the collection of information from different sources, such as, critical friends, school principals and middle level leaders of HCSC. Data were carefully analysed using themes that emerged from the data. This allowed for conceptual connections to be made and conclusions to be drawn that confirmed the findings.

7. Delimitations and limitations of the study

Research can have delimitations and limitations. Delimitations are represented by the assigning of boundaries, while limitations are the restrictions and qualifications that are placed on the findings. An important delimitation of this study was that the researcher used data from only one government secondary school in Victoria. Another delimitation was that within this school, the views of a sample of personnel were sought: views of critical friends, principal class and middle level leaders were used.

On the other hand, limitations found were the use of individual and group interviews, supported by background material, leaving out other techniques such as observation or discourse analysis. This study was limited in scope and size to a 20,000 word minor thesis. For this reason, the number of observations must be reduced in order to keep within the number of word allowed. In addition, the use of a single site case study means that it is challenging to make generalizations from this research. It may be that the case study
could be interpreted as being quite subjective. However, diverse quotations and multiple perspectives were incorporated to support the results (Cresswell, 2009, p. 189). The findings have also been conveyed using rich data which can be connected to the attached quotes in Chapter Four: Results.

8. Ethical issues and risks

Ethical concerns encountered in educational research may create a conflict between the demands placed on researchers as professional scientist in pursuit of truth, and their subjects’ right and values which could potentially be threatened by the research. This is known as the cost/benefits ratio, the essence of which is outlined by Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1992).

Some important aspects to consider in the ethics procedure for educational research include the informed consent and the access and acceptance by the research participants. Firstly, informed consent plays an important role in relation to the subject’s right to freedom and self-determination. This protects and respects the right of participants and places some of the responsibility on them, because the subject has the right to refuse to take part. According to this principle, researchers submitted an ethics application THEMIS, which is the integrated administration system that supports the documentation and management of Finance, Human Resources, Research and Environment, Health and Safety processes at the University of Melbourne. Consent was granted under this system for the researchers to gain access to the participants. In general, ethical aspects have been well respected, because researchers have considered an ethic of respect for the person, knowledge, democratic values, the quality of educational research educational research and academic freedom (Dowling & Brown, 2010). This research used the real names of the participants, because it had the consent of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), The University of Melbourne with THEMIS approval, and the permission of Hume Central Secondary College (HCSC). Therefore these organizations allowed the researcher to use the real names of the participants.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Overview

This chapter describes and discusses the results that emerged from the interviews with the critical friends, principals and leadership team involved in this research. This chapter addresses the main question of this study, “What is the role and impact of the critical friend in supporting school improvement?” Data were collected through a series of semi-structured individual and group interviews. The interviews were audio-taped and notes were taken. Each interview was between thirty and fifty minutes in duration.

Individuals were selected from the leadership team by the researcher with the collaboration of the executive principal, on the basis of having a relationship with a critical friend. Interviews were conducted with the following people, who currently fulfil a variety of leadership roles at the school. The individual interviews were with: Glenn Proctor, the executive principal; Irene Iliadis, the campus principal at Town Park; Karen Anderson, the campus principal at Dimboola Road; David Russell, the campus principal at Blair Street; Lisa Robinson, the assistant principal at Town Park; Nick Bakatsoulas, the eLearning leader; Belinda Howard, the year 10 team leader. A group interview was conducted with two teachers: Ramazan Tirli, the staff supports leader, and Mehtap Gunes, the year 12 team leader. In addition, two telephone interviews were conducted with Silvia Quaine, responsible for curriculum operations, and Kate Bird, the year 8 team leader.

Two critical friends to HCSC, Lawrie Drysdale and Vic Zbar, were interviewed. Lawrie Drysdale is a Senior Lecturer at The University of Melbourne, Australia. In addition, he has an extensive background in teaching, human resource development, lecturing and research. He is involved in consultancy work in the Victorian school system including conducting government school reviews and independent school inspections. Vic Zbar is director of Zbar Consulting. He has wide consultancy and project management experience and is recognised internationally for his writing on education and range of reports. Prior to the establishment of Zbar Consulting, he worked as the assistant director of human
resources in the Victorian Department of Education, having earlier been principal advisor to the chief executive, giving him an in-depth knowledge of the work of most aspects of the then Office of Schools. Vic Zbar is a widely published author in education and management.

**Chapter distribution**

The results are reported according to the main themes and sub-themes that emerged during analysis of the interviews.

The principal themes are:

1. The role of the critical friend;

1.1 Qualities

1.2 Critical friendship practice

2. Understanding the work of a critical friend as being different than a coach;

3. The contribution for school improvement.

**1. Role of the critical friend**

The concept of a critical friend is familiar to the community of HCSC; two people have been working in this role for more than three years, and there are several other people described as being critical friends. During the interviews the participants described some general qualities that seem to be important for being a critical friend. Lawrie Drysdale, for example, described necessary qualities for his work as a critical friend as including the ability to listen, to use knowledge and creating good relationships, particularly with the principal. The qualities that emerged from the interviews comprise interpersonal skills such as listening, feedback, dialogue, trust, objectivity, credibility, expertise, challenge and commitment. Interpersonal skills were identified in all interviews as being features of the
success of the critical friend role. Some of the most frequently mentioned interpersonal skills were dialogue, listening, and feedback. Each of these will now be described.

1.1 Qualities

Glenn Proctor recalled the importance of a continuing dialogue between a critical friend and the school leadership members, especially in the case of HCSC, which is a large college. He thinks that a critical friend requires very good communication skills. He said: “Lawrie and Vic talk with us after our meetings and they say what they think about the event, helping in every session and being in contact with me all the time”. He explained that the dialogue and communication between them is constant, but more especially after important events. For Glenn Proctor the opportunity to have open discussion with the critical friends is very important, because he can be honest, say what is happening and get some feedback. Ramazan Tirli supported this idea when he commented:

“One of the main contributions of the critical friends is the opportunity of having discussions with them during the meeting or after these, for Glenn more importantly. I think, he makes right decisions because critical friends help him”.

A similar opinion was expressed by David Russell, one of the campus principals. For him, a critical friend contributes to discussions about the educational field. He saw these conversations as an opportunity to learn and he considers these discussions useful to analyse whether he is doing the right thing in his job, even if the conversation is only 5 or 10 minutes duration. He said: “a conversation with a critical friend is positive for myself, because it helps to clarify my own thinking”.

Irene Iliadis, a campus principal, highlighted the importance of the critical friend’s listening ability. She valued this opportunity and said: “you can give your opinion in a working space, where it is listened to and respected by everyone, because staff follow the listening model of the critical friend”. Related to this idea, Kate Bird mentioned: “I think that listening ability is one of the important qualities of the critical friend, specifically the
way that they listen to us”. This view is supported by Karen Anderson, who noted the value of good listening skills, describing how comfortable she feels when a critical friend is able to listen to her carefully, and then give suggestions and help to motivate her to follow her ideas in an appropriate way. For example, she said:

“We were working with the art team on high expectations, so I talked to Lawrie about our job, and he listened to what was going on, he told me you can do that. Then he sent me a paper about the topic. This was really good”.

Good listening skills as described by Karen Anderson are an important element of the interpersonal skill of providing feedback, which is discussed in the next section.

According to the majority of respondents, the feedback delivered by critical friends has been a great help to the members of the school. They view this feedback as maximising potential at different stages of the improvement process. The feedback helps to raise their awareness of strengths and areas for improvement and identify actions to be taken to improve their performance. Some examples of the feedback received were given by Ramazan Tirli and Mehtap Gunes, both of whom are part of the leadership team. They described feedback given by the critical friends as an important source of support. It allowed them to generate an official report that reviews how well they are performing. For example, Ramazan Tirli explained: “we normally discussed issues in the leadership meetings, and critical friends directly contribute in these meetings providing feedback”. A similar comment was made by Mehtap Gunes, who said: “critical friends help us by giving feedback in the meetings and it is a way to provide us with direction”. Feedback was provided in several ways, such as short conversations after a meeting or in casual encounters providing advice. It was also evident that, in working broadly with the leadership team meetings, they helped to re-direct discussions and so avoid losing the main points. Lisa Robinson talked about the quality of the feedback provided by the critical friends, explaining that: “they facilitate the leadership team learning through their feedback”. These findings highlight the importance of quality feedback. Staff valued the
fact that it came from a different perspective, informed by experience gained at other schools. In summary, staff valued the feedback from critical friends, as they viewed them as a trusted role model with expertise, commitment and objectivity.

Critical friends were described as showing integrity and honesty, and someone who could be trusted. Honesty or trust is one of the major components of successful interpersonal relationships. For example, Nick Bakatsoulas, who has been involved with the school for more than ten years, commented: “some qualities of the critical friend are being honest, giving support, showing clarity”. David Russell noted his reliance on the critical friend’s integrity. As David Russell perceived the critical friends as being honest people with an opinion he trusted, he felt unafraid to tell the truth about his work, even if his views subsequently proved to be incorrect. He mentioned: “working with a critical friend, it is about being someone who is trusted for an opinion and not being afraid of the truth”. In fact, he felt comfortable to speak his mind, knowing that his views would be listened to and valued. A similar idea was expressed by Irene, who perceived the critical friend as a credible person capable of creating an open relationship with staff because of the high level of confidence that each staff member has in the critical friends.

Related to trustworthiness and integrity, many of the interviewees identified credibility as a key quality of a critical friend. The majority of respondents commented on their credibility, not only on account of their good reputation as researcher, but also on account of their wide record of achievement based on intellectual ability, knowledge of education, and being able to maintain objectivity in relation to the matters in question. According to Glenn Proctor: “we have a relationship of confidence with the critical friends. They really believe in this school, they have got a comprehension of this context and I can be honest with them”. To be considered as a credible person, one must necessarily possess some required qualities and interviewees described such qualities as being an expert, being highly qualified, and being a skilled and trustworthy person who also shows honesty, responsibility and fairness towards the school. For example, Irene Iliadis mentioned: “a critical friend is someone who has achieved academic success in a specific context, and
they are used as models to give support to our staff, because they are credible”. In addition, the ability to develop positive relationships with the school community was seen as an essential aspect of credibility. As Irene Iliadis commented: “a critical friend is someone who has an open relationship with the staff, because it is based on confidence and mutual respect”

The interviews indicated the important relationship between expertise and trust, in order for staff to trust the critical friend; they need to see them as someone with relevant expertise. During the interviews, staff emphasized the importance of the critical friend’s expertise in school improvement. According to Lisa Robinson, critical friends bring experience from their own knowledge, which is very useful for the school: “...he has the ability to articulate what you know and help get it done”. Lisa Robinson also indicated the fact that the staff can access research findings through critical friends, because they are often active researchers, or at least familiar with current research. It is also important to mention here the way Glenn Proctor understands the role of the critical friend in this sense. He sees them as a role model for gaining and using knowledge. According to his words:

“Probably the most important ingredient of the role of the critical friend is that they have got a really sound background in research and... they can bring the knowledge to discuss with you”

For Glenn Proctor, critical friends are persons with an appropriate professional background, displaying a high level of knowledge and expertise, who are up to date on educational issues. He said that critical friends possess an understanding of the broader educational environment thanks to their experience working with other schools, which they bring to their conversations with school leaders. Similarly, other respondents mentioned expertise as one of the key qualities of a critical friend. For instance, Kate Bird, a year 8 team leader, said: “...they have a lot of expertise; it gives confidence, because their knowledge is based on research”. Irene Iliadis defined a critical friend as someone who has expertise and a wide record of achievement. Likewise, Karen Bird provided an
example of the use of the expertise of critical friends after a meeting, when the staff can ask questions to the critical friends. She says: “particularly with Lawrie but also with Vic, they can bring what they know from other works in other researches as well, to consider that in other contexts”.

Objectivity was another quality of the critical friends frequently mentioned by staff members. For example, Lisa Robinson highlighted the importance of objectivity, believing that objectivity is a necessary quality of a critical friend. Lisa Robinson explained that the experience of the critical friends in educational research, and their ability to know how to use this knowledge, gives them objectivity to help the school staff to see issues in a different way. She said: “critical friends provide an objective view from their knowledge on educational research, it is a different perspective that sometimes we do not have”.

Similarly, David Russell thinks that an important role of a critical friend is to see the panorama objectively as a result of their independence of the context. As he said: “a critical friend is able to look at things objectively”. Silvia Quaine, who is in charge of curriculum operations, also believes that objectivity in a critical friend is a significant component of their feedback. She affirmed: “critical friends bring an objective feedback to the school”. Silvia Quaine noted that feedback they give each other within their team may not be objective since they are within the same field, but the critical friend can see a different reality using their outside perspective, and put forward an objective opinion that may differ from what the leadership team may be considering.

A key quality of the critical friends is their capacity to simultaneously provide support and challenge people in schools to take different perspectives on issues. For instance, Ramazan Tirli and Mehtap Gunes described their positive view of the support received from the critical friends. They explained that a critical friend is continually giving suggestions and advice, and also challenging them. They also commented that a critical friend helps provide critique of direction, to help the school reflect on the correctness of its directions, and also to help the school recognise when there is a need to change. Thus, support delivered by the critical friends has a high component of challenge, because as Vic
Zbar, one of the critical friends at the school explained: “...you can’t give the answer; you need to help them to find the answer”. Irene Iliadis clearly sustains this connection among support and challenge given by a critical friend, when she said: “... they support me and also challenge me”. In this context, Kate Bird explained that the job of the critical friend is about detecting problems and offering support, not solutions. She argued that they are able to ask hard questions, and answer hard questions as well. Kate Bird said: “a critical friend would guide you to a solution”. In her view, Glenn Proctor, the executive principal, placed these experts with the teachers to help them identify issues and jointly devise a work plan that will help them.

A further quality is commitment towards the school. For instance, Glenn Proctor, when describing the critical friend’s actions, said “...one of the most important ingredients of a critical friend is commitment to the school”. He noted that commitment require a high level of dedication from the critical friends. In this sense, Silvia Quaine mentioned as a one of the requirements of a critical friend is being a committed person, who is able to work responsibly with the school. According to her words, “one important quality that is needed from critical friend is commitment with the school”. A similar view was expressed by Belinda Howard, who felt that the critical friend was so committed to the school that they became part of the team: “...they are not just a witness of our work, because they have worked with commitment within the school, so critical friends are part of us”. This view is consistent with that expressed by Robinson, who recalled the commitment of the critical friends to the school: “they are constantly here, doing ongoing work, critical friends work as a part of the organisation”. Lisa Robinson concluded that critical friends have been working in a committed and dedicated fashion within the school, thus commitment has been one of the key ingredients of the critical friendship success.

1.2 Critical friendship practice

Staff opinions of the critical friends were very similar and all of them shared a positive view of the contribution of the critical friends at the school. As mentioned before, HCSC is working on an ongoing basis with two critical friends, and with several other critical
friends for short term roles. The focus of this section is on the two main critical friends, Lawrie Drysdale and Vic Zbar. These two critical friends work in two different ways, but with the same goal, which is to contribute to the improvement of the school. In this section, some of the actual work of the critical friends is described.

Lawrie Drysdale has worked with Glenn Proctor for more than a decade. He had worked with Glenn Proctor in a previous school and the executive principal invited him to be part of the development of HCSC. Lawrie Drysdale described his role of critical friend at HCSC through these words:

“I support the leadership team and the principal, and run an emerging leaders program, which runs eight times during the year. They will say what the issues are, and in casual conversations where they express what is happening in the classroom. I challenge them and give my support. My role is to support the school, to act and challenge from time to time when I am in a meeting. I am often asked to summarise a meeting, I am asked to lead on the books that they read. I see my role as giving critical comment and listening to what is going, and, if I can, contribute ideas or expertise to the school”.

This quote indicates some of the work Lawrie Drysdale does. There are two foci emerging. One is the role of helping a meeting progress – to summarise points made, to challenge views and so forth. The other is to provide professional learning. This is through activities like leading the emerging leaders program and providing key readings to the school staff broadly. In relation to professional learning, Lawrie Drysdale commented that he is able to contribute in a number of different areas, because he is relatively up to date with ideas and research.

An important practice for critical friends is to form good relationships with staff, and in particular, with the executive principal. Lawrie Drysdale clearly has a close relationship
with Glenn Proctor, emphasising the trust and confidence that Glenn has in him. As Lawrie Drysdale commented:

“...I think Glenn values my opinion and is able to trust me enough to tell me some of the real issues that he’s confronting, I get an insight of how he thinks as a principal, he values me from time to time. One of my roles is influencing him, the trick is to give suggestions, but support him as well with his ideas. I am supporting more than challenging. I give ideas and challenge as well. I am more support than critical such as a supporting friend...”

For Lawrie Drysdale, a positive aspect of his role is that the principal is willing to confide in him. From these conversations Lawrie gains insights and information that is not widely known, such as staffing or financial issues. Lawrie Drysdale sees this as quite valuable, as it makes him think that he is doing a good job, and gives him a sense of appreciation of his own work. Thus, as a critical friend, he thinks he learns as much from the staff as they learn from him. For example, Lawrie explained that when he speaks with Glenn Proctor, he may give him just two critical comments within a twenty minute conversation, while the rest of the dialogue is more supportive; He sees his role as more listening than talking, and Lawrie Drysdale believes that Glenn Proctor and he have created an excellent working relationship.

While Lawrie Drysdale is comfortable in his role as a critical friend, he sometimes feels he could do more. He recalls how sometimes meetings do not have time for him to provide a comment, that there are times when he wished that he had contributed more, and on occasions he feels he does not have sufficient knowledge to help sufficiently. Notwithstanding these doubts, Lawrie Drysdale persists with his voluntary work at HCSC because he believes he is making a valuable contribution to the school and to education more broadly.
The other critical friend, Vic Zbar, has been working at the school in this role from 2010. He described his work as supporting Glenn Proctor, in terms of clarifying the leadership behaviours that the leadership team need to enact, to be able to lead their teams in the directions of the school. His role in the beginning came from Glenn Proctor hearing about some research Vic Zbar was involved in:

“...I guess my involvement came about because of the work that Graham Marshall and Ross Timber and I did in terms of developing a theory of action for school improvement, where we looked at eight high disadvantaged, and high performing government schools and identified how they managed to generate that improvement. And basically Glenn adopted those pre conditions as the starting point for their improvement process. It was about four years ago, and that’s why they asked me to come on board and work with their leadership team...”

His role as a critical friend has been defined by the school, with the staff themselves identifying the focus on the preconditions to use as the starting point. Vic Zbar makes a large number of presentations to schools and school networks, particularly leadership networks, in order to stimulate rich discussion, contextualise improvement efforts and provide challenge to school leaders to improve their schools. This is the role Vic Zbar has at HCSC, with a special emphasis on working with the school to help them solve their own issues: “I help the school see what needs to be the focus, to be able to ask questions...you can’t give the answer, you need to help them to find the answer”.

Vic Zbar described his work as being divided into three different stages. First, he uses supporting the high performing schools research to support the leadership team in getting the four preconditions in place for whole school improvement; strong leadership that is shared, high levels of expectations and teacher efficacy, ensuring an orderly learning environment, and a focus on what matters. Then, as the development of the preconditions became clearer in the school, the critical friend role shifted towards working with individual people, and mainly supporting Glenn Proctor, in terms of clarifying
the behaviours that the leadership team members needed to enact, in order to move their teams in the improvement direction of the school. The third phase was helping the school to review progress during the compulsory review year (which occurs every four years in government schools). In 2013, the review process changed to include a process of school self-reflection and peer review facilitated by an external reviewer acting as a critical friend to the review process. Vic Zbar assumed the role of the external reviewer as he has extensive experience in reviewing schools, and was already acting as a critical friend to the school. In this review the critical friend helps the school to identify terms of reference for the review and oversees a review day that includes school representatives and principals from other schools. With Vic’s experience he was also able to provide some input, expectations, and motivations from the wider research on school effectiveness and improvement. In the case of HCSC the three-year improvement strategy that emerged was to consolidate what they have done; it was an endorsement of the work that had already begun, and an acknowledgement that this needed more time to be fully implemented.

The assistant principal, Lisa Robinson, explained how she perceives the work of Lawrie Drysdale and Vic Zbar. In her view, Lawrie’s work involves supporting the leadership team, particularly the executive principal and the campus principals, using his knowledge from educational research in an objective manner. Lisa Robinson said that Vic Zbar works more on the ground, giving a view of what is happening in the field.

Another aspect that was perceived as a fundamental in the practice of the critical friend was their professional support. This differs from the kind of support delivered by other external agents such as a coach. This type of support involves the management and development of two important work strategies, the leadership team and the emerging leaders group. Leadership team is composed by the two main critical friends, all senior principal class members and middle level leaders. Meetings are focused on professional learning and activities include professional reading, presentations by leadership team members, guest speakers, data analysis and review, strategic planning, and setting targets for improvement. Key topics for leadership team meetings have included managing
change, team building, instructional leadership, instructional models of learning, peer coaching and review, professional conversations, and differentiation of lessons according to student needs. In order to support leadership development, the school conducts the emerging leaders program for teachers and staff who aspire to more senior leadership positions. This was led by the critical friend, Lawrie Drysdale, with eight 90 minutes sessions per year.

These programs were created as part of the school improvement process with the purpose of making good decisions about the future. Hence, members have been developing a wide range of educational discussions in the meetings. These discussions aim to build leadership capacity, motivating and educating staff in a professional and collaborative environment, in order to produce positive effects on student learning. One of the most important things for the success of these strategies was the time spent by critical friends on them. Indeed, critical friends have been working with HCSC for more than three years.

Displaying collaborative leadership was referred to as a key aspect of the critical friend’s work. Respondents perceived a critical friend as someone who allows them to share ideas, give opinions, share experiences and methodologies, and also to look at strengths and weaknesses with the purpose of becoming better professionals. One of the best feelings around this experience has been to not feel isolated. Regarding this idea, Irene Iliadis said that one significant lesson learned from the critical friends has been to change thinking in the sense of being able to perceive in her profession that isolation is not the best way, and that they need to collaborate. According to Irene Iliadis, “when critical friends collaborate with teachers and each other, sharing expertise and ideas, they gain collective ownership of improvement in student learning”. Likewise, Nick Bakatsoulas mentioned: “part of the critical friend role is to help the teacher to improve in the classroom, so we don’t feel isolated, because we have their collaboration, and we are receiving their feedback. They come from an external perspective and they help through that”.

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2. Understanding the work of a critical friend as being different than a coach

This theme was evident across four of the twelve interviews, so while it was not expressed by the majority, it was considered sufficiently important to be a separate theme, especially as the school has embarked on an extensive coaching program in 2013. Those who mentioned it emphasised the significant difference between the role of a critical friend and a coach.

Three participants explained in detail how they perceived the difference between the role of a critical friend and that of a coach. Lisa Robinson, for example, commented:

“...They are completely different for me. A coach is someone that is playing exactly the same game as you. They may have a skill set that is slightly more advanced and obviously they are training or coaching you to get that skill set. While, the critical friends have skills and attributes that I don’t have at all, and I’m going to learn those things from them.”

This point of view is consistent with that of Ramazan Tirli, who indicated that a critical friend is more a mentor than a coach. Ramazan Tirli described a critical friend as a person who he respects and who is able to provide him direction, because a critical friend has extensive experience and knowledge, whereas a coach is someone who ensures that they are doing the right thing by imposing something from the school system. Thus, working with a critical friend, is more interactive and focussed on the professional needs of an individual to improve their practice. Related to this, Karen Anderson believes coaches are different from a critical friend because they do more listening and seeking, and less telling. She believes that “a major difference between a critical friend and a coach is that the critical friend has more depth of expertise and can be trusted with confidential information”. Karen Anderson also said: “...if you are working with Lawrie, you will tell him the truth and you will receive honest feedback, because he is a trusted person...coaching really is more about discussion, I think it is different...”
Lawrie Drysdale thinks that a critical friend may be different from a coach, and for the reason that a coach or external agent may not have enough knowledge of what is happening in the school. So he exemplified this issue through this phrase: “The train is going and you are only boarding it from time to time”, but for him a critical friend is always on the train.

Critical friends are a recent development in schools, and it seems from a grounded perspective that teachers are making a distinction between the role of critical friends and coaches. This suggests some fertile grounds for further research into the role of the various support people now found in schools.

3. Contributions for school improvement

The regeneration project of HCSC is an example of a long term improvement project. The reader will recall that Glenn Proctor was appointed the executive principal of HCSC in 2008, as part of the Victorian Government's Broadmeadows Regeneration Project which saw seventeen schools cooperate to improve government education in the Broadmeadows area. This project, funded by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development aimed to encourage students to stay at school to year 12, improve year 10-12 education results, and provide modern facilities for the whole community. For example, the new campuses at HCSC are brightly coloured with open learning spaces and the very best technology to stimulate learning.

The schools, and Glenn’s leadership, were the subject of a major news documentary aired on the Four Corners program on the government funded national television network, the ABC. Shaun Carney, the reporter compiling the documentary commented on the school:

*Just five years ago, three schools in the Broadmeadows area of Melbourne were declared a disaster. They were at the bottom of the tables academically; nearly half the students weren’t even turning up, and only 30 per cent finished year 12. So they shut them down. The schools were bulldozed, creating one: Hume Central Secondary College. The Victorian Education department put a substantial investment of about 35 million dollars into the*
project. Glenn Proctor was declared the state’s first super principal and put in charge of about 1100 students. Today it’s a different school.

Although the school improvement process has been in operation at the school for just over four years, the total list of achievements mentioned by the interviewees is wide-ranging. Some important changes that have taken place were described by Clarke, Drysdale, Gurr, Huerta and Wildy (2012, p. 10), such as:

“...The school is gradually tapping into the unarticulated expectations of the community for quality education. The school is gradually finding a way to tap into the community and form stronger relationships in an attempt to forge true partnerships. Families that once went past the school to send their children to another school are now returning. Enrolments are growing which goes against the demographic trends in the area that suggest enrolments should be declining”.

For Glenn Proctor, reflecting on the improvement journey of the school, there are a number of areas in which the critical friends have made a significant impact: leadership development and improved student outcomes are examples. While critical friends have not had a direct impact on student outcomes, their contribution to this via professional learning for staff has, in Glenn’s view been invaluable. Another perspective is given by Lisa Robinson, who emphasized the important role of the critical friend in building capacity, providing a professional reading and access to relevant research findings. She also commented on their contribution to increasing teacher’s expectations of student learning and achievement. She said: “critical friends cannot work alone; it is a job which required the collaboration of everyone”. Nick Bakatsoulas adds to these comments with the idea that an important contribution of the critical friends has been their collaboration in new strategies and policies that are evidence-based. For Silvia Quaine, the major contribution of critical friends to the school’s improvement has been the possibility of obtaining up to date research findings about leadership and also knowing how the good practices work in other school contexts.
When Lawrie Drysdale and Vic Zbar describe the school’s progress, they have similar views. For example, according to Drysdale’s words:

“...Four years ago, there were behavioural problems with students, school members were not seen as totally competent, student morale, attendance and results were not good. Now I think it has turned around in many ways. Staff are more settled. Glenn has got rid of staff that were not up to scratch. The leadership team is in place, people not doing a good job were replaced. He has replaced the APs at two campuses; they were demoted. Student enrolment has gone up, attendance is better, behaviour has improved, teacher and student attitudes have improved, NAPLAN has gone up, VCE results have gone up with 97% of students going on to some type of course or work...”

This notable sense of success and progress for the school was mentioned by Vic Zbar when he commented on the student learning improvement evident in the NAPLAN results accessed through the My School website (http://www.myschool.edu.au):

“...If you have a look at the My School website, for example, the chart of kids from grade 7 to 9, you can see that the kids entries to level 7 was in a low standard, and then if you observe the difference between 2009 and 2012, you can appreciate the difference, how positive has been the contribution. It is solid evidence in the review, it is pretty impressive...”

Vic Zbar also indicated more examples of school improvement, related to improvement in students, opinions and motivations. For him, the school is currently going in the right direction.

Interviewees discussed the key people and events that have been critical to the school’s development. All agreed that Glenn Proctor has been the key person. Lawrie Drysdale commented that it is Glenn’s vision, his determination, his ability to push people that have been a key to the success of the school. He specifies that improvement has been
evidenced based, and that Glenn Proctor has focussed on the leadership team, resourcing their development with time, money and knowledge through the use of critical friends and other strategies such as having key reference book that the leadership team focuses on each year.

This school has 85% of the students come from non-English speaking backgrounds, mostly Middle Eastern. The majority come into year seven at least a year or two behind in reading and writing, according to NAPLAN. Thereby, several interviewees established as an important event the creation by Glenn of the 2 for 1 plan, which consists of trying to have two years of learning growth in one year. The creation by Glenn Proctor of the leadership team and the emerging leaders program were also noted by several interviewees as a major contribution to the school’s improvement. The strategies adopted were focused on key foundations for improvement, such as building leadership capacity, setting high expectations, developing a comprehensive planning strategy, building teacher capacity to improve teaching and learning, restructuring the school, and developing a high performance culture.

Many interviewees mentioned as significant the contribution and participation of the critical friends to the school’s improvement. Benefits included: being up to date on educational research, and receiving ideas, direction, and support from a highly qualified and experienced person. Karen Anderson commented on the value of receiving honest feedback from someone who is not your boss: “it is not easy to receive feedback from your boss…Glenn gave us this opportunity”. David Russell shared his opinion, and he explained that his experience included a shift in his perception of the role of the critical friends, from that of an external agent to a trusted person whose feedback he really valued.

The improvement experienced by the school was seen as the result of the commitment, endeavour and passion of many people. Those interviewees emphasized the importance of the combined efforts of the principals, the leadership team members, the teaching staff, support staff and, importantly the critical friends.
In conclusion, through these key people and initiatives, HCSC is progressively achieving the expectations of the community for quality education; with this evident in the increased enrolments in recent years and high parent opinion survey results.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

1. Introduction

The aim of this research was to investigate the role and impact of the critical friend in supporting school improvement based on a single case study. In addition, the relation between educational leadership, school improvement and critical friendship was examined.

In this section, the results are connected with the literature, noting what this research confirms or refutes and showing unique findings that emerged from this study. This chapter comprises three sections: the results of the study in relation to the research question, insights obtained from this case study concerning the areas of educational leadership, school improvement and critical friendship, and some directions for further research.

2. Research question

What is the role of the critical friend in supporting school leadership and school improvement?

Participants identified a considerable number of interpersonal skills, required qualities and technical competencies as a part of the role of the critical friend. The role of the critical friend was found to be a dynamic one, requiring a high level of skill, flexibility, and professional judgement. Rather than following a checklist of scripted “technical assistance”, it is about developing a repertoire of strategies and skills, and learning when and how to use them, taking account of the particular context (Butler et al., 2011). In this section, the researcher consider these aspects by first exploring some general qualities of the critical friends (such as listening, feedback, dialogue, trust, objectivity, expertise, challenge and commitment), and then focussing on three aspects that were mentioned by most respondents and which can be labelled as critical friendship practice: credibility, professional support and collaborative leadership.
3. The role of the critical friend

3.1 Qualities

This study found that there are a range of qualities referred as interpersonal skills required to work as an effective critical friend. The most significative interpersonal skills noted by interviewees were dialogue, listening and feedback. For example, in terms of listening skills, one of the members of the leadership team of HCSC described the role as follows: “...they gave us something that is learning. He listens to us and then he said you can do it, so this is really good”. Dialogue was noted by the executive principal as a crucial interpersonal skill needed by the critical friend. He mentioned the importance of an ongoing communication between staff members and critical friends, putting as an instance the fact that they have undertaken formal and informal meetings on a regular basis, which is really appreciated by him. Additionally, he described these conversations as an opportunity to have a discussion, confident that people can be honest and say what is actually happening. The same feeling was expressed by one of the campus principals, who noted:

“Only five minutes of conversation can be positive for me, because it is an interaction to see if I’m doing the right thing. He [Vic] can say what happened at the school, and then see what is going on with the preconditions”.

The last interpersonal skill frequently mentioned was feedback; it was seen to have an important connection with the two aspects discussed above. The reason for this is explained better through an example by one of the campus principals, who related how comfortable he feels when a critical friend is able to listen to him carefully and then, through giving suggestions, about what they are doing, motivate him to follow his ideas in a correct way. Thereby, the relation between dialogue, listening and feedback described by this school member is certainly an essential part of education and training programs, which have been predominant in the process of school improvement at HCSC. It was
agreed by all participants that the feedback delivered by the critical friend was very helpful to the school in order to take full advantage of their potential at the different phases of the improvement journey; mostly to have increased their awareness of strengths and areas for development, as well identifying actions to be taken to improve their performance.

These findings are consistent with the literature on critical friendship. For instance, Block (1999) recommends three needed abilities: technical (expertise about the particular issue), consulting (process skills such as negotiating entry, agreeing the scope of the work and eventually disengagement) and interpersonal skills. The first two could be considered as competences, and the third one is more about the qualities of the individual (MacBeath & Myers, 1999). Additionally, the following essential skills are required for the critical friend: listening, observing, questioning, managing conflict and team building, along with qualities such as respect, empathy, genuineness, confidence, optimism, sensitivity, insight, thoughtfulness and commitment (Swaffield, 2002).

One of the most valued abilities is providing an appropriate balance between support and challenge (Watling et al., 1998 p. 61). For example, one of the campus principals indicated this connection between support and challenge given by a critical friend when she said: “...they support me and also challenge me”. A group interview explained this in detail. Respondents explained that a critical friend is constantly giving suggestions and advice and also challenging them. They said: “if there is a discussion and the teacher lost the point, the critical friend helps them to re-direct the discussion in the right way”. The direction provided consists of making them realize what they need to change, instead of giving answers. Indeed, the support delivered by critical friends requires a high component of challenge, as one of the critical friends at the school explained: “...you can’t give the answer; you need to help them to find the answer”. Hence, the job of the critical friends is about detecting problems and offering support, no solutions.

According to Costa and Kallick (1993, p. 50) “a critical friend is a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers
critiques of a person’s work as a friend”. In this sense, another quality is added, which is being trusted. A campus principal noted his firm reliance on the critical friend’s integrity, perceiving a critical friend as an honest person, with a trusted opinion which makes him unafraid to tell the truth about his job, even if he is wrong because later his thinking will be clarified by someone whose opinion he values. Another staff member had a similar view: he perceived the critical friend as a credible person capable of creating an open relationship with everyone as a consequence of the level of confidence that every staff member had in the critical friends.

One of the most vital requisites of a critical friend is to have expertise in the field that he or she is working in. According to MacBeath (1999), the contribution of an external agent can bring a measure of objectivity as well as a measure of support. Moreover, in order to be useful, a critical friend must be someone with experience of school improvement and expertise working with a range of groups and in a variety of contexts. Consistent with this view, the results chapter highlighted these elements; expertise and objectivity were frequently mentioned by the majority of interviewees.

Regarding expertise, the assistant principal mentioned:

“Critical friends bring experience from their own knowledge, which is very useful for us...he has the ability to articulate what you know and help it get done. We can have research access through critical friends, because they are active researchers”.

Another important idea was provided by the executive principal supporting the previous comment. He understands the role of the critical friend as a role model, as a person with a good professional background, high level of knowledge, and abundant expertise, who is always up to date on the education context. The executive principal said that critical friends possess a comprehension of the environment thanks, for example to their experience of schools reviews at other schools, so they are well equipped to provide professional development to members of staff. As an example of objectivity, another staff
member argued that a quality of a critical friend is to see the panorama objectively as a consequence of their independence of the context. This means that when the teachers give feedback to each other, it might not be objective, since they are within the same field, while the critical friend can see another reality from an outside perspective and submit an objective opinion for them.

A final element that was mentioned in the interviews as a part of the required qualities of a critical friend is commitment, which is rarely mentioned in the literature reviewed. It could be because it has not been enough explored yet. However, an important finding of this study was that the critical friend’s job could not be done without commitment to the school. For example, the executive principal, when describing the critical friend’s actions said, “...one of the most important ingredients of a critical friend is commitment to the school”. He noted that it is hard work that certainly requires an elevated level of dedication from all the members of the school. In this sense, the critical friend’s commitment to the school is so strong that teachers perceive the critical friend as a part of the team. As one of the teachers said:

“...they are part of us; we feel comfortable with them, because they work in a global way, putting it in an individual way... We really have a strong relationship”.

This thought differs from the view provided by Hawe et al., (1998), where the critical friend is described as mostly working alone in a particular school or community, with the nature of their work meaning that it is often invisible: nurturing relationships, building understanding and enhancing capacity which is work that may not show immediate or tangible results. In contrast to this view, in the case of HCSC the critical friend never works alone, and their role is not perceived as intangible. In fact, critical friends are seen as belonging to the school and in this capacity make a tangible contribution to improvement.

Swaffield and MacBeath (2005) mentioned some conditions for the effectiveness of the relationship between critical friends and the school. These were trust, shared values,
shared purpose and personal qualities, such as communication and practical action, all in the context of critique. Regarding this idea, this research confirms these conditions, as were indicated in the interviews. However, when Swaffield explains this relationship as often one of utility, where ‘critical friends’ use, and are used by others in their professional practice, this creates a relationship that is deliberately not reciprocal. It is unequal and is not intended to be enduring. This research refutes this view. While this research was a single case study which cannot be easily generalized, the interviews demonstrated that the relationship generated between critical friends and school members was reciprocal and clearly durable. Indeed, critical friends have been working at HCSC for a long period, more than three years, and according to the interviewees one of the important reasons why changes have occurred is because of the time that has been invested by the critical friends in the same goal the school has.

3.2 Critical friendship practice

This research has found three main aspects which were characterised by the respondents as the most significative part of the critical friend’s role. These were credibility, professional support and collaborative leadership. Thus, these seem to be “key roles”. Interestingly, in this research study, the descriptions of the key role of the critical friends in the interviews were not frequently emphasized by the literature. To be more specific, only one of these was highlighted as important, which is credibility. The rest of them, even when they are mentioned, are not featured as a key role. The literature (e.g. Butler et al., 2011; Swaffield, 2004) indicated that the critical friend’s viewpoint has credibility if it is informed by an understanding of the situation, developed through listening as well as observation. It is a versatile form of external support for school leaders, and one that is subject to increasing professional and political interest (Butler et al., 2011; Swaffield, 2004). Likewise, Carlson (2009) notes that the critical friends must be considered trustworthy by the school members, someone with credibility to carry out the role.

Many of the interviewees defined critical friends as persons who are trustworthy and entitled to be believed. Their explanations were based on the idea that critical friends are
extremely reliable, not only on account of their good reputation as consultants, but also in relation to their wide record of achievement based on intelligence and knowledge of education, and the capacity for developing relationships with the school community. All of these were considered indispensable for ensuring the credibility of the critical friend.

Another theme that was perceived as necessary in the role of the critical friend was their professional support for the school. According to the interviews, this type of support involves the management and development of two important work strategies: the leadership team and the emerging leaders programs. Both of these programs were implemented to improve the communication environment, by using the critical friend’s knowledge from research as support for current and future planning.

The last key role mentioned was collaborative leadership. Interviewees perceived a critical friend as a leader, who allows them to share ideas, give opinions, share experiences and methodologies, and also look at strengths and weaknesses with the purpose of becoming better professionals. One of the best feelings around this experience has been not feeling isolated. For example, one teacher noted:

“Part of their role is to help the teacher to improve in the classroom, so we don’t feel isolation, because we have their collaboration, and we are receiving their feedback. They come from an external perspective and they help through that”.

Butler et al. (2011) distinguished the type of support given by the critical friend between formal and informal support. They note that support occurs at the direct source of influence through project planning meetings and according to this study, it could be associated with professional support mentioned in the interviews. While informal support can be seen as an indirect source of influence though for example casual conversations with colleagues this activity can be viewed as part of collaborative leadership, but they have not been mentioned in the literature as a key role of the critical friend’s performance.
3.3 A critical friend is not the same as a coach

Some authors define the critical friend as an external agent (MacBeath, 1999). Other researchers use the term coach or trainer (Butler, et. al 2011). However, the research results revealed that for the teachers at HCSC there are important differences between a critical friend and a coach. For example respondents contended that coaches are different to a critical friend because a critical friend does more listening and seeking, but less telling. They believe that a critical friend employs these elements in order to make the person use their skills and knowledge, and the major difference between a critical friend and a coach was that the critical friend can be trusted with confidential information because he or she is able to build deep relationships, based on their credibility, commitment and their integrity as a critical friend. In addition, one of the critical friends also noted a difference between his role and that of a coach, noting that a critical friend has detailed knowledge of what is happening at a school whereas a coach only has partial knowledge.

3.4 Impact of the critical friend on school improvement

The contribution and participation of critical friends to school improvement was frequently mentioned in the interviews. Critical friends provided many benefits through being up to date in educational research, and well qualified to provide support, ideas, direction and objective feedback. For example, one of the interviewees described how his view of the role of a critical friend was transformed. His initial impression was that of an independent agent observing and supporting meetings, but then the critical friend became a trusted person, who provided constructive feedback and helped him to clarify his own thinking towards improvement. This important change may be explained by Costa and Kallick (1993, p. 50) when they indicated that 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 towards. The critical friend is an advocate for the success of that work. Although Butler (et. al, 2011) contended that the notion of critical friendship is an emerging area of interest, earlier researchers had already discussed its benefits. For
example, Doherty (et. al, 2001) commented on the benefits of working with critical friends in schools, in relation to school effectiveness, extending this idea when they described the critical friend as helping schools make sound decisions, challenge expectations, patiently playing a role that is interpretative and catalytic, helping shape outcomes but never determining them, alerting the school to issues often only half perceived, and being sympathetic to the school’s purpose. Indeed, Swaffield (2004) argued that the role of the critical friend as a facilitator of change has become an important component for a range of school improvement, health promotion and professional learning initiatives in school communities.

Additionally, in an early report provided by Clarke, et al., (2012) related to case studies of two principals and their leadership of high need Australian schools, it was noted that Glenn Proctor was the person who has been able to bring his knowledge, wisdom, skills, experience and learning to drive through change for improvement in spite of the barriers and difficulties. This paper mentioned: “...he is his own person but prepared to listen and learn. He noted at one stage that he had endured a steep learning curve where he said: “I have learnt more in two years at the school that for the whole of his previous career” (Clarke, et al., 2012, p. 11). This essay described Glenn Proctor as a strong leader, who is persistent, determined, passionate, focused, and resilient. It defined Proctor as a person who acts with integrity and compassion, with values of social justice and equity, and someone who demonstrates a strong sense of moral purpose and mission, with the need to succeed in the face of considerable challenges. All of these qualities were confirmed in the current study.

4. Insights obtained from this case study concerning to the areas of educational leadership, school improvement and critical friendship.

The evidence provided for the literature on school improvement indicates an urgent need to find people, events or factors that may be useful for improving school outcomes. As already discussed, leadership has a powerful influence on school improvement. However,
the findings of this study affirmed that there are more factors that influence school enhancement, including an external agent known as a critical friend.

To begin, good leadership from the principal is essential for the change process at a school, because this journey is extremely complex, and requires constant direction and support (Drysdale, Goode & Gurr, 2009). However having an ideal leader is not enough when the desired transformation requires a high level of performance from each member of the school. This is the situation at HCSC, where there are three different campuses which need to be working in a coordinated fashion. Distributed leadership is needed to facilitate the achievement of objectives, so each member is able to contribute their abilities towards school improvement. Secondly, in the process of improvement, to become successful schools may require a blend of internal and external support. In this sense, it was necessary to involve an external agent, who contributes to a constructive change and development.

This is because, when a school is trying to implement change initiatives, it cannot see mistakes for itself, because it tends to be too subjective. However, with the contribution of a critical friend, the school is provided with a vision from an outside perspective, which can lead to a balanced approach in undertaking school change and transformation. It was shown in this research that this process requires real dedication and a high level of commitment, so the time spent by the critical friend plays an important role in the improvement process. A critical friend was considered by respondents as someone much more relevant and necessary than a normal coach. As the school has implemented a staff-wide coaching program, they considered each other as coaches. The critical friends, through their wider perspective, were considered to be something more than a coach. They perceived a critical friend as an extremely experienced person, bringing wider knowledge, and for this reason they have developed a high level of confidence in their knowledge and support. This creates a relationship that is closer than one which has a more typical type of external agent working at the school, such as a consultant. They
consider a critical friend as part of the team, and they seemed to value highly this close working relationship and sense of dual ownership of the improvement journey.

5. Research directions

The role of a critical friend in leadership and school improvement has been clarified through this case study, which explored the work of critical friends at a school undergoing major improvement. The critical friends were seen to be an integral and important part of the school’s improvement, supporting the principal, the leadership team and middle-level leaders to both set an improvement direction, and implement improvement strategies. The critical friends brought a high level of professional expertise in leadership and change, wider knowledge about school effectiveness and improvement, provided support for senior leaders (especially the principal), helped to set the school direction, and contributed to the capacity building of middle-level leaders. As the study involved only one school (albeit with three campuses), these new findings could generate more interest in the study of this area, connecting the work of the critical friend with the broader educational leadership and school improvement literature. Further studies could include a much larger cohort of schools and school participants in order to gain a richer base of information. Deeper exploration of the role could be achieved through observational studies. The research also has applicability to contexts where critical friends are less evident, such as in Chile, the home country of the researcher.
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