



# Leading *Improving* Primary Schools

The Work of Headteachers and Deputy Heads

Geoff Southworth

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Leading Improving  
Primary Schools:  
The Work of Headteachers and  
Deputy Heads

*Geoff Southworth*

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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to the deputy head  
of Barrington CE Primary School  
from whom I have learned so much.

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## Foreword

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Transformational leadership rather than transactional management is an unreal choice. Both are required. Transpose the adjectives however and a school—indeed any organization—is in trouble. This book should reduce that danger.

Geoff Southworth is well placed to provide the subtle insights into primary school leadership which this book provides. He has been pursuing his quarry for years—perhaps since the beginning of his career. Most school effectiveness and school improvement researchers, especially in the UK, come from a secondary background. The distinguished primary researchers—Neville Bennett, Robin Alexander and Maurice Galton—have in the main focused on classroom practice, teaching styles and curriculum. Very few have looked at leadership of the primary school. Yet, more so than in the secondary school, where the Heads of Faculty can so easily diffuse the impact of most Headteachers, the primary Headteacher and her Deputy can transform their school in short order. Lines of communication are shorter, management can be kept simpler and personal impact can be greater than in a secondary context.

This book therefore is welcome. Moreover, it comes at a time when a period of benign neglect of the primary school has given way to one of unparalleled pressure and attention. The publication of SAT results at age 11 in league table form, combined with the literacy and numeracy hours, has signalled a nation's determination to raise expectations of what is possible. It is as though there is a desperate hope (almost Jesuitical in its fervour) that if our primary schools could improve their practice, more children would gain sufficient grasp on literacy, numeracy competence and personal confidence that they would stand a better chance of navigating adolescence successfully.

It is down to 20,000 primary schools to realise that ambition. Some have already proved that this ambition is realistic. This book will enable many more others to emulate their success. Everyone who reads it, if they have the eyes and imagination to analyse and digest, will find something to improve their existing school or their next one when perhaps they are a Head or a Deputy.

Some years ago when he was in Cambridge and I was at Keele, Geoff

## *Foreword*

Southworth and I ran a series of three workshops together in different parts of the country for newly appointed primary Headteachers. It was our purpose, in a day, to share what we had together gleaned about successful primary Headship in order to equip better new Heads in their task of transforming life's chances for their pupils. I, and the members of the courses, learnt so much from him then.

It seemed so profligate to leave such insights to the transient nature of a workshop and the chance of memory. So I am pleased to have the book, both to remind myself of them and learn so much more. So too will those who read on from here.

*Professor Tim Brighouse  
Chief Education Officer  
Birmingham LEA*

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# Introduction

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This book aims to encourage a reflective approach to primary school leadership and improvement. Over the years I have been invited to speak about primary school leadership at conferences, courses and workshops organized by LEA staff, headteachers and deputy heads groups. Almost all of these invitations have arisen because the participants have wanted to examine their approaches to school leadership. Some have wanted to consider alternative approaches and options, others the opportunity to review and, perhaps, re-appraise, re-affirm or renew their efforts. Whatever the precise intentions of these activities, it is clear that school leaders need, from time to time, to reflect on their leadership. This was something I learned first hand as a head and as someone who in the 1980s organized management courses for primary heads and deputies. In the busy world of primary schools, time to reflect is at a premium. Moreover, when heads and deputies do find some space to reflect, there are so many issues to consider that leadership as a topic to review is easily pushed aside by seemingly more pressing matters.

Yet the case for professional reflection, analysis and action planning in the light of reflection is a compelling one. Moreover, with growing emphasis being placed on each school improving the pupils' learning and every school needing to evaluate and develop its overall levels of performance, the work and role of school leaders has never been so important as it is today. This book, therefore, aims to provide ideas and examples to stimulate reflection on primary school leadership and leadership for school improvement.

The book is intended for headteachers, deputy heads and those who aspire to these positions. It is generally common for books on school leadership to be written almost exclusively for headteachers. I have not been comfortable with this focus for some time and therefore decided to try to put together a book which looked at both roles. One reason for this decision is my growing belief in the value of shared leadership and this is one of the ideas I try to develop in this volume.

In a number of ways this book is another step in my personal journey of trying to understand and deepen my knowledge of primary school leadership. I have been both a deputy head in a primary school and the headteacher of a junior school. Since moving into higher education I have

been responsible for a series of activities which have attempted to make a contribution to the professional development of primary heads and deputies.

I have also conducted research into primary school leadership. The Primary School Staff Relationships project (Nias et al., 1989) enabled me to focus on how heads and deputies developed a culture of collaboration in their schools. The whole school curriculum development project (Nias et al., 1992) enabled me to consider how heads created a sense of whole school and developed themselves and their teacher colleagues. Around this time I also conducted a close-up study of a primary school head at work in his school and created a detailed case study of his actions over a school year (Southworth, 1995c). From this case study I was able to explore power relations in school and the notion that some primary heads develop a strong sense of occupational identity which underpins their actions, intentions and reasoning. Since then I have also looked at what heads had to say about primary headship in the 1990s (Southworth, 1995a) and have contrasted this with work from New Zealand and North America.

The studies I have conducted into deputy headship include looking at a year-long job rotation in a primary school which involved the head returning to the classroom, the deputy becoming acting head and a senior teacher taking on the role of deputy (Southworth, 1994). Also, with a group of deputies, I have been studying head and deputy head partnerships and the role and work of deputies. Together, with support from Hertfordshire LEA, we have conducted a large scale enquiry into deputy headship in primary schools in Hertfordshire (Southworth, 1998).

In his book I will bring together the main lessons from my personal experience of school leadership and of working with large numbers of leaders, plus all of these projects, and combine them with other relevant work and research. In this sense the book provides another piece in the accumulating project I have been embarked on for the last 20 years or more.

One principal aim of this book is to review, discuss, synthesize and summarize existing research and thinking about school leadership, particularly primary school leadership. To make this aim manageable I have had to confine myself to heads and deputies. I am aware that this excludes co-ordinators and other senior staff in larger schools. However, co-ordinators have received quite a lot of attention in the last 10 years and deputies have not. Also, in wanting to include deputies I particularly wanted to do so alongside a review of primary headship. Therefore, not being able to deal with all three I elected for these two. This may not be a convincing argument for some, and I am aware that deputy headship also needs to be considered in relation to co-ordinators and senior management teams, as I have begun to consider (Southworth, 1997c), but sometimes compromises have to be

struck, as many school leaders are aware. However, in [Chapter 5](#) I do focus on the notion of leadership at all levels and I hope that this provides some counter-balance to my otherwise limited treatment of leadership.

The book consists of five chapters, divided into three parts. [Part 1](#) is called leadership. In [Chapter 1](#) I look at the idea that leadership matters and that school leaders make a difference. In [Chapter 2](#) I review a number of leadership theories and relate them to primary schools in an effort to demonstrate their relevance and pertinence to school leaders.

[Part 2](#) focuses on leadership in primary schools. [Chapter 3](#) summarizes what we currently know about primary headship and headteachers. [Chapter 4](#) deals with what is known about primary deputy heads. Both chapters rely on published studies and commentaries, as well as my own knowledge of both groups. In each chapter I also try to summarize the key points and provide an overview of our contemporary understanding of the roles.

[Part 3](#) looks at leadership and school improvement. [Chapter 5](#) synthesizes the main issues from the previous chapters and identifies the emerging themes. These, in turn, are used to highlight four elements of leadership and school improvement which leaders in the future might need to consider and develop. Examples from existing practices in primary schools are given to show how these four elements can be put into practice. The chapter closes with a section looking at reflective leadership and sets out some questions leaders of improving schools might focus on to guide their reflections on their own leadership.

A final section in [Part 3](#) simply notes the challenges and opportunities heads and deputies face in improving primary schools.

One key idea which runs through this volume is the value of professional learning. Effective leaders are also able learners. They are keen to find out how their peers and colleagues do things and they enjoy ideas and discussing alternatives. They are intensely interested in what is happening inside the schools they lead and they are also keen to know what is going beyond the school. Such hunger for information, knowledge and insight makes these leaders not only teachers but also life-long learners. They know that the world of ideas keeps on moving and that research reinforces professional practice, refines it and, sometimes, questions it. They are not afraid to consider alternatives, nor do they seek change for its own sake. Sometimes, their reflections increase their confidence in what is presently happening in the school and so they decide not to change things. Change and continuity both play a part in school improvement.

I have learned a great deal from working with heads and deputies, as well as many other teachers. What is written here is entirely my responsibility, but it is drawn from listening to colleagues talking about their experiences of leading schools and from visiting them and studying them.



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*Part 1*

*Leadership*