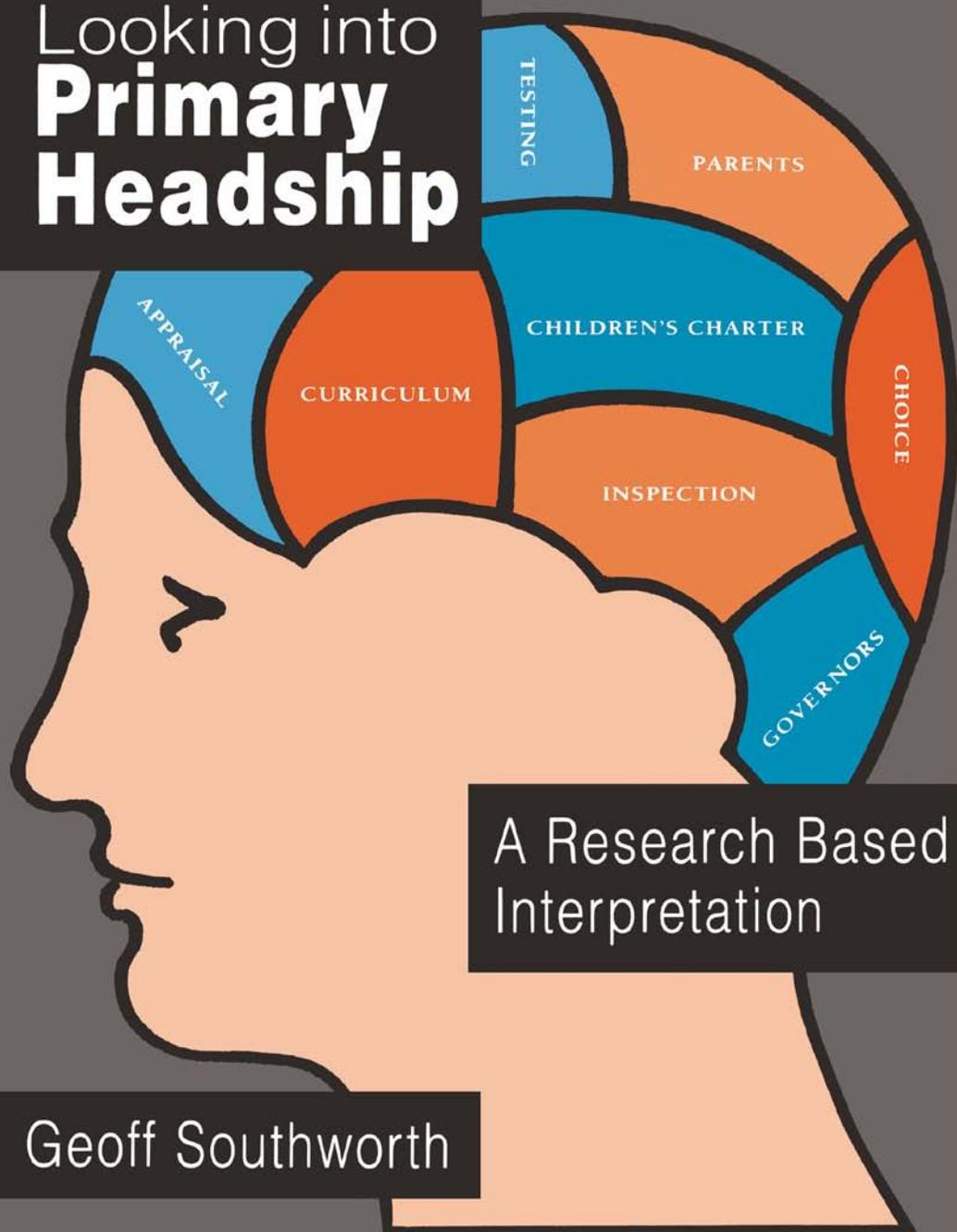


Looking into **Primary Headship**



A Research Based
Interpretation

Geoff Southworth

 The Falmer Press

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A Research Based Interpretation

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Dedication

For Ben

Acknowledgments

In preparing this book and the thesis from which it has arisen I have been aided and encouraged by many other persons. Conversations with colleagues at the University of Cambridge Institute of Education and elsewhere have helped me to develop and clarify my thinking. I should especially like to acknowledge the support given to me by Jennifer Nias who always offered constructive and valuable responses to my ideas. I should also say thank you to Barry MacDonald, John Elliott and Louis Smith. Special thanks should go to Rita Harvey for preparing the manuscript of this book.

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The author and publishers are indebted to HMSO for permission to include the material in Appendix 1.

Abbreviations Used

| | |
|--------|--|
| AERA | American Educational Research Association |
| CDO | Community Development Officer |
| DES | Department of Education and Science |
| DfE | Department for Education |
| ESRC | Economic and Social Research Council |
| ERA | Education Reform Act |
| EWO | Educational Welfare Officer |
| HE | Higher Education |
| HMI | Her Majesty's Inspectors |
| ILEA | Inner London Education Authority |
| INSET | In-service Education and Training |
| INT | Interview data |
| LEA | Local Education Authority |
| LMS | Local Management of Schools |
| MBWA | Management By Wandering About |
| NAPE | National Association for Primary Education |
| NCC | National Curriculum Council |
| NFER | National Foundation for Educational Research |
| OU | Open University |
| PTA | Parent Teachers' Association |
| RE | Religious Education |
| SEAC | Schools Examination and Assessment Council |
| SMTF | School Management Task Force |
| WSCDPS | Whole School Curriculum Development in Primary Schools Project |

Introduction

This book is concerned with primary school headship. I embarked upon the research because my responsibilities at the University of Cambridge Institute of Education included providing school management courses for primary school headteachers. Over time, I became aware that the literature focusing upon primary school management and leadership did not fully reflect the accounts and concerns of the heads I worked with on management courses. Moreover, as I searched the literature dealing with primary heads and school management, I recognized that there had been little research conducted into primary headteachers. As I looked at the literature and listened to the many heads with whom I worked I realized that there was scope for a further exploration of headship.

The notion of exploration is apposite. I embarked on the journey which has led to this book without any clear sense of a destination. Originally my strongest concern was to look more closely into headship. Previous research with which I had been involved (Nias *et al.* 1989) had convinced me of the benefits of participant observation, detailed description and close-up studies. So, from an early stage, I determined to study a headteacher by observing him/her at work inside his/her school.

As the research progressed I began to travel over terrain which was sometimes familiar and sometimes new to me. What I observed and analysed stimulated my thinking on methodology. I investigated the idea of producing a portrait of the subject and saw parallels with biography. As the study developed, the data prompted me to explore three main issues: *leadership*, *power* and *identity*. That the study was concerned with leadership was hardly surprising. As for power, while I recognized it was a part of headship I did not expect it to feature to the extent it did. By contrast, the notion of identity was a discovery for me and my understanding of headship.

Separately, each of these three notions is a major field of study; together they form a considerable body of knowledge. Just as initially there was a temptation to keep collecting data on the head I observed at work, as the fieldwork ended this desire was replaced by my wishing to keep reading more about each of the three issues. Indeed, for a period, I was caught up in a cycle whereby the more I read, the more I felt I needed to read. This cycle was eventually broken when I recognized two things. First, the research is essentially speculative rather than conclusive. It is in every sense an exploration and not a colonization. I have undertaken only an initial mapping of the issues and recognize that more work is needed to test and develop the ideas I raise here. Second, the enquiry is concerned primarily with integrating the three issues in terms of how they relate to primary headship. While I need to demonstrate an understanding of the salient features of each issue, my aim has been less to develop an encyclopaedic knowledge of each and more to do with juxtaposing the three in order to discover the relationships between them and to attempt a synthesis of them.

By giving this book the title of *Looking Into Primary Headship: A Research Based Interpretation* I want to suggest three things. First, that the book is derived from research. This book is not simply a commentary on headship, nor is it merely a personal set of opinions about how I think primary heads should behave. Rather, the book is based upon a school-based enquiry which studied what one headteacher actually did. Second, by the words *looking into*, as against *looking at*, I want to convey that I have not been concerned just with the surface appearance of headship. Instead, I believe I have not only described one head's work, but also delved into what this meant to the individual himself. Third, by using the word *interpretation* I want to signal that both the research on which this book is based (i.e., the intentions, objectives, data and its analysis) and this report of the findings (i.e., the case study, the reflections and hypotheses derived from the study) represent my views about what I witnessed and noted. I do not believe that what I offer here is all there is to know about headship, far from it. Neither do I feel I am providing some objective and neutral account about this headteacher. Although I have tried to be self-conscious about my subjectivity, nevertheless, much of the material here has been mediated by me—so the book is a glossed account of headship.

In publishing this research I have one specific goal in mind. I hope to provide, in a public form, an account and analysis of what a headteacher did. I want to do this because it seems to me that we lack any such study. In a sense, we do not know what heads do. I hope this study casts a little light on the work of heads by looking closely at what one headteacher did and said about his work. The book is divided into three parts.

Part I deals with the study's origins and methods. In Chapter 1 I explain why I embarked on the research, review the literature concerned with primary school headteachers, note the issues which arise from the literature and set out the preliminary questions which guided the early phase of this study. Chapter 2 deals with methodology. I present what I mean by educational ethnography, critically describe how I conducted the research and highlight what I have learned from the process. I have included a chapter on methodology because all too often researchers do not tell their readers enough about their methodologies. I therefore include this chapter to avoid this omission rather than to advocate that my approach should be emulated by others.

Part II covers the case study and my reflections upon it. The subject of the case study is Ron Lacey, headteacher of Orchard Community Junior School. Chapter 3, the study, is subdivided into four parts. The first deals with Ron's background and context. The second examines what he did as headteacher. The third part focuses on how he controlled what happened in the school. The fourth offers a portrait of his headship and looks at the personal and professional dimensions of headship. Also within Part II of the thesis is Chapter 4. This chapter deals with Ron's response to the case study of himself, my reflections upon the study and sets out the main conclusions I draw from the study.

Part III consists of Chapters 5, 6 and 7 and my conclusions for the study as a whole. In Chapter 5 I provide a theoretical explanation for the conclusions set out in Chapter 4. The chapter deals with two issues: the morality of domination and the conditions which allow heads to dominate the schools they lead. The discussion throughout the chapter extends and develops the conclusions I draw from the case study; at the end of the chapter I offer a hypothesis as to why primary heads take it for granted that they will be dominant in their schools. Chapter 6 continues the discussion begun in Chapter 5. I examine whether there are other ways of

conceptualizing headship than one where the head is the dominant person in the school. I review school management theorizing and find that critical theorists provide the most cogent challenge to the bureaucratic rationale which sustains the idea of dominating leaders. Following on from this finding I examine the notion of critical leadership.

Chapter 7 considers the implications of critical leadership for headteacher development. I am critical of existing trends in headteacher development because they are grounded in a wholly instrumental rationale. I next go on to argue that discussion groups offer an appropriate context for developing heads, alongside challenges to their assumptions about leadership. I also argue that headteacher development needs to be complemented by programmes of teacher development.

In Chapter 8 I present the main points of the study, highlight the major outcomes and offer some recommendations for the development of heads and some avenues for possible future research. The book can be read in a number of ways. Those readers who are strongly interested in the work of headteachers should especially focus on Chapter 1, Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. Those who are interested in qualitative research should read Chapter 2, as well as Chapters 3 and 4. Students and practitioners of school management and leadership should try to read the whole text!

There is one other point I should like to make. What I offer here is neither a definitive set of insights, nor a model of how to conduct research. Rather, I have only tried to set out how I embarked upon and completed a school-based enquiry and what my present understandings about headship are. For sure, there is more to learn and much left to study. This book is not the terminal point, only a way-station I have reached and at which I have paused for a while. I am convinced there is much more to explore and territory I need to revisit.

Part I

Origins and Methods

Literature Review

There are three related reasons why I embarked upon this study. The first is my personal experience of headship. For three years, ten school terms (1980–3), I was headteacher of a junior school in Leyland, Lancashire, with approximately 300 children on roll. Second, my work as tutor in Primary Education and Management at the University of Cambridge Institute of Education has involved me in working with large numbers of primary school headteachers on a variety of courses and activities (50- and 20-day courses; LEA conferences; workshops on leadership; residential courses; consultant to a headteacher support group). Third, as a consequence of these two I have taken a strong interest in the literature concerned with primary school headship (research reports, articles and books—both generic educational management texts and accounts specific to the work of primary heads). However, the literature, though insightful in some ways, fails to portray the essence of the experience of headship as I remember it and as I believe many of the heads I have worked with appear to experience the job. Generally the literature concerned with headship either takes a monocular view of the work, by focusing upon one aspect of the job, or presents too simple and neat a picture. Although some writers have provided useful analyses, these have often been abstractions which only partially reflect the reality of headship (Hughes 1976:59). There is a general failure to come to grips with the ‘street realities’ of headship (Ball 1987:81). Headship is presented as a rational set of tasks and responsibilities. The interaction between categories is not considered, nor is the affective dimension of dealing with people given attention.

The more I read and studied the literature, the more I listened to other heads talk about their work and the more I matched these to my own recollections of headship, the greater my sense of dissatisfaction with the published and public picture became. Eventually this dissatisfaction motivated me to contemplate undertaking a study into headship which might attempt to remedy some of the deficiencies in the existing literature and test some of the assumptions and ideas therein.

This chapter provides a critical review of the literature which focuses upon primary school headteachers. The review will serve two purposes. First, it will identify weaknesses, shortcomings and inadequacies in the literature. Second, it will provide a preface to the research as a whole, since the study has been conceived, in part, as a response to these perceived deficiencies in the published accounts.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first, and longest section reviews the literature concerned with primary headship. This section is subdivided into five parts. In the second section I note the issues arising from the literature. In the third section I set out the questions I formulated in response to the deficiencies I perceived in the literature and which stimulated

and guided this enquiry. These questions served as 'guiding questions' (Smith 1990:8) for this research and need to be made explicit in order to demonstrate the conceptual and methodological roots of this study.

Review of the Literature

Some General Observations

While throughout the 1980s and 1990s there was increasing interest in school management, little has changed since Baron (1980:5), reviewing education management research, noted, 'The neglect of the headteacher position in the infant and junior school is particularly marked.'

No major study into primary school headteachers has been undertaken in this country. Despite widespread recognition of the importance of the position, there has been no large-scale funded investigation of British primary headship (Coulson 1988a:3). Primary heads therefore lack a data base which would enable them to relate their work to a large sample of heads (Laws and Dennison 1991:279).

By contrast secondary school headteachers have been studied in greater detail. The Project on the Selection of Secondary Headteachers was a three-year investigation, funded by the DES, based explicitly upon the premise that headteachers are important figures in their schools and represent a large scale investment (Morgan *et al.* 1983:1). Hall *et al.* (1986), in a study funded by the Leverhulme Trust, focused on secondary headship in action. Using an ethnographic approach 15 heads were observed at work both within and outside their schools. Four of these 15 were observed in depth on a regular basis for a year (Hall *et al.* 1986:6). Weindling and Earley (1987) report upon a National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) project undertaken in 1982-4 which, using a range of methods, such as questionnaire survey, interview and case study, examined the first years of secondary headship. This was a national project, since the researchers attempted to study all secondary heads who took up their first appointment in England and Wales during the school year 1982-3 (1987:9).

International comparisons also show that in this country our knowledge of primary heads is shallow. Australia, for example, has produced *A Descriptive Profile of Australian School Principals* (Chapman 1984) which presents detailed, factual information concerning school principals (personal backgrounds; formal education; work experience). No such comparable data base exists for heads in England and Wales. In the USA there is a National Centre for Educational Leadership based jointly at the Universities of Harvard and Chicago. Moreover, the wealth of research into school leadership in North America is also reflected in both the literature (see Wolcott 1973; Kentz and Willower 1982; De Bevoise 1984; Sergiovanni and Corbally 1984; Blumberg and Greenfield 1986; Greenfield, W. 1987; Sheive and Schoenheit 1987; Burdin 1989) and research associations such as the American Educational Research Association.

Given the sparseness of material available on primary headship in England and Wales and the lack of large-scale research investigations into the work of these heads, 'writing and research on the topic remains the province of individuals, mainly heads themselves' (Coulson 1988a:3). Consequently such research as has been undertaken is limited in scope and timescale. Several of the studies are limited in scope because they are undertaken by

individuals, for example, questionnaire surveys of small samples of heads, sometimes as part of higher degree courses (MA/MEd/MPhil assignments; see Coulson 1974; Lloyd 1981; Holtom 1988). They are limited in time because there is a tendency to adopt a short rather than long-term focus—time studies over single days. Methodologically such investigations favour personal experience reports and small quantitative studies. While some of this work has generated useful insights and understandings into matters such as power, the absence of any thorough synthesis and publication of the work means that it has little influence upon policymakers and practitioners alike.

The literature can be divided into four categories. These categories are of unequal size and are not discrete. They are:

- headship and leadership style;
- prescriptions;
- descriptions;
- headship and school effectiveness.

These will now be examined in turn.

Headship and Leadership Style

According to Coulson

In the 1960s and 1970s much of the discussion of headship utilised Lewin's (1944) autocratic-democratic dimensions, the Ohio State leadership studies (e.g. Hemphill and Coons 1954; Halpin 1966), or role analysis (e.g. Getzels and Guba 1957).

(Coulson 1988a:3)

Later work continued to explore heads' authority and their leadership styles. Coulson (1976) drew attention to the close identification between head and school and described the characteristic (male) headteacher style as 'paternalistic'.

At the root of the primary head's paternalism lies the ego-identification which he normally has with the school. He tends to think of it as 'his' in a very special way and therefore to feel a deep sense of personal responsibility for everything and everyone in it.

(Coulson 1976:286)

Coulson is critical of the paternalistic style (1976:287–90; 1978:80–1) and suggests 'collegiality' as an alternative. Waters also underlines the head's freedom to adopt a style 'which suits both his personality and the situation' (1979:56).

Nias (1980) interviewed 99 graduates who, after a specialized one-year PGCE course, had taken jobs in infant and junior schools. The questions that these teachers were asked in interview were designed to chart their views on teaching as a career. So strongly were these