

Praise for *Primary Heads*

Bill Laar has spent a lifetime enchanting primary heads and teachers – not to mention their pupils. He weaves magic and here you will find out why and emerge from reading this energised and with renewed determination for the years ahead.

Sir Tim Brighouse, Visiting Professor, Institute of Education

This is a timely, well-written account of the challenges and joys of being a primary head teacher during a very challenging time in English education. He has given a voice to a diverse range of heads, who all have a clear belief and a passion about their role.

Bill Laar has always made sure his knowledge is up-to-date and relevant and throughout this book his love of children and those who teach them is evident.

**Pat Morrissey, former head teacher,
St George's Catholic Primary School, Harrow**

Bill Laar sets out the framework for leadership of primary schools as we see them today and charts the way the role has changed over time. He then tells the story of a series of heads as they describe their passions, philosophies and working practices. He draws out what matters in headship with incisive analysis. The book has that lovely balance between the theoretical, the practical and the persona – just like a good primary school.

Mick Waters, Professor of Education, Wolverhampton University

There are many books on school leadership, but few which speak through the voice of the primary school leaders themselves. In rectifying that gap in the literature, this book provides a most welcome service, deserving a prominent place in every head teacher's study. The highly experienced Bill Laar reproduces the interviews he has had with head teachers of many schools which are recognised for their successes and high quality. The schools represent a wide range in terms of location, intake and religious status, and the questions and their answers address the many problems which head teachers have to face. As the book points out, there is now a dearth of teachers responding to the need for school leadership. This book confronts the reasons why that might be, but also shows how potential but doubting recruits might see how they too might become good 'Primary Heads'.

Professor Richard Pring, University of Oxford

Bill Laar brings his characteristic insights and passions to this highly readable collection of leadership stories. His own significant experiences as head teacher, inspector and leading local authorities underpin his sharp, carefully crafted analysis of what great primary school leaders do for the communities they serve. Each head he has interviewed has a distinctive journey to share, both personally and professionally. There will be few primary heads in the country who will not want to turn and turn again to the wisdom and inspiration in these pages.

Roy Blatchford, Director, National Education Trust

In this veritable Pandora's Box of methods and experiences, one gains insight into modern headship of a calibre never before seen. For intending headship candidates, or indeed anyone contemplating middle management, this is a fountain of knowledge and practical common sense. It must take pride of place in any establishment worthy of its name. Investment in people to provide the wherewithal for a superb educational experience for all children is a paramount requisite. Human resources are the most costly element of any school budget. This highly illuminating book is a beacon of success.

**Cliff Jones, head teacher. Ofsted inspector, School Improvement Partner,
Secretary of South West Primary Heads group**

Primary Heads reveals the secrets of eleven exceptional heads, who together encompass a great breadth of experience and a wide range of primary school contexts. Bill Laar has always been a gifted story-teller: here he writes engagingly about different approaches to headship. All of the vignettes demonstrate the importance of a clear vision and the courage to pursue it in the face of resistance. The heads provide honest descriptions of the difficulties they have confronted and how they overcame them. There are no easy answers here, but this book is an amazing resource for anyone who would like to learn more about what distinguishes outstanding leadership of primary schools.

**Dr Linet Arthur, Senior Lecturer: Educational Leadership and Management,
Oxford Brookes University**

Bill Laar's book, *Primary Heads*, shines a bright light on the real life stories of eleven heads who have had transformational success as primary school leaders. Their stories are mapped against accepted qualities of leadership, revealing how successful heads significantly surpass these qualities. Laar tracks the teachers' journeys, tracing their beliefs back to childhood, revealing ways in which beliefs and early experiences are manifested in practice, and exploring how their practice has changed and transformed others. The stories are inspiring and complex, revealing the struggles and costs as well as the rewards of realising their visions. Examples of extraordinary practice are shared: we see teachers

at their very best, functioning at the peak of their skill in spite of constraints, challenges and blocks. The book is an inspiration to any teacher questioning the value of their work, any enquirer wondering what 'success' might look like in a primary school, and how it can be achieved; it is a mantra against the defeatist. Primary heads such as these answer our search for role models: they assure us that, whatever the onslaughts from the outside world, our education is in safe hands and that it is its best leaders and practitioners we should be listening to. This book, from an author with decades of insider experience, gives us the opportunity to do so.

**Jane Spiro, Reader in Education and TESOL, National Teaching Fellow,
Oxford Brookes School of Education**

In 524 words in his Introduction, augmented by his Overview chapter, Bill Laar describes the essence of what works in education. His long and impressive experience has taught him about the realities of learning beyond the narrow current confines of selective attainment. He reminds us that education is about life and living and at a time of imminent and radical changes in education it is essential we focus on the truths of the processes.

The focus on headship very properly explains and acknowledges the considerable research evidence showing that leadership is central to quality. Individual teachers can display leadership. Many will be good teachers. The effective school is one that recognises such strengths alongside the capacity to improve and the central binding element that shapes real success is leadership. Bill deals with key elements – continuous professional development, succession planning, monitoring and evaluation – very clearly.

**Mervyn Benford, former teacher, head teacher, Local Authority adviser/inspector,
Ofsted Registered Inspector and quality consultant**

This is a great read for many teachers who feel they would like to take on a school but feel they are not courageous or good enough – it will inspire many who can find similarities in the character of one or more of these Heads to understand that they can do it too. (One size doesn't fit all!)

Every story is engrossing and shows the many difficult issues Heads have to face – but do so by thinking and planning in creative and lateral thinking ways. They communicate their vision and plans in a way that involves everyone. I enjoyed each and every account because although heads are surrounded by people, it can be a very lonely job for those who are afraid to share problems. A problem shared is a problem solved and this will be an invaluable read for aspiring head teachers.

**Dame Anna Hassan, education consultant
and Chair of OCAT Oak Community Academy Trust**

PRIMARY HEADS

EXCEPTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

BILL LAAR



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This book is dedicated to Jackie and Alex Laar, and the many outstanding head teachers and teachers with whom I have been privileged to work.

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INTRODUCTION

This book examines the concepts of effective primary leadership and headship. It seeks to establish how far the concepts are exemplified in the practice of eleven successful head teachers, and the extent to which their work, and the performance of their schools, reflect currently accepted views of educational excellence, and the qualities deemed essential to exceptional leadership.

Each chapter, devoted to a head teacher, provides evidence of notable qualities of leadership. These leadership qualities are articulated in their professional narratives in/by:

- the shaping of inspiring vision;
- the professional development of individuals;
- the establishment of effective teams, committed to a common, aspirational purpose;
- the efficient management of systems and organisations, an unrelenting insistence on refining the quality of teaching and learning;
- an emphasis on distributed leadership; and
- the forging of productive links with parents, carers and the wider community in the interest of children's education.

The schools described in chapters 2–12 differ from each other in various aspects, sometimes significantly so. The differences relate to:

- Status e.g. state or faith school
- Location and socio-economic make-up of the catchment area
- Size, ethnic diversity and mobility of pupil population
- The professional experience of the head teacher and senior staff and the experience and capacity of all staff
- The nature and quality of the building and the immediate school environment
- Access to funding resources beyond the legislated minimum
- The nature of the governing body and the support it affords

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- The context of the contributory school community, its perception of the school and its historic relationship with it

I have written about head teachers whose schools are widely acknowledged to be outstanding in terms of the transforming educational experience they provide. Such judgements are based on rigorous criteria and national standardised tests in which pupils consistently attain high standards.

Apart from these benchmarks there are other significant quality indicators that characterise the schools and their head teachers.

- These schools are commissioned by local authorities, national institutions and bodies such as the NCSL and the DfE as training grounds for other schools and their staff.
- Their teaching staff are regularly promoted to leadership and senior positions in other schools.
- The schools develop rich and creative environments that contribute significantly to pupils' learning and to the enlarging of their cultural experience and understanding.
- They use advanced and innovative educational technology to enhance the pupils' learning across the whole curriculum.
- Without exception, they provide an education based on strong, moral, ethical and spiritual principles. These are reflected in the unfailing care and support for children and the commitment to serving the rights and needs of every individual.
- Their reputation for excellence often extends beyond their immediate community, in some cases attaining a national status.

Finally, I took account of the criteria for effective headship/leadership based on academic research and literature devoted to the subject (see Bibliography), and how the head teachers matched up to them. These head teachers do the following:

- Build vision and set direction
- Redesign and restructure an organisation as required
- Manage teaching and learning programmes
- Respond effectively to the contexts in which they find themselves
- Effectively distribute school leadership

- Improve teaching and learning through their influence on staff
- Motivate staff, maintain morale, exploit capacity, and provide high quality working conditions
- Have high expectations of learning, achievement and attainment for all pupils and staff

Each head teacher inspires outstanding practice through highly effective leadership. Each works in his or her particular way; the schools are distinctly different in their characteristics. What they have in common is high quality leadership and demonstrable achievement.

There are three important and illuminating elements:

- Their home life and early formative (largely primary) years. These clearly influence their professional philosophy and practice. Consequently, they believe that schools need to make enduring partnerships with parents in a shared commitment to their children's education.
- Their vision for the school in terms of its potential to instil in children a positive concept of themselves and a belief in their ability to flourish in the world.
- Their professional experience and their progression to senior management and headship. Such experience underpins their understanding of the essence of good leadership.

The book is organised in the following way:

Chapter 1 – A brief review of contemporary theories and precepts about headship and leadership.

Chapters 2–12 – Each chapter gives a detailed account of the work and leadership of an individual head teacher, the life of their school, and the qualities and attributes that make them outstanding.

Chapter 13 – An overview of the work and practice of a group of head teachers, the leadership and management of their schools, and the education provided within them. There is reference throughout to the beliefs and intentions that inspire their work.

Conclusion – A brief reminder of what effective headship/leadership means, according to the accounts of the work and achievements of the individual head teachers, and articulated in the beliefs that inspire them. There are strengths and qualities that lie outside the canon of attributes generally regarded as prerequisites of effective

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leadership. These influence many of the head teachers, and contribute to any discussion of school management.

Finally, how context affects the ultimate fate of schools and the success or otherwise of those who lead them.

There is disquiet, at present, about what is seen as a growing and serious crisis due to a national failure to recruit head teachers.

The claim is that teachers – eligible in terms of experience, seniority and performance – are reluctant to make themselves available for these positions, for the following reasons:

- It is claimed that achieving an acceptable work/life balance as a head is virtually impossible
- The pay differential for the headship of a small school – which would be the appointment most likely to be secured by a first-time head – is not enough to tempt or compensate for the huge increase in responsibility
- Head teachers have suffered ill health as a result of the amount of stress they are under, due to inspection/accountability
- Head teachers are trapped between the requirement to follow statutory policy and the expectation to be creative and innovative

My hope for this book is that head teachers, and teachers eligible for headship but intimidated by the challenges associated with it, will find it offers inspiring and encouraging insights into the unique professional, personal, and even spiritual rewards that the position and experience can bring.

CHAPTER 1

TALKING HEADS

EXCEPTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

Since the Education Reform Act, schools have come a long way in response to an unremitting stream of government legislation and demand. In the process they have made large advances in institutional management, curriculum development, teaching and learning, self regulation and accountability, staff development and the creative use of enhanced finance and resources.

As a result, primary schools today are, in significant respects, unrecognisable from their counterparts of a couple of decades ago. They are more suited to purpose in terms of organisation; more self-critical, rigorous and clear-sighted in relation to aims, intentions, planning and outcomes; more informed and coherent about teaching and learning; more effective and dynamic in practice; and managed with clarity and assurance inherent in forms of leadership radically different from former styles and models.

The nature and quality of leadership is now generally accepted as the critical factor affecting the quality and effectiveness of schools. In a 2003 report, 'Leadership and Management', Ofsted cited evidence from inspections and HMI surveys that asserted the importance of 'strong leadership and management' in:

- Addressing low achievement
- Providing for a broad, balanced and appropriate curriculum
- Ensuring high quality teaching
- Improving monitoring and evaluation strategies in relation to performance in teaching and learning

An insight into the changing views of headship/leadership over the last three decades is provided by a comparison of the first Ofsted Framework (1992), which sets out the detailed schedule for the newly inaugurated inspection process, with the most recent frameworks.

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The first handbook is explicit in its expectations for primary education, thereby effectively ending divisive ideology and practice post-Plowden. It deals relatively briefly with the issue of leadership under the category of Management and Administration.

The ‘well-managed school’ – clear in its objectives and focused on pupils’ needs and the promotion of effective learning – is driven by ‘positive leadership’ on the part of an ‘accessible and approachable head and senior staff’. The roles and responsibilities of staff, ‘aware of their part in the running of the school, are clearly defined and there is appropriate delegation.’

So, at first sight, there seems to be no great difference here from current expectations of leadership. But despite a sense of the importance of collegiality and corporate engagement, the unmistakable suggestion seems to be that the essential business of the school will be delivered and have its nature determined by, at most, a handful of senior staff.

There is a single reference to positive leadership but no attempt to explore in detail what that means. While the head teacher and senior staff are ‘accessible and approachable’, there is a hint at operational structures that create a divide; a divide in which a majority of staff, however secure and professionally supported they may feel, are largely dependent on a minority for direction, purpose, action and initiative. In the phrase, ‘approachable and accessible’, there is a sense of detachment, of senior leaders standing separate from the teachers they ‘manage’.

Subsequently, successive inspection schedules have focused more on the influence of leadership on the success of schools as institutions of learning, and on the quality of education they provide. They have become more explicit about the nature of that leadership, with a particular emphasis on being inclusive, engaging all staff in the process at levels appropriate to their professional development and areas of responsibility. Leaders and managers are charged with being proactive, with ‘communicating an ambitious vision for the school, with driving improvement and securing support from others’.

Inspections now evaluate the effectiveness of leaders and managers, at all levels, in conveying their vision for the school’s continuing improvement, driving and securing that improvement, inspiring the school community, promoting improved teaching as judged within the context of the school, and enabling pupils to overcome specific barriers to learning.

Inspections now assess the impact of all leaders in relation to:

- The extent to which they secure sustained school improvement through the development of high quality teaching and capacity for leadership.

- Their evaluation of school strengths and weaknesses as a means to the promotion of general improvement.
- Their provision of a broad and balanced curriculum, meeting the needs of all pupils.
- Their implementation of systems for the safety and welfare of pupils, and for their spiritual, moral, and social development and behaviour.
- Their effectiveness in securing parents' engagement in supporting their children's achievement.

It is clear that in the period since the inspection system was first established by Ofsted, there has been a sea change in its perception of what is meant by the effective direction of schools. Effective management and organisation are still held to be prerequisites of a good and successful school. But there is now a growing emphasis on the concept of leadership, even an inclination to treat it as the more vital element in the crucial amalgam with management.

It is self-evident that head teachers are inseparable from the schools they lead. Therefore, before we consider headship and leadership in detail, we need to reflect on the nature of effective and outstanding primary schools, and the factors and constituents that make them so.

OUTSTANDING PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Ofsted frameworks identify key features for inspection in determining the quality of schools. They are:

- Achievement of pupils
- Quality of teaching
- Quality of leadership and management
- Behaviour and safety of pupils
- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

There is a growing consensus that some, if not all, of the following features will be common in such schools:

- A guiding vision, shared by all staff, generating aims, intentions and goals that are translated into policies and courses of action for curriculum, teaching and learning,

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assessment and evaluation of performance, staff development, and community partnership, all designed to bring about high achievement and improvement.

- A curriculum that provides the richest, most extensive and relevant education possible for all its pupils, and a quality of teaching and learning that offers a genuine experience of scholarship and high academic achievement and attainment.
- A commitment to collegiality, to staff working and maturing professionally together for positive change, development and improvement in the whole institution.
- Informed and ordered application of proven monitoring and evaluation strategies that enable secure judgements to be made about the school's effectiveness in providing for all pupils' success, attainment and improvement.
- Professional networking and collaboration – a readiness to share and learn from the experience, practice and innovation of others, through creating productive links with schools and educational institutions and agencies, including higher education.
- Inclusivity – a commitment to the provision of equal opportunity for all pupils, whatever their background, heritage, achievement, faith or ethnicity.
- Helping pupils to become 'internationally minded in a global and inter-connected world'.
- A commitment to the professional development, and the personal welfare, well-being and self-esteem of all staff.

THE LEADERSHIP OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Clearly headship/leadership of an institution as complex and sophisticated as the model set out above can be no commonplace or nominal role.

It has become an article of faith for educational academics, theorists and practitioners, that effective leadership is crucial to the life of every school. Its nature and quality ultimately determine, more than any other single factor, the kind of school it will be, and its success in the pupils' education.

These perceptions of the centrality of headship, not merely to the effectiveness of schools, but to the realisation of large-scale educational reform, are reflected in important steps taken by successive governments.

- The establishment of the Teacher Training Agency which, in consultation with teachers, head teachers, professional and subject associations, teacher trainers

in schools, local education authorities, and higher education institutions, created *The National Standards for Headteachers*. These were subsequently revised by the National College. The Standards were articulated in the National Professional Qualification for Headship as ‘a first map of the basic landscape of headship’. The publication, *The National Standards for Headteachers*, should no longer be considered to reflect DfE policy or guidance.

- Perhaps the most influential step, the establishment (in 2002) of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL),¹ with a remit to ensure that current and future school leaders develop the skills, capability and capacity to lead and transform what exists into ‘a world-class education system’.
- The publication in 2004 by the then DfES of revised *National Standards for Headteachers* that ‘recognise the key role that head teachers play in engaging in the development and delivery of government policy and in raising and maintaining levels of attainment in schools in order to meet the needs of every child.’

The critical importance of headship therefore seems to have been established beyond argument. But the question that inevitably follows is: what exactly is good, effective headship? We are not short of commentary or advice on the matter. In recent times, few areas of education have attracted so much attention, or indeed generated so much public interest, even excitement. In some cases head teachers have gained a kind of celebrity status, officially honoured for their achievements as leaders, being identified as National Head Teacher Leaders. These teachers are ‘parachuted in’ to rescue failing schools, occasionally assuming the direction and management of federations of two or three institutions. So much is written about headship/leadership that the body of literature could be described as a ‘swamp’.

The official bodies referred to above have put forward the following as among the characteristics/prerequisites inseparable from effective headship:

- Effective management of the organisation
- The leadership of teaching and learning
- The building of ‘capacity’ through the development of the school as a learning community
- The securing and establishment of accountability

¹ On 1 April 2013, the National College merged with the Teaching Agency (previously the TTA) to become the National College for Teaching and Leadership.

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The insights and judgements drawn from academic research and theory about headship/ leadership – that ‘swamp of leadership literature’ – can be said to be broadly compatible with the views of the official bodies referred to above; they have almost certainly influenced such bodies in significant respects.

They suggest that almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices:

- Building vision and setting directions
- Understanding and developing people
- Redesigning the organisation
- Managing the teaching and learning programmes, and providing professional leadership through involvement in the curriculum, visiting classrooms and being generally involved in classroom activity

A recurring emphasis is placed on the theory of distributed leadership, marking a transformational move away from a long-established view of leadership identified with and invested in a single figure.

This concept of distributed or shared leadership has become a predominant belief among educationists, consistently advocated and accepted without reservation.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

The whole staff share, to varying degrees – dependent on particular roles, competences, experience, skills and dispositions – responsibility for the learning achieved by both pupils and staff. Distributed leadership becomes the function of individuals, groups or teams who not only lead on the implementation of education policy, but are a source of guidance, advice, counsel, instruction, coaching and practical support for colleagues.

However peer-based and democratic it may seem, distributed leadership probably has a hierarchical configuration. There will be leadership from a senior perspective, comprising the head teacher and senior staff, who will assume main responsibility for such instructional leadership by virtue of their particular experience, knowledge and skill, as distinct from any formal role.

There are a number of styles of distributed leadership, influenced by the particular contexts and circumstances in which head teachers operate. Two predominant forms are transactional and transformational, which have many commonalities but differ

EXCEPTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

In *Primary Heads* Bill Laar provides an overview of the current thinking on good leadership practice before setting out lessons on leadership which he has distilled from the inspirational stories of eleven highly successful primary head teachers who have, sometimes in the face of extraordinary adversity, transformed their schools. Each of the eleven has a very personal view on what successful leadership in primary schools should look like, yet the author draws out the key elements from their accounts and details how primary schools and primary heads can create the best possible environment for learning by concentrating on the aspects of exceptional leadership which he identifies. This detailed translation of theories into notably successful practice will have a particular resonance for practitioners engaged in the challenging business of education today.

These clear and honest accounts make essential reading for all those, from head teacher to the least experienced staff, who bear responsibility for the management and direction of primary schools. The book will also be relevant for administrators, school governors and those involved in teacher training and continuing professional development.

Bill Laar has spent a lifetime enchanting primary heads and teachers – not to mention their pupils. He weaves magic and here you will find out why and emerge from reading this energised and with renewed determination for the years ahead.

Sir Tim Brighouse, Visiting Professor, Institute of Education

There will be few primary heads in the country who will not want to turn and turn again to the wisdom and inspiration in these pages.

Roy Blatchford, Director, National Education Trust

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Mick Waters, Professor of Education, Wolverhampton University



A former head teacher, Bill has been an inspector in Local Authorities, including Birmingham, ILEA, Oxfordshire and Westminster, where he was Chief Inspector and Deputy Director of Education. He is Patron of National Primary Heads (NPH) and is a well-known speaker. He has written for school leaders and teachers on inspection, teaching and learning, literacy and leadership.



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