

1 Transcript Interview: Co-Leadership in a Swiss Primary School

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Interviewer:	Daniela Schädeli (A)
Date/Duration/Location:	24 April 2019, approx. 30min., office building 1 in Switzerland
Interviewees	Bettina Baeriswyl (B) (40%), Patrick Müller (C) (100%) (names have been anonymized)

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5 A: The first thematic block deals with the history, motivation and introduction of the co-
6 leadership. Can you tell me how it happened that you use the co-leadership model here?

7 B: Well, it started before us, so to speak.

8 C: ((uhm)) yes, so maybe this started with me and the predecessor because she explicitly
9 said during the interview that she wanted a co-leadership and she didn't want a
10 hierarchical system, otherwise she wouldn't come. I hadn't really been used to this from
11 previous jobs. I had always had a hierarchical system. And yes, we have taken the risk
12 and it has proven that we have found the right people together.

13 A: So you have the feeling that in such a system it is important which people work
14 together?

15 B: Yes, I think so. Now, if any of us were an extremely power-oriented person it would
16 certainly be a lot harder. Then there is always one thing you want to determine, or it
17 would certainly be more difficult if you were to work together.

18 C: Or if your pedagogical approaches are too different. [Yes], then it would be difficult. I
19 have already met colleagues who really have completely different pedagogical
20 approaches and then it becomes difficult. How do you deal with disciplinary cases? One
21 person does it in a certain way and the other one doesn't like it, then there is always
22 friction and tension and afterwards there is also the interpersonal, sometimes you can't
23 put it into words at all, either it harmonizes or it doesn't harmonize. But it has to
24 harmonize, otherwise it becomes tedious.

25 B: I also think that it is very important that you have a similar basic attitude in certain
26 things, actually quite similar to a class team [yes, exactly]. If two teachers lead a class
27 together and do this more or less as job sharing, that means they do something 50/50,
28 then it has to work.

29 C: Exactly. They must have common principles for class leadership and communication,
30 otherwise it won't work. And if someone wants to be completely open and the other
31 rather head-on, or more closed, then it becomes difficult, whereby even with the
32 predecessor it is not always the case. Pedagogically, we were were on the same page
33 100% of the time but because we gave each other space and somehow found a way that
34 his has worked out well together. You said it earlier (C turns to B). It has also a lot to do
35 with personality traits. If you let the other live or not.

36 B: Do people respect each other? Do you ever respect a different opinion?

37 C: And is it also possible to precisely define the task areas? Or that's where we have it,
38 we're actually doing that now, even though we're into each other's space and have been

39 that way before but we still have a clear division of tasks and that saves us a lot of
40 trouble.

41 A: How was this divided?

42 B: I am responsible for the finances, ICT plus all the teachers from cycle 1. I am
43 responsible for staff interviews, classroom visits, for example.

44 C: Exactly. And I have cycle 2 and 3 staff and class management and tasks I take over
45 plus construction and school development with the tax division together. I have initiated
46 these things, with the cooperation of the parents, the teachers, the parents council –

47 B: And IBEM, where we have most of our points of contact also with regard to the
48 teachers.

49 C: Yes, the special education sector. Exactly that was a huge challenge for me and now
50 it's working quite well. We have a new concept which is now a matter of public
51 discussion.

52 A: If you both have your designated areas, how will this be carried out by the school
53 commission? Did they say anything about this during the introduction? Did they say
54 anything about how you split it? Or do they support the model? What does the school
55 commission provide?

56 B: So when I applied they said that it would be okay for them if we agreed together who
57 would over which areas. I actually took more or less things from my predecessor but I
58 didn't take the IBEM area because I said that I didn't want to work more than 40%
59 actually and then Olivier said that he would take it in addition to his areas. So the
60 employment conditions worked out in the end.

61 C: They're happy if they have nothing, if they have as little trouble as possible and how
62 we organize ourselves doesn't really matter to them as long as it works. I think if we as a
63 team didn't work, they would and then they would tend to reintroduce the hierarchical
64 model, I'm pretty sure about that. Or the community, we're sure they just want it to run
65 with as little trouble as possible. By the way, what was I going to say? Earlier, something
66 just came to my mind in this context that might come back to my mind later.

67 A: How was it? Previously you had a hierarchical model here and then there was the co-
68 leading team. How did the teachers react?

69 C: Well, I experienced that and you as a teacher (C addresses B). As principal, I had the
70 feeling that this was not a problem for her. They were glad that it ran more quietly than
71 before because despite the hierarchical model we had before, the team, which consisted
72 of one more person, was fighting a lot which led to dismissals etc. and they were all glad
73 that it worked.

74 B: Actually similar to the appointing authority. They are happy when everything is
75 working smoothly. I think I also have the feeling that it is perhaps for teachers to orient
76 themselves. On the one hand you have a clear contact person who is responsible for your
77 cycle, but I also notice that, depending on the school building, it is also people for whom
78 C is responsible, who then talk to me about their problems or something similar. It
79 doesn't matter who you go to, if you have something right now, I have the feeling. So if
80 something is urgent to you and I am just there although Oliver is responsible, then they
81 can come to me with their problems and then I pass it on or they tell C as well.

82 C: Exactly. Sometimes it's really not about making decisions but about simply talking to
83 someone about them. That's all right the way it is. Given the fact (turns to B) that you are
84 in primary school and in the school building, my teachers come to you from time to time
85 and say something just like that. It's important to me but it works well that when it
86 comes to making decisions that you pass that on safely. And that has already happened
87 to me or to my predecessor too who said "aha yes, yes" got a request and didn't even
88 think about it that it was actually my colleague's area and that could then in the long run
89 create tensions, I think, if one of the others always interfered. That's not the case.

90 A: Then you also make the final decision in "your areas"?

91 B: And at the same time, it has now been the case with the ICT concept that you (turns to
92 C) have been present at one of the two sessions. Simply when it came to certain
93 decisions where it's also important that both know what's going on and that's on the one
94 hand a relief, I find that you know the other also heard that and was also able to form an
95 opinion.

96 C: Exactly but you invited me. If I had come there now, if I had participated completely
97 insensitively and ignored you, at the end you would have the feeling: "Yes, I'm
98 responsible now or is he?" then there is also tension again.

99 B: There it is again. Is someone a power-oriented person and takes it all, wants to have a
100 say in everything or not?

101 C: Exactly. And I appreciated that, too. You discuss things with me very often and I vice
102 versa even if it is a concern to me and sometimes there are really tricky cases where one
103 is happy to get a second opinion and sometimes it really affects us both. For example, the
104 holiday request from one of your children [Ah, yes] of your class and one of mine and
105 then imagine she would be completely different from me. That would be chaotic for the
106 parents afterwards, so a good agreement is certainly important.

107 A: Have you installed permanent exchange meetings during the week? Or how does that
108 happen?

109 B: So right at the beginning we agreed very often that I would go to the upper school on
110 Friday and there we exchanged things from time to time. I think I had a lot of questions
111 in the beginning because it was all new for me and I have a very, I found it very good to
112 start like this, on the one hand I knew exactly if there is a problem somewhere I can
113 mention it. It was not officially a fixed meeting structure but especially in the beginning
114 it was often on Friday and now it is actually by phone.

115 C: That had already been the case with the predecessor. Frequently we just talked on the
116 phone or then we would see each other. I have people in all three schools if you add the
117 kindergartens, then there are even more and on Tuesday I am always here. We see each
118 other at least that way but we usually see each other several times a week.

119 *Telephone interruption*

120 B: I have often experienced it that way with the school principals that I have experienced
121 as a teacher that it is not- perhaps it is almost easier to say when it does not work. It
122 doesn't work when someone's more controlling than the other. I also sometimes had the
123 impression that there are people who failed as teachers because they had problems with
124 class management and then they want to become school leaders where they should have
125 leadership qualities and then they just couldn't do that because somewhere the ability

126 was missing. Where it would have been important. I mean you always have things where
127 you have weaknesses and where you're not as strong as in other places but if that's
128 where it's missing, the leadership or the ability to work in a team, then it just didn't
129 work.

130 A: You came to be a school principal a year ago, almost a year ago, you were previously a
131 teacher in this college. How did you experience that coming in and then working so
132 closely with C in a co-leadership team? How was that for you?

133 B: Well, I first felt the change from teacher to principal more because I missed the
134 children. Regarding the job as such, I felt pretty quickly at ease because I could always
135 ask, I appreciated that very much –

136 C: You adapted very quickly –

137 B: And it certainly has something to do with the fact that I was well received. That would
138 certainly have been much more difficult if all had had certain reservations like: is that
139 even possible? So from that point of view I already had a lot of 'goodwill' as a starting
140 point to make it work. I think you can't just start from what you bring yourself. It also
141 needs a lot from the outside. Goodwill from you (turns to C) and from the teachers. With
142 that basic attitude of saying "‘Mou' [Swiss German expression], hopefully you'll be
143 alright." And don't start thinking that this isn't going to be good.

144 C: Yes, I think there was also something to worry about because of the history of this
145 school. When the predecessor left, I already had the feeling that certain people were
146 worried and happy in a way that someone had come who knew the place, who knew the
147 school for a long time and also as a class teacher and I think everyone was very happy
148 then and also reinforced this positively and acted accordingly that this would work out
149 well. I also felt a lot of goodwill.

150 A: How was that for you? (turns to B). First the change with another person and then
151 how a part of the team changes? Someone with no experience comes in. How was that
152 for you, the change?

153 C (exhales): I've experienced several changes, already in my previous career. I just knew
154 it was now. I regretted that the predecessor left, of course, after two years. But I had the
155 idea that D. would be a suitable successor and called her along, if you can say that. And
156 from that perspective I started off with very good feelings, intentions which now have
157 come true. Even more for me. D. started off really fast and professionally, although she
158 still lacked the training and she had to solve difficult cases from the beginning, in
159 addition to that. Where maybe other people would have struggled more. One notices
160 that a certain life experience has also played a part.

161 A: How much did it help you that you didn't have to start alone in one place as school
162 principal but in a co-leadership team?

163 B: Well, that, just such things as the electronic standby notification and stuff like that.
164 Well if I had started somewhere alone, I'd have thought about it a lot. If I had applied
165 somewhere as a school principal without any previous knowledge in the field, which is
166 possible in principle in Switzerland. Then I wouldn't have had any idea how to deal with
167 that stuff. Well, I was already very happy to be able to advise you. Then I thought about
168 something and then I could just ask you: "What do you think, is this appropriate, does it
169 fit?" or I could ask: "Is it legally sound, may I do this?" Yes, such things and that has been

170 enormously valuable and, I also think, this has also contributed to efficiency. If I had to
171 gather all this information somewhere else, I would have felt like I had to put in more
172 effort and spend a lot more time on such things and a lot less time on people because I
173 would have spent hours searching for the information somewhere.

174 C: By the way, these are exactly the things that are neglected in training. I heard that
175 again and again in X (city anonymized) at the university for teacher preparation. There
176 you learn all kinds of things but how fill in an EPM you don't learn that there and this is,
177 if you're not familiar with it, a lot of trouble.

178 A: What does it mean to you to be a successful co-leader?

179 B: Mutual respect, a common goal probably also that one wants the school to go in the
180 same direction and not having different ideas where to go.

181 C: A certain common attitude to life perhaps and perhaps even more so a common
182 personality, a compatible personality that somehow it works out.

183 A: What would you recommend for teams that want to move from a hierarchical model
184 to a co-leadership one? What do they have to watch out for, what could be obstacles?

185 C: Well, I'd only do that if I was sure both of them could see themselves as co-leaders.
186 The one who would then have to go down one hierarchical level and the other would
187 have to go up one level, that would give an approximation and if you had difficulties in
188 the hierarchical system together before then the difficulties will probably get even
189 bigger. I have the feeling and if that was not the case, yes, then the one who comes down
190 from above must also be prepared to accept the other at the same level. And the other
191 person would have to have the courage to contribute something and not sometimes to
192 'over assert' something out of false insecurity. I have already noticed that people who
193 are insecure and then come into such a position must somehow distinguish themselves
194 and then almost exaggerate their opinion, even in factual problems that can then also
195 lead to tensions again.

196 B: I think in communication with the outside world, it would also be important to think
197 more about the fact when you have certain questions, you say 'We have to discuss this
198 first'. And not 'I think'. If one is used to it from before that, for example, the main
199 principal decides, now this person would have to learn to take him- or herself back so in
200 situations where he or she perhaps said before: We do this and that, that one thinks of it,
201 we must first still agree on that together. That you have to discuss the decision together
202 and perhaps come to an agreement at the beginning: "When do we take time for such
203 meetings?" I think until it works smoothly. I think that makes sense. Whether it's now
204 always the same day at the same time doesn't matter. That helped at that time to record
205 the interview today on Friday. The Fridays we worked together in the high school office.

206 C: And you also have to say that this goes a little beyond the question. Meanwhile, I am
207 also convinced of the system if it fits. Because it is also an advantage for the school if
208 almost institutional, if decisions, important decisions are made by two people and not
209 just one. Of course, at every school we don't have a private-sector organization, no
210 school management can afford to decide everything over their heads, that doesn't work
211 even in a hierarchical system. But if it is the case that one is on a co-leadership level, it is
212 also guaranteed for the school itself that perhaps certain blind spots, which everyone
213 has, come to the fore a little less.

214 A: Do you also have the feeling that you act as a role model toward the teachers, as team
215 leaders?

216 *Phone rings*

217 C: I think so. So I have to say the cooperation.

218 *B picks up the phone and walks out.*

219 C: In these two, now almost three years where I'm here this has increased tremendously.
220 Also with people, where one has heard before of the predecessors before me, who have
221 such a things are old-fashioned or conservative, according to the old system. Some of the
222 changes there have been quite astonishing. That people really work together brilliantly. I
223 do believe this had an influence. I'm serious. And that's a positive influence without you
224 thinking it all has to be together. It is clear that in the end the class teacher writes the
225 certificates and probably has the biggest importance but in the meantime many are very
226 happy, sometimes they even argue about the resources of the special education staff
227 because they want enough. Whereas in other schools I have noticed in the sense of
228 "((ooh)) do not come too close to me and I would like to have no one in the class at all. I
229 can it alone", that's not really the case anymore.

230 *A stops recording. B comes back.*

231 A: Some people say that co-leadership is expensive because you have to work together.
232 Both have to go to meetings together and that's not efficient. Do you feel there are
233 disadvantages? Or that it's really an additional effort?

234 B: A little, I think. Where you go together –

235 C: To the BK sessions –

236 B: It is also a good thing if both of them then know the same thing because then you will
237 also have to discuss it together. Then it's good if they both got the same info.

238 C: We also trust each other to share the essentials with each other because you may have
239 come to ZBMO School Leadership Conferences once now –

240 B: Yeah, yeah, that's right.

241 C: Or you'll have left it there. That's also resource-saving and you get all the protocols
242 and so on.

243 B: Yes, then I had to look at each with all the substitutions and stuff.

244 A: Did it take anything in terms of infrastructure to do that? Or –

245 B: So, yes, I think what was great was that you had everything on the server then you
246 could get it, file it, from the organization you knew what you could search or and where
247 and if you couldn't find it, then you could ask: 'Where did you file it?'. Yes, I'm sure that's
248 very helpful, yes. Especially because I'm not always here with the 40% that you could
249 also look something up from home. But I wouldn't say that it needs more resources now
250 because you need more time to work together. This time can be saved in another place.

251 C: Well, I think so too. I think without digitalization you would have to have a common
252 office or more fixed appointments. That would almost have to be the case. But because
253 we can communicate quickly via chat and telephone, via e-mail, plus the server solution,
254 where everyone has access to all documents at any time, decentralized working is
255 actually possible. But we have to be aware of that. 20 years ago this would have been
256 more difficult to organize.

257 A: Can you tell any other story that comes to your mind from the last time where you'd
258 say that really reflects our cooperation as co-leaders?

259 C: For example, it occurred to me that you (*turns to B*) were looking for a substitute in
260 the kindergarten and I told you: "You know what, M. would be interested in some more
261 lessons". Afterwards it just worked out. Or you when you told me: "I just had an
262 interview. She would be interested in your lessons" and that was just right. So from that
263 point of view, so ((mou)) [Swiss German expression] that's already that. We work hand
264 in hand. That's a good fit. Exactly, it's again, I don't know either. It has so much to do
265 with the way you are. Once I was at a school, everything was quite clear according to the
266 specifications and legally defined: "It's none of my business, I don't do it, it's your
267 business, etc." and then everything becomes so hard and tedious and it just doesn't work
268 "as if there is sand in the gearbox". If both have the basic goodwill to work together and
269 want the school to move forward, then that actually works well. Almost like in a
270 relationship (laughs).

271 B: I think that has something to do with that. There is a difference is someone wants to
272 realize him- or herself in this job or if it is about the school as a whole. I have often
273 experienced this in such a way that certain people have come and wanted to put their
274 stamp on it: "This is my school now and I design it according to my ideas" and that has
275 always given me a bad feeling and if you work with what is there and the people who are
276 there if you want to achieve something together it is just different.

277 A: So it's almost more a question of attitude than an organizational question?

278 B: The attitude first and then comes the organization.

279 C: Yeah, I think so too. That's the way it is. And you said it right: "Work with what is ther"
280 and still convey a vision. For example, I made it clear to myself from the beginning that it
281 is important that there is a certain focus on, how should I say this? Performance is the
282 key but that can be misunderstood. I want the children who come here to benefit and
283 learn something and I don't want time to be wasted or in the sense that it is sometimes
284 stereotyped by the teachers as a "coffee party", pedagogy prevails. And I think that you
285 also radiate that a lot of people here they actually had this attitude and those who had it
286 a little less have noticed it and I have the feeling that our school is developing in this
287 direction, so to my satisfaction. And afterwards organizationally or whether they talk so
288 much together, on Wednesday or Thursday, that doesn't matter to me if it works and
289 they work together. There I am very undogmatic and I believe you too.

290 B: I think that the trust that teachers place in us must also be right, that we can function
291 so well. It has also been with- it is very strongly imposed the whole thing. And a piece
292 can be controlled or changed already and a piece has to be there already. I don't think it
293 was nice that a lot of things didn't work out with former school administrators before
294 but it had the advantage that everyone was happy who wanted to work together and do
295 something with the children who were happy when someone came to support them and
296 do the job unagitatedly, without somehow, yes, any kind of projects whatsoever, self-
297 realization and so on.

298 C: And perhaps not exactly central to the topic but I think it's important to make it
299 possible for those who want to try something and don't orient themselves on those who
300 are skeptical to do so. You (*turns to B*) have done a great job I think with the change of

301 the Math teaching material where they do not agree on the cycle 1 and you said: “Yes,
302 well, you two think it’s great, we’ll do a pilot” and then you declare this as a pilot and in
303 the end you know that you have to decide for yourself, but you make it possible for those
304 who want and sometimes the other need a little more time and sometimes it takes two
305 ways. Sometimes you have to say: “No, it makes sense that everyone does it the same
306 way, next year it will be like that”. But so a little flexibility and to allow those to do
307 something they want to do.

308 A: Thank you so much for your information, for sharing your experience. Do you have
309 any other questions or something you would like to say?

310 C: It’s just important to me, she (*turns to B*) at this school, if the wrong person came as a
311 colleague, this would clearly be a reason for me to quit. I have to be honest with you. I’ve
312 experienced enough of that, i.e. teamwork, be it co or hierarchical, that’s the most
313 important thing for a functional principalship.

314 B: I also have the feeling that I have experienced it very well that if I were to change one
315 person at some point, then I would wish again to take the position of a co-school
316 principal because I simply think it is very good if you have difficult decisions you can
317 discuss them with someone.