Co-headship
Where two heads can be better one.

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Welcome by Marie-Claire Bretherton

Interview with Liz Robinson – on her co-headship at Surrey Square Primary School, London.

Expert Voice: Jill Berry – thoughts and advice for those considering headship

Co-headship at Mount Street Academy, Lincoln – Lauren Nicoll and Rachael Horn

Legsby Primary School, Lincolnshire – Co-headship at a small, rural school; Ben Murray and Lucy Dabbs

Research and resources - Leaders embracing support, flexibility and new ways of working
In this edition of the Kyra Journal we are placing a spotlight on co-headship.

Although there are still only a relatively small number of co-heads in the UK, it is a model of leadership that is attracting an increasing amount of attention and interest for a number of reasons. This is in part because of the current ‘recruitment and retention challenge’ within the education system, which, as well as impacting on the amount of classroom teachers, is also having a significant impact on the amount of people moving into school leadership positions. Fewer teachers are applying for headship roles (there has been a notable reduction in applicants for headteacher posts in recent years, particularly in primary schools), and government figures also show that almost a third of new headteachers leave the role within just three years. Could opportunities for co-headship help to lessen this problem?

Co-headship certainly has the potential to address a number of the factors which put people off moving into a headship role. For starters, it opens up the possibility of flexible working to headteachers, therefore offering improved work-life balance to potential heads with young families or other family commitments. Sharing the responsibilities of headship with someone else may also make the job more appealing to those who would be worried about facing the demands of headship alone.

A co-headship model means that there is that it is less pressure on just one person, since co-heads have a ‘thought partner’ to discuss ideas, problems, and solutions with, as well as having shared accountability for decisions.

While there is still a long way to go before co-headship is considered a normal and commonplace alternative to sole-headship, in the pages ahead you will find three case studies of schools with co-heads, who explain how they have made co-headship work successfully in their own context. These examples show not only that a co-headship leadership model can work, but that it can enable staff and schools to thrive!

We have also included an ‘Expert Voice’ interview with Jill Berry, who shares her thoughts, advice, and personal experiences as a headteacher of over 10 years. This interview will be of great interest to anyone who may be considering (or even just ‘considering considering!’) becoming a headteacher one day.

We hope you enjoy reading this edition of the journal as much as we have, and extend our thanks to everyone who has contributed.

Warm wishes,

Marie Claire - Bretherton
An Interview with Liz Robinson

Liz Robinson became head of Surrey Square Primary School in January 2006. She was just 29 at the time, making her the youngest headteacher in England. Following an outstanding Ofsted in November 2009, she was asked to lead the amalgamation with the linked Infant School, and the newly formed Primary School was judged outstanding in November 2016. Liz, and her colleague Nicola Noble, developed a model of co-headship from 2014 onwards. In this article, Liz discusses how working flexibly has helped her to balance work and family life, and how herself and Nicola made a co-headship model of leadership work successfully, both for themselves and for their school. >>>>
How did the co-headship model begin?

When I became Head of Surrey Square Primary School at the age of 29, I knew that I also wanted to have a family of my own one day, but I didn’t want that to put me off progressing in my career and fulfilling my potential at work. Once I had my first child, several years later, I was determined to continue to be a head teacher; however, after eight years of headship I knew very well by then the sheer amount of commitment involved in fulfilling the role! Therefore, I knew that I needed to find a solution, which would work for me personally, to ensure that my role as headteacher would be compatible with my family life, in such a way that neither one would suffer because of the other.

It just so happened that my deputy head, Nicola Noble, had gone on maternity leave a couple of months before I did; therefore, when she returned, she took on the role of ‘acting head teacher’ for two months before my return. We discussed our situation, and both decided that we would like to work four days a week in order to balance the commitments of work and motherhood, and that’s how the initial concept of a co-headship first emerged. It took some time to research the idea, and how it would work in practice. This included visiting local schools who were already operating under a co-headship model, and discussing with them the pros, cons, and logistics of the approach.

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When we made our case to the governors, as well as presenting all the positive aspects of having two head teachers, effectively working eight days a week between us, we also had to be in a position to outline costs, where accountability would lie in every area, and how the school could safeguard against any risks that such a model could potentially present. Key decisions had to be made about who would take the main responsibility in each area, and where the two of us would take joint responsibility (such as with culture, ethos and values). It was also decided that our appraisal would be a joint appraisal, with shared targets and objectives. We would, however, have different developmental targets due to our differing levels of experience in the headship role (with Nicola being new to the role). Once all of the key decisions had been made and agreed upon, they were carefully documented, including the systems and procedures which would be put into place should any disagreements occur in the future. As a consequence, everybody was suitably reassured that the co-headship model would be able to work effectively at the school!
Nicola and myself were already very used to working closely with one another, so we didn't find the transition to a co-headship model particularly difficult. Despite the fact that Nicola was new headship, we both made sure we were equals from the beginning in terms of our decision making and responsibility. Initially, however, I did help to coach Nicola in many of the areas of headship which were new to her, but gradually I stepped away from this mentoring role and gave Nicola more responsibility and autonomy as she became more confident. Eventually, she was asking for advice much less, and it didn’t take her long to find her stride as a head teacher in her own right. Another thing that helped with the transition to a co-headship model, and in fact, throughout our time as co-heads, was the joint coaching sessions we had together for one day of each half term. For us, this was a safe space to talk about how the co-headship was going and reflect upon the past half term together.

**Advantages of co-headship**

The co-headship shared between Nicola and myself at Surrey Square lasted for 5 years, until I took up my new post as Co-Director of Big Education Academy Trust last September. Our co-headship was a harmonious and effective one, which had many different benefits (especially given our situation as new mothers) compared to a sole-headship. It made the headship role so much more sustainable for both of us, as it helped us on practical level to spend more time with our families, and to have more of a work-life balance. We both worked four days a week, and on my day off, I did not have to worry about work building up, or have the pressure of being on call to respond to emails throughout the day. I knew that the school was in safe hands. While I know I could have also relied on Nicola when she was my deputy, there would have been a lot more guilt involved, as I would have been asking her to fulfil duties beyond her role. Having a co-headship means having a trusted person in charge in school on your day off, and that meant as well as physically getting away from work, I could mentally get away too, and focus on my children 100%.

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Being part of a co-headship model of leadership takes the pressure off in other ways too. Being a headteacher is a highly accountable role, and one that can, at times, feel quite isolating, especially when it comes to dealing with complex and challenging issues alone. With a co-headship comes joint accountability, and you’re in that together as a team, and from an emotional perspective, I think you feel less pressure and anxiety as a result.

Being part of a co-headship means you can discuss issues together, and again, that makes the job so much more sustainable in the long run. Two heads are also often better than one (no pun intended!) when it comes to working through problems, coming up with solutions, and moving forward with new ideas. Everyone thinks differently, so with a co-headship you have two different perspectives. Nicola would often spot things I didn’t and vice versa, and we would also generate different ideas and solutions, which we may not have thought of alone.
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As you have to come to joint decisions, it also forces you to properly discuss, reflect, and consider another perspective, before acting. Therefore, I would say that co- headship keeps you humble, self-aware, and continually focused on the importance of communication and the viewpoints of others.

Had I not had the opportunity to go into co-headship with Nicola, I may well have made the decision to stop being a Headteacher altogether, and that would have been such a shame. Instead, I have been able to continue to develop my career successfully, and have also been able to continue to be ambitious, and to progress. Last September I took up a new role as Co-Director of our Trust (Big Education), and I continue to work four days a week in this new role, alongside the Trust’s other Co-director, Peter.

Challenges - and how they can be overcome
I think one of the main challenges of co-headship is convincing people that it can be an effective model of leadership in the first instance! It is still a relatively unusual model, and articulating it to governors, staff and parents can be difficult at first. Even if you do not encounter direct opposition to the idea, you will almost certainly come up against some apprehension and concerns. Having a solid plan in place, which clearly demonstrates how the model will work, and how potential problems will be overcome, is crucial to building up trust and support for a new co-headship model. Also having systems and procedures clearly set out in writing is very important for reassuring the governors and the school community that adopting the model will not present any risk to the school. Finally, laying out all the many advantages of co-headship is key, especially explaining why, in your context, co-headship will actually be a better model, and all the ways it will benefit your school.

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A second challenge is whether you and your co-head will work well together as a team, or if you will encounter any serious problems in your working relationship during the process of co-headship. Again, this is where the importance of having clear documentation (a contract) for how to deal with such a situation is key. It also needs to be clear who is taking responsibility in which areas, and which areas constitute joint and equal responsibility.

I think it is also important to point out here that co-headship will not work for everyone. However, it is ideal for those who enjoy coming to decisions through discussion and as part of a team, are open-minded to other perspectives, able to compromise, and willing to be vulnerable enough to having the occasional difficult conversation.

To make a co-headship work you must meet regularly (at least once a week), and you must work out a system to keep one another informed of any developments. You need to talk and reflect regularly about how you are working together, and raise any issues, or even potential issues, as soon as they are recognised. It is crucial to get any concerns out in the open as soon as possible before they are allowed to escalate. Nearly all issues can be solved by listening to one another carefully, and being sincerely committed to finding the best way of moving forward together as a team.

What’s next?
I’m at a really exciting time in my career, as I embark on the new challenge of co-director of Big Education Trust alongside Peter. I’m really pleased to be working within a model of co-leadership again, and this time it feels even more pioneering, as there are so few co-leaders of Academy Trusts out there at the moment.

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Peter and myself have a strong shared vision for our Trust. We are passionate about asking bigger questions about what schools can and should be about, and about enabling every child to find their own success and fulfil their potential. We think that success should reach far beyond a narrow focus on academic outcomes, and that’s why we’ve called our Trust ‘Big Education’, because a big, broad, and ambitious education is what we believe in. We are developing an education of ‘the heart, the hand, and the head’, and want to educate our children in a much fuller and more rounded way than the traditional curriculum allows. An education of the heart, hand, and head includes learning and applying knowledge, developing an understanding of the self, others, and the world, learning to form ideas and concepts, think critically, create, and problem-solve, and taking time to consider how each of us can make a positive difference to our communities and the wider world.

‘Big Education’ is about striving for academic and personal excellence; we want to raise expectations and aspirations across the board. Our aim is to treat our pupils as the individuals that they are, allowing each to build on their own unique abilities, interests and talents, in order to prepare them to embrace the challenges of work, and find their own path to success in life. Over the next few years Peter and myself are excited about doing all that we can, as Co-Directors of Big Education, to bring this vision to life.
"I had a 30-year career in education, as a teacher of English and later a Head of Department, Head of Sixth Form, Deputy Head and, for ten years, as a Head. I enjoyed and learnt from all my jobs, but definitely found headship the most rewarding and joyful.

Ten years as a head in one school felt like enough for me, though, and I didn’t want to move to a second headship, so I left full-time education in 2010. Since then I have completed a Professional Doctorate in Education (researching the transition from deputy headship to headship), worked as an Associate for the National College for Teaching and Leadership, and carried out a range of educational consultancy roles. My consultancy work has included head and senior leader appointments; head and senior leader appraisal/professional review; staff training, especially on leadership topics; and mentoring and coaching. Much as I loved headship, life is even richer now, with satisfying professional activity combined with more time for my friends, family, and, in fact, for myself.

I have also written a book for Crown House, ‘Making the Leap: Moving from Deputy to Head’ which was published in 2016. The book is for aspiring heads (and to those who are trying to decide whether they are), for heads-elect who have been appointed but who have not yet formally stepped into the role, and for heads in the early months in post.

Follow me on Twitter (@jillberry102) to find out more."
In this interview, Jill Berry shares her advice for new and aspiring headteachers on a range of topics, including how to prepare for headship, build support networks, achieve a work-life balance, and most importantly, how to develop the courage and resolve to ‘make the leap’ into what she considers as one of the world’s most rewarding job roles – headship.

**For teachers considering going into headship, what is the best way to prepare for the role?**

Developing into a strong middle leader, and then senior leader, are the main things that enable you to acquire the necessary skills for headship. If you are considering headship, start talking to your headteacher, and other heads if possible, about the role and what is involved. You can also start reading blogs and books about headship, and start taking on whole-school tasks in areas such as PR or finance, to see whether that is something you enjoy. If, after gaining more insight, you feel that becoming a head is the right step forward for you, see if you can arrange to shadow a headteacher for a day. Not only can you watch and learn from what they do, but you can also begin to consider what you would do in the same situation.

Completing an NPQH is also useful identifying areas for development, plugging any gaps in skills or knowledge, and giving you a taste of the roles and responsibilities involved in headship.

Finally, start putting together applications, and go for it! You may never feel fully prepared, but that’s ok; much of your learning will come through first-hand experiences on the job anyway.

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**What support can new heads expect to receive?**

Your school or trust will no doubt have its own induction programme for new headteachers, although it is important to check to make sure that this is the case.

However, I think it is very important to have support from outside of your own school context too. My advice is to be proactive in building up your own network of support. Use the internet as a resource to find networks for headteachers, and also social media to build up an online network. Twitter is especially useful in this regard, especially for under-represented groups (e.g. WomenEd, BAMEed, LGBTed, DisabilityEd).

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It is also a really good idea to have a mentor from outside of your school context who you can talk to regularly, to share concerns, receive advice, and generally chat with about how things are going! Coaching and CPD are also very important too. Your governors should be prepared to make these kinds of investments to support you in the early stages of your headship.

Finally, make sure you have a personal support structure too, made up of family and friends who will be there for you through the good times and bad. The practical and moral support that they can offer on a personal level will be invaluable.

**Can a headteacher hope to have a good work-life balance? If so, how?**

It is possible, though it isn't always easy! However, the perception that the harder you work, the more successful you will be as a headteacher is, in my opinion, a misguided one. It is true that when you are a headteacher your work is never 'complete', but ultimately you have to decide what amount of work is realistic and reasonable, and where to draw the line. Being a headteacher is an exceptionally important job, but it is still a job, so it should definitely not be taking over your whole life.

There are a few key ways in which I approached the issue of work-life balance when I was a head. I did work very hard, but I also made sure that I had scheduled times, particularly in the school holidays, when I could take a break and switch-off from work completely. At those times I would be very strict with myself about not checking emails (my chair of governors and my PA always knew how to contact me in an emergency situation) or getting distracted by any other work-related tasks, however small. During these times I would do things such as travel, meet up with friends, or escape into a good novel. I also sing in a choir, which is something I enjoy, and which has always had the added benefit of helping me to focus my mind on something completely unrelated to work.

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Another important way of ensuring work-life balance for me was to pinpoint the areas where I could really add value as headteacher, and the areas which would be better delegated to members of my senior leadership team, or other staff. This approach helps you to avoid micro-management, and also demonstrates trust in your staff, and their ability to handle difficult tasks. As well as this, it can provide your team with opportunities to broaden and develop their own skills and experience, which is potentially very useful for their wider professional development.

What worries me most today is when I see headteachers (or any teachers) constantly receiving work emails and notifications on their mobile phones. If you have work emails popping up on your phone all the time, even if you are not physically in school, your mind is never truly getting away from work, and that is very unhealthy. Everyone needs some time to completely switch off and re-energise.

If you try to work all of the time, that is actually counter-productive; you will not be working to your full potential, and it will not be sustainable in the long term. So watch your habits carefully, check your emails when you decide to, and don't feel guilty about not being available 24/7. It is important to do this to model a healthy work-life balance to your staff too.

**What is your view on co-headship?**

Developing more flexible working practices within education is a hot topic at the moment, especially in addressing issues of work-life balance, and attracting, recruiting and retaining great teachers. I think it is very important for schools to have options for flexible working available, otherwise we run the risk of losing highly capable teachers. It is far better for
schools (and for the pupils) if they can appoint an excellent practitioner within a flexible arrangement, than a less effective professional who does not require such flexibility.

Co-headship is one of the best ways of making flexible working possible for headteachers. I think it also has other potential benefits, as each co-head can bring their own individual skills and talents to the job, and they can support one another in fulfilling a role which can be an enormous undertaking for one individual.

“Co-headship is one of the best ways of making flexible working possible for headteachers”

However, it takes a good pairing to make co-headship work, so the ‘fit’ of the two co-heads should be considered carefully. They need to be able to work very well together as a team, communicate with one another effectively, and be the right fit for the school too. That being said, when co-headship works, it can work very well indeed, and can potentially bring about more benefits, on balance, than a sole headship could.

Being a headteacher is a highly accountable, and potentially very stressful role. What advice do you have for headteachers in protecting their mental health and overall wellbeing?

Good headteachers are not superhuman. They care; and because they care, they sometimes worry, experience self-doubt, or get stressed, and that is all perfectly normal and acceptable. After all, if leaders didn't let anything bother them, they probably wouldn't be very good leaders! However, it’s important to have coping mechanisms and support systems in place for the tough times, so that the role is manageable, and sustainable in the long-term.

I will reiterate here the importance of having a life outside of work, and spending time with family and friends. It's also important to prioritise your health, so trying to fit in some regular exercise, eating a balanced diet, and making sure you're getting enough sleep, are all absolutely crucial.

If you have a mentor, a coach, or a strong network to draw upon for support, that’s very helpful, as you can discuss any problems or concerns with someone who really understands the job and the pressures that can come with it. Then, even if you don’t know what to do in a certain situation, at least you will know who you can talk to that can help.

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When I was a head I used to keep a diary, not only of events, but also of my thoughts and feelings about whatever had happened during the day. This may not work for everybody, but it helped me a lot to express my thoughts in writing; it was a cathartic process, and it also helped me to track my progress over time. Gradually I became more and more resilient, as each time I met with an unexpected challenge, I was able to reflect on how I had come up against, and survived, unexpected challenges before, so I knew I could do it again! The more experiences you have over time, the more confident you become in the role.

Finally, remember that nobody is perfect, so don't set yourself impossible standards. Try your best, be honest, and apologise if you do make a mistake. Keep your vision and moral purpose at the forefront of your mind, and recognise all the many ways in which you have made, and are continuing to make, a positive difference as a headteacher. It is a hard job, but it is so worth it.
How do you think more teachers could be encouraged to consider headship?

I think, to a large extent, it is down to current headteachers. If headteachers are seen to be happy and fulfilled in their role, then staff will see that positive example, and are more likely to consider the role for themselves in the future. On the other hand, if the headteacher appears to be constantly stressed, with the weight of the world always on their shoulders, staff are more likely to be put off ever becoming a head themselves. Therefore, it’s important for headteachers to focus on the positive aspects of the role, and to communicate those to the staff within their school, and beyond if possible.

“It is also important for headteachers to recognise staff with leadership potential within their school, and to encourage and nourish that as much as possible.”

It is also important for headteachers to recognise staff with leadership potential within their school, and to encourage and nourish that as much as possible. The result may be that the member of staff eventually leaves the school, to move into a leadership or headship post elsewhere; however, I think this is where headteachers need to be selfless in the name of the greater good. Talented leaders who are encouraged, nourished and developed by current headteachers can go on to make a huge difference in another setting, to the benefit of hundreds more pupils, so this approach is about the ‘bigger picture’ of making a positive difference within the education system as a whole.

What advice do you have for teachers considering headship who feel apprehensive about the potential pressures and workload involved?

Being a headteacher is challenging, but it is also highly rewarding, and ultimately, an amazing privilege. It offers an incredible opportunity to make a difference to the lives of young people on a large scale, and I know many heads that derive a great deal of satisfaction and joy from the role (including myself when I was a headteacher).

If other people see the potential in you to become a great headteacher, you have no reason to doubt their judgement, especially if they know you well in a professional context. Therefore, if becoming a headteacher is something you want to do, my advice is to be courageous; step out of your comfort zone, and be ready to embrace the new challenges! Don’t put it off because you can’t tick off every box on the job description yet; after all, if you were already doing every task on the job description, you would already be a headteacher!

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If, after your first interview for headship, you don’t get the job, please don’t give up. You will have learnt more about the application and interview process from your experience, so don’t lose confidence at the first hurdle. Believe in yourself enough to keep trying, until you find the right school, and the right school also finds you!
In this case study, Lauren Nicoll and Rachael Horn discuss their co-headship model with Rachael Gacs, outlining the reasons behind adopting the co-headship model, the benefits and challenges of co-headship so far, and the positive effect co-headship has had in helping them to achieve a better work-life balance.

When the Head of School of Mount Street Academy, Lauren Nicoll, went on maternity leave in September 2015, she wasn’t certain whether she would return as Head of School, or, indeed, stand down from the role.

“I knew for sure when I first went on maternity leave that I wanted to work part time on my return to Mount Street” says Lauren , “but I didn’t know whether the school would want a part-time head or not, and I was prepared to step down from the role, as much as I loved it, if that wasn’t an option. However, as the time to return grew closer, I asked the question and it was arranged that I would work as Head of School for three days a week. The two assistant heads, Rachael Horn and Emily Burford, would take charge of the day-to-day running of the school for the other two days. It seemed like the perfect solution.”

Going part-time
Lauren was pleased to go part-time while also remaining head of school. However, she soon discovered that the arrangement was by no means the ‘perfect solution’ for her, in terms of balancing the demands of work and motherhood. “I found that work was essentially just building up for me on my days off, and I would get quite anxious about how much would be waiting for me when I went in on a Tuesday, my
first working day of the week. Rachael and Emily were doing a great job, but – inevitably - there was always a large pile of issues awaiting me whenever I went back into school after a day off, that people specifically wanted the headteacher to deal with. I always felt exceptionally guilty about asking Emily or Rachael to complete tasks which were the responsibility of the Head of School too, as that wasn’t their job. In the end, I felt like I was trying to fit five days’ work into a three-day week, and I didn’t feel it was sustainable."

A need for change

When Lauren went on her second maternity leave in 2016, she knew something had to change. "I gave my honest opinion, which was that I thought Mount Street would benefit greatly from having a Head of School, on site, every day of the week," says Lauren. "However, I still wanted to work part time, and while I hoped that a job share might be a possibility, I was also taking the risk, again, that I might have to stand down so that a full-time headteacher could be employed in my place."

"We had a very honest and open conversation with one another, and drew up a contract of agreements about how we were going to behave, make decisions, and settle any differences of opinion as co-heads."

Thankfully, Lauren did not have to stand down. During her maternity leave, Rachael Horn had taken on the role of acting Head of School at Mount Street, and she agreed to become a co-head of school, alongside Lauren, on her return. It was agreed that Lauren would work three days a week, and Rachael would work four. Rachael explains, "while my children are grown up now, I saw becoming a co-head as a really positive thing for me too, because it offers a greater amount of flexibility, and a greater degree of work-life balance than a role as a full-time head; so I was more than happy with the arrangement."

The transition to co-headship

Once the decision to embark on a co-headship had been made, Lauren and Rachael spent some time together to discuss the details of the arrangement, and how it would work in practice, before Lauren returned from maternity leave. "We had a very honest and open conversation with one another, and drew up a contract of agreements about how we were going to behave, make decisions, and settle any differences of opinion as co-heads. We wanted to ensure that even if we disagreed about something, that we would do so in a positive way", says Rachael. Lauren adds, "I think it’s absolutely right that we bring challenge to each other, and equally important not to get offended by any differences of opinion, and we needed to have a clear understanding about that. We also agreed that once a decision had been made, even if there had been disagreement during the process, we wouldn’t show that beyond the office door."

“It has been important for staff to know we’re always communicating with one another, and that decisions are being made jointly.”

Rachael and Lauren were very careful to present a united front from day one of their co-headship, which officially began in November 2018. "We wanted the nature of our relationship as co-heads to be really clear from the start, as we knew it was key that staff and parents understood that we are leading together as equals. As a result, we’ve been quite cautious in these early days. We haven’t made decisions individually, on the spot, as it has been important for staff to know we’re always communicating with one another, and that decisions are being made jointly. This seems to have worked really well, as staff do come to both of us equally, and email both of us too," says Rachael.
“Our co-headship seems to have been received successfully so far by parents too’, say Lauren, “they don’t request only to speak with Rachael, or myself, but are always happy to speak with either one of us about any issues. I think that’s a really positive sign that our co-headship is accepted and understood by the wider school community too.”

**The benefits of co-headship**

“We are two very different personalities’, admits Lauren, “but so far, that has turned out to be a blessing rather than a hinderance. We bring two different perspectives to the role, and two different skill sets. Combined, I believe, that results in very strong leadership.”

Rachael adds, “being co-heads brings a broader perspective. We have different strengths, and notice different things. For example, Lauren is very skilled at having difficult conversations, and I’m good with data, and have an eye for detail. I think as time goes by we are our establishing our individual areas of expertise more and more, and that may mean dividing our responsibilities more clearly and deliberately as our co-headship evolves.”

Rachael and Lauren also both agree that their co-headship makes for a better work-life balance too. Lauren finds that she is able to spend more time with her children, and does not have to worry about work on her days off anymore; “I know that the school is in safe hands and that any issues will be taken care of”, says Lauren, “so when I am out of work I can dedicate my time and energy completely to my children’. As for Rachael, she tells us, “having Fridays off gives me more time to rest and recharge at the end of each week, and I think that’s really beneficial and healthy. After the break, I’m able to come back into school feeling refreshed and ready to go on a Monday.”

“As co-heads, we can also support one another through any difficult times, whether that’s professionally, or personally.”

Another benefit which Lauren and Rachael both highly value is having shared responsibility and accountability for the important decisions they have to make as co-heads. “We can problem-solve together”, says Rachael, “which I think is much less daunting than doing having to do that on your own. Sharing accountability also means sharing the pressures of the job, and I think that makes the role much less stressful overall.”

“As co-heads, we can also support one another through any difficult times”, says Lauren, “whether that’s professionally, or personally. We can look out for one another, and either one of us can temporarily take on more of the load if we know the other is going through a difficult time.”
Advice for others on co-headship & overcoming challenges

Lauren and Rachael both emphasised the crucial importance of drawing up a clear contract, which outlines explicitly how the co-headship team will behave, and how any conflicts, should they occur, will be resolved. “This is not only important for you as a co-headship team, but also for your staff, parents and community, so they can see how you’re going to behave as a partnership and know what to expect,” says Lauren.

Both also stressed the importance of having clear and open channels of communication with one another. “You have to be very honest, and also prepared to be completely vulnerable with each other”, says Rachael; “being co-heads can only work through total transparency, and a commitment to work together as a team. You must meet regularly, and make time to discuss the co-headship and how you both feel things are going.”

Lauren adds, “being able to have those honest and vulnerable conversations, without getting personally offended, is vitally important to avoid or overcome any challenges you may face as co-heads. It is those conversations that ensure that we can continue to lead shoulder to shoulder. We also meet with our regional director every term, both together and separately, and I think that is important as we can keep them up-to-date about how the co-headship is going too, from both our perspectives.”

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Finally, both Lauren and Rachael agreed on the importance of keeping your shared vision for the school at the core of all your decisions. “I think co-headship can only work if you have two individuals who are completely committed to doing whatever is in the best interests of the school, and are able to put that ahead of any personal ambitions or interests they may have”, says Rachael.

Looking to the Future…

Rachael and Lauren are determined to make a great success of their co-headship, to ensure that they fulfil their vision of ‘creating a haven where children flourish.

“Whatever changes we may face in the years to come at Mount Street, our vision will always remain at the centre of everything that we do”, says Rachael, “so as co-heads we are determined to foster an environment of high expectations and high aspirations for every child at our school, and do all that we can to support and encourage them to achieve their full potential as individuals.”
Legsby Primary School is a small rural school in the Lincolnshire Wolds, just outside Market Rasen, with just two classes. It is a rather unique school in that its main classroom teachers, Lucy Dabb and Ben Murray, are also the school’s co-headteachers.

This case study explores how Ben and Lucy came to be the co-heads of Legsby Primary, how they make their co-headship work successfully, and how they manage to balance their role as co-heads with their roles as classroom teachers.

Background

Both Ben and Lucy began their teaching careers at Legsby Primary School as NQTs. Lucy started the school in 2009 teaching EYFS and Ks1, with Ben joining two years later, in 2011, to teach the Ks2 class. The school had a full-time headteacher up until the summer of 2016, after which an executive head was put in charge; however, the executive headteacher was only able to go into Legsby Primary School for one day of each week. “The executive head did a great job when they were in school, but this clearly wasn’t a long-term solution” says Lucy. “For the other four days of the week the school appeared to be leaderless, and it was at this point that Ben and I had to step up to the mark and become the ‘face’ of the school, for the parents and children alike. We also had to take responsibility for the smooth running of the school on a day-to-day basis, dealing with any issues that arose, and communicating with parents whenever necessary.” However, despite taking on this level of responsibility, Ben and Lucy remained classroom teachers, with no official leadership roles.
Moving towards a model of co-headship

The governors explored many different avenues to find a new headteacher for the school, and looked into a number of diverse options, including employing a part time head, buying in a head from another school, or federating with another school and sharing the headteacher across both schools. However, it was Lucy and Ben who first suggested the option of co-headship. Ben explains, “Lucy and myself knew that we could make a success of co-headship; we’d practically been doing it for a year already, and had demonstrated that we could lead the school together as a team. It was clear that we had the same values and vision for the school too, and we also agreed about the things we wanted to change”. Lucy adds, “the governors were quite sceptical about the idea at first as there wasn’t much information out there at the time on co-headship. The governors felt that, for logistical reasons, only one person could be in charge, as only one person could have the final say on decisions. However, they did allow Ben and myself to make our case to them, and we were invited to present to them, separately, about our vision for the school, and how we intended to ensure that the co-headship model would be a success.”

“Lucy and myself knew that we could make a success of co-headship; we’d practically been doing it for a year already, and had demonstrated that we could lead the school together as a team.”

Despite writing and performing their presentations separately, it was clear that Lucy and Ben were very much on the same page about what they wanted for Legsby Primary, and how, as co-heads, they would achieve it. They also clearly outlined how their co-headship would work; “we told the governors that we wanted to share our responsibilities as co-headteachers completely equally, in every aspect of the job. Since we would both be learning to be headteachers, it made sense to us to do everything together, and therefore learn about every aspect of the job from the very beginning”, says Lucy. “Thankfully, we managed to convince the governors in the end that a co-headship was a good idea”, says Ben, “and we became the co-heads of Legsby Primary in September 2017.”

The Practicalities of the co-headship model

Being the only two teachers at Legsby, some practical changes had to made before Lucy and Ben were officially able to become the co-headteachers of the school in September 2017. A part-time teacher was employed to provide Ben and Lucy with sufficient time to fulfil their new role, as well as time for their PPA. “We put together a clear timetable”, says Ben, “which enabled Lucy and myself to both have one day out of the classroom each week to focus on headship tasks, an afternoon off together each Tuesday for a co-heads meeting, and also both have half a day of PPA time weekly. This time out of the classroom is mostly covered by our part-time teacher, Miss Vout, who teaches both classes at the school on different days, and also by PE and Music specialists who teach the children on Tuesday afternoons.”

“We are very careful to ensure that our performance, as co-heads, and as classroom teachers, is regularly assessed by an external source that we can rely on to be entirely objective and accurate.”

As Ben and Lucy only have Tuesday afternoons together, it is vital that there are clear communication channels to keep each other up to date regarding any important business on a day-to-day basis. Lucy tells us, “we have a shared notebook where we keep a continuous record of our activities during office time. We also make a note of what tasks need prioritising, or need to be dealt with urgently, and also include any issues that have come up which need to be, or are in the process of being, resolved’’. Lucy and Ben also share a diary, and have one shared email address between them; “this helps us to avoid a situation where staff or parents might just email one of us”, says Ben, “and means that we are both equally aware of any queries, comments, or issues which may come through via email.”
Accountability

As Lucy and Ben are both the co-heads, and the two main teachers at Legsby Primary School, it is clear that a high level of accountability needs to come from sources that are external to the school itself. To ensure that this is the case, the school is regularly visited by an education advisor, Andy Craven, who works alongside the chair of governors to monitor the staff and school's ongoing performance. This includes completing regular lesson observations, staff appraisals, and book scrutinies. “As co-heads, it’s really important that we have regular external feedback on our school’s performance”, says Ben. “We are also very careful to ensure that our performance, as co-heads, and as classroom teachers, is regularly assessed by an external source that we can rely on to be entirely objective and accurate.” Legsby’s governors also perform monitoring visits every term, with each visit focusing in on two key areas of the school’s provision, as well as continually monitoring the effectiveness of teaching and learning, and the school’s leadership.

Outcomes of co-headship so far

Ben and Lucy first became co-heads at Legsby following a period where the roles and responsibilities of all members of staff (TAs, the administrator, midday supervisors etc.), including their own, had become very blurred. Therefore, one of the first things they did as co-heads was to clarify job roles within the school. “During the summer before we became co-heads, we met with each member of staff one-to-one to make job descriptions really clear”, says Ben. “We generally had a good chat with each member of staff about any issues they had, and discussed what their role would look like moving forward, with lots of input from both sides. We wanted to create a fresh start for our staff, based on shared expectations and understanding.” Lucy and Ben also invested in their own CPD, attending Kyra’s ‘New to Headship’ course, “this was a great opportunity for us to learn more about the roles and responsibilities of headship, and to clarify exactly what would be expected of us”, says Lucy, “and it also gave us the chance to meet other headteachers and to build up a network of contacts who we knew we could get in touch with if we needed advice or a second opinion on anything.”

Pupil numbers, which were at around just 25 in September 2017, were another key area of focus for Ben and Lucy. “We knew this was a real challenge for us, so we did everything we could to improve numbers”, says Lucy. “We advertised in local newspapers, as well as making sure that any events taking place at the school were reported in the local press. We forged much stronger links with local pre-schools, and encouraged potential new starters to come and visit the school. We also got the school much more involved with the local community, offering locals the opportunity to attend events such as our summer fayre, and our ‘Big Dig’ event, where we started our school allotment, and also did lots of jobs to improve the school grounds.” Lucy and Ben’s efforts really paid off, with pupil numbers almost doubling to 48, and still growing, by the summer term of 2019.

“We are lucky that our pupils, parents, and the local community were really positive about our co-headship from the off”

Other notable changes brought about by Ben and Lucy have included introducing more opportunities for whole school collaborative learning, and creating a new curriculum for each key stage, which will run on a 4-year long, rolling basis. Whole school assemblies are now held three times a week. “Bringing the whole school together more to engage in collaborative activities and learning has made a real difference”, reflects Ben. “The school now has much more of a family feel, with the older pupils looking out for the younger ones, and the younger pupils looking up to the older ones. The pupils at our school come from diverse backgrounds, and as co-heads, Lucy and I have put a real emphasis on the importance of being welcoming and inclusive of everyone. We can see the results of our efforts on a daily basis, as our pupils have really embraced that message, and really look out
Reflections on Co-headship so far ...

Challenges

"We are lucky that our pupils, parents, and the local community were really positive about our co-headship from the off", says Ben, "but that doesn’t mean we haven’t had challenges. For example, it took us a while to fully establish with parents, and some members of staff too, that we are both equally headteachers. Some people would request to speak to only one of us, or only address one of us as the headteacher! Having a shared email address helped with this, as did meeting up with parents together, and making it clear that decisions would only be made after communicating with one another. The message has definitely got through now, it just took a bit of patience and perseverance!"

It also appears that this example of co-headship is not one that has resulted in reduced workload. Lucy explains, "it’s a full-on job, being both classroom teachers and co-headteachers. It can on occasion be a struggle to juggle both roles, as there is often no one to delegate to, and we both end up having to do a bit of everything that needs to be done within the school! However, despite the fact that it is sometimes hard work, we love what we do and are completely dedicated to the school."

Benefits

"I think the pressure of headship is reduced because we are in it together", says Ben, "and that shared responsibility makes the role less of a burden. If either of us are worried about anything, we can talk about it together, and come up with a solution together, and that kind of mutual support really helps." Lucy adds, "we also bring different skills to the table, for example, I’m very organised which helps us to get through all the administration we need to complete as heads. On the other hand, Ben is a great communicator, so he’s brilliant at dealing with parents and addressing them at events. There are lots of other examples like this too, that show that we offer much more together, as co-headship team, than we possibly could as sole-heads, and I think everyone benefits from that."

“Ultimately, I think our co-headship works so well because there is no competition or rivalry between the two of us”
Overall, both Ben and Lucy agree that the co-headship model works really well for them. "We make a good team because we deal with our differences through discussion, respect each other’s points of view, and are able to negotiate. In fact, solving problems through discussion is an approach we encourage throughout the school, whether that’s dealing with an issue with a pupil, or between pupils, we focus on understanding one another and resolving differences calmly and respectfully", says Ben.

"Ultimately, I think our co-headship works so well because there is no competition or rivalry between the two of us", says Lucy. "Whenever we make decisions we both have the same end goal in mind, and that is to do whatever is in the best interests of our pupils and the school."

Conclusion

Both Lucy and Ben have a shared passion and dedication towards ensuring that Legsby Primary provides the best education possible for the children it serves, with high expectations for all of their pupils within the context of a warm, caring and inclusive ‘family’ atmosphere. They have worked with one another at Legsby for over ten years, and this has included facing some turbulent times together at the school. Their relationship as co-heads appears to be very strong, and it is clear that from the beginning, they have approached their shared role in the way that feels right for them; as complete equals, and with shared responsibility in every area. "It works really well for us", says Lucy, "and I think for the school too". Ben adds, "we certainly have happy children, staff, and parents now, and the school itself has a very positive, ‘family’ atmosphere; so from that perspective, I think we can confidently say that our co-headship has been a real success so far!"
Ensuring meaningful collaboration

An article by the University of Pennsylvania discusses what happens when the drive for increasing collaboration, both within and between organisations, results in reduced efficiencies, rather than the positive impact which collaboration is supposed to bring. Whilst the article acknowledges that today's knowledge economy necessitates collaboration between teams and between organisations, and that there are many positive outcomes from this; the major downside can be that this way of working can mean that it takes much longer to reach decisions and get things done. One statistic cited in the article is that the average knowledge worker spends 85% or more of each week on email, in meetings or on the telephone, leaving little time for individualised tasks or learning. Too much collaborative working can also mean that talented individuals receive unrealistic demands on their time, becoming overburdened and dissatisfied with their work and role. The article suggests that ensuring efficient collaboration is essential both for organisations and individuals, and that this can be achieved through individuals taking responsibility for a more structured approach to their work and in responding to competing demands on their time; and through organisations and leaders undertaking careful planning and thought as to how collaborative working will be supported and how teams will be structured.

Further information can be found: https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/much-togetherness-downside-workplace-collaboration/

The best leaders aren’t afraid to ask for help

In this article from the Harvard Business Review (HBR) the author reflects that leaders must be prepared to show their weaknesses as well as their strengths, and that their leadership will be stronger for it. The author also states that, as leadership is about connection, people will only follow you, work hard for you, create and risk and sacrifice for you, if they feel connected to you, and they will only feel connected to you if they feel you are being authentic.
He also suggests that leaders who don't need help have no one to lead. People feel good when they help. They are inspired when they are needed. They don't think less of the people they help, they feel more connected. It is therefore vital that leaders are prepared to not only show their weaknesses but to ask for help and support to address those weaknesses.

Further information can be found: https://hbr.org/2019/01/the-best-leaders-arent-afraid-to-ask-for-help

Flexible working for everyone

In this article from the Harvard Business Review (HBR), the author reflects on the approach taken at PwC with regard to flexible working, which has been made available to everyone. The author states that the move to flexible working did not happen overnight, and certainly wasn’t easy – in fact the organisation is still learning how to effectively embed flexible working. The key learning from PwC’s approach is summarised below (source: HBR):

- You need to toss out the rule book - To build a culture of flexibility, you must first reimagine what flexibility means today. To create behaviour change, you need to allow for variance and creativity and agility. In other words, be “flexible” when creating a flexibility culture. A policy guide or a formal program can work against you. At PwC, it is loosely called “everyday flexibility”. It is not something that is mandated that all teams adopt; it’s a mentality and a way of life that should be individualized for each person.

- Everyone deserves the same degree of flexibility - Flexibility is not related to a generational need. Every employee, at any age, benefits from and is looking for its availability. A culture of flexibility will not be created, adopted, or embraced unless the origination stems from an understanding and belief that every single person in the organization deserves the same consideration and flexible working policies. One person’s reasons for needing flexibility are not any more important or any less important than any another person’s.
• When it comes to flexibility, trust is not earned - If you trust an individual enough that you hired them to join your organisation, you also should trust them to get the work done when and where they prefer, as long as they meet deadlines.

• Flexibility is a two-way street - A strong culture starts from the very top, but the action to embed it comes from the bottom up.

The author states that flexibility is not about working less, but it is about encouraging people to work differently; giving people the flexibility they need when they need it, and sometimes, needing them to give more when business demands require it. When done right, flexibility results in a happier, healthier, and more productive workforce. And it helps attract the best employees, and makes them want to stick around.

Further information can be found: https://hbr.org/2019/01/what-pwc-learned-from-its-policy-of-flexible-work-for-everyone

Reimaging the leader’s role

This article by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) suggests that younger generations are driving change in companies, and it’s up to leaders to embrace it. Whether it’s attitudes towards technology, perspectives on workplace structures, or approaches to work itself, the latest generation of workers is considerably different to its predecessors. They are seasoned technology users and therefore already familiar with (and keen to adopt) the tools that can make the workplace more efficient, and, rather than looking to begin their career within a large organisation, many are preferring to make their mark in small, agile start-ups, which they perceive will offer them more flexibility and better work-life balance. The article suggests that, in order to attract and retain this new generation of employees, it is time for leaders to (source: CBI):

• Embrace differences as opportunities.
• Recognise technology as a positive force to drive innovation.
• Foster a more agile, open and collaborative culture.
• Create a better work-life balance.

Further details can be found: http://www.cbi.org.uk/businessvoice/latest/it-s-time-to-reimagine-the-role-of-leader/

Using AI to reduce workload

The Department for Education (DfE) has published (23 January) a press release setting out the Education Secretary, Damian Hinds’ call for the technology industry and educators to work in partnership to transform education, cut workload and improve pupil outcomes Addressing more than 800 of the world’s leading tech companies and start-ups, as well as school representatives and international education ministers, at the Bett Show in London, Mr Hinds told teachers and school leaders to make smarter use of technology, both inside and outside of the classroom, to make sure that it does not add to teachers’ responsibilities and workload. Mr Hinds said that while education technology has the power to transform education, its growth in the classroom has created both opportunities and challenges. He also outlined his plans to launch an EdTech strategy later this year to harness the power of technology in schools, strengthening the training teachers receive, reducing their workload, and unleashing young people’s potential. This will be backed by a £10 million fund to support innovative uses of tech in schools and colleges across England.

Further details can be found: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/damian-hinds-school-leaders-should-ditch-email-culture-to-cut-workload
Discover lots of informative videos on the Kyra TSA YouTube Channel ...
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCygsbkC8zRkOfkobipVD08w

You can also find videos from previous editions of the Kyra Journal on our YouTube Channel.

Video Link: https://youtu.be/Mtz6Niox1Ac