

Women Aged 30-39: why are they the largest demographic to leave teaching every year?

A 2018-21 study by The MTPT Project

01. Doing the Washing Up Badly

In January 2018, three weeks after the birth of my second child, Lucie, I committed to undertaking the research project that I had spent the previous two years avoiding. I had few qualifications as a researcher and absolutely no funding, nor was I attached to any sort of academic institute. In fact, the only thing attached to anything was Lucie, to me, a lot of the time. However, during my Teach First indoctrination training, Brett Wigdortz had summoned the much-quoted Hillel the Elder: “If not now, then when? If not me, then who?” and being a big fan of Brett and believing – to this day – in the transformational power of education, it stuck with me. By the time Lucie and I had set up our little love-nest of duvets, muslins and side-cots in January 2018, therefore, I had begrudgingly accepted that if I didn’t get on with understanding and solving the motherhood penalty in education, then nobody else would.

Without shame, I declared that I would do a terrible cock-up of a job of this enormous project but, much like the outcome of hashing the washing up, I was confident that my laughable attempt at large-scale research would draw the attention of sufficiently important people who would take on this mantle and create a rich body of research to spotlight the experiences of mother teachers like me. So where did I start?

Well, in 2016 the Policy Exchange published *The Importance of Teachers* which, despite revealing that “there is a huge bulge in leavers for women aged between 30-39... around 6,000 teachers a year – 27% of all leavers in total” could only draw the “obvious conclusion... that this is maternity related”. The 27% makes this demographic the largest group of leavers every year, other than retirees and, presumably, the Schools Workforce Census has produced similar information year upon year. Yet – even to date – there has been no research asking this group of women about their motivations to leave the classroom. Equally, no research existed that documented the experiences of women in this age bracket who *had* remained in teaching. How had they survived, when so many others had not? And were they simply surviving, or thriving?

If memory (which I replaced with the @maternityCPD Twitter handle over both of my maternity leaves) serves rightly, I first read this report in September 2016, three months into my first maternity leave when The MTPT Project was in its infancy – a social media account, a hashtag and a blog about my CPD adventures with Hugo. At this time, the voices of The MTPT Project which are now so empowered, felt entirely silent and the utter data void about teacher mothers or reasons for the motherhood penalty in teaching, only confirmed the sense that this demographic was too invisible to even attempt to understand. People weren’t just looking away, they didn’t even know we were there to avoid.



As well as assumptions, “obvious conclusions” and the uncomfortable awkwardness that accompanied any conversations around the wastage rate of women aged 30-39, we also had no idea about the following:

- How many teachers were on maternity leave at any given time
- The average length of maternity leave taken by teachers
- How many teachers were on paternity leave at any given time
- The length of paternity leave taken by teachers, and whether this was ever beyond the week or fortnightly entitlement
- What percentage of female leavers aged 30-39 were mothers

Evidence, such as the submission of MATB1 forms, accounting for periods of absence on the Schools Workforce Census, insurance and maternity pay records do exist at school, trust and governmental level that could provide experienced and influential researchers the details they needed to create a core data set. Alas, however, as a small-fry leader of a grassroots network – ‘just a teacher’ – this data was way beyond my access level.

For teachers, whose sense of professional fulfilment comes from being seen, daily, by large numbers of children, acting as a role model and seeing immediately the impact of our hard work, being invisible, voiceless and ignored is not much fun. In fact, it’s pretty disempowering. In a data-rich world, lack of data on a topic either means it’s very new, or that it isn’t important. Both motherhood and teaching have been around for a very long time, and since 1944 when the marriage bar for teachers was lifted, these two identities have been combined. So when the figures suggest that one of these identities is influencing the other to the likely detriment of the students in our schools, why isn’t anyone paying attention? Are we, as teacher mothers, really so worthless?

At the time, I was simultaneously within and outside this context: a first time mother at 30 undergoing a huge transition in identity, clinging on to a sense of professional purpose and yet isolated for an extended period of time from the community and existence that had formed me up until that point. At the same time, maternity leave afforded me the time and motivation to piece together the available data that *could* offer a picture of a woman’s journey through teaching, placing myself bang smack in the middle of the black hole of maternity leave and motherhood.

The period of September 2016 to October 2017 involved a great deal of asking, listening and thinking. Members of the WomenEd community, including those with first-hand experience, academics and school leaders, were hugely supportive during this time, as were the Teacher Development Trust and Teach First. Groups with similar preoccupations were forming – Flexible Teacher Talent, Return to Teach, the Shared Headship Network, Leaders Plus – evolving not just into professional connections, but cherished friendships, an emboldened community of strong mothers making themselves visible, speaking and being heard. PhD theses were encouraged, designed, submitted, rejected, and yet the encouragement continued: focusing on this topic was pioneering, trailblazing, important work. I want to take



this opportunity to express my gratitude for all the practical and emotional support that I have received since The MTPT Project's inception in 2016.

This year of literature review culminated in The MTPT Project's infographic, which provides a concise visual of our hypothesis on the impact of the motherhood penalty in education. In the top right-hand corner sits the first of the basic information that wasn't – until January 2018 – public knowledge: that 3.4% of the teacher workforce are on maternity leave at any given time. This equates to approximately 2 teachers per school, 11,500 women every year.

Acquiring this data was a perfect example of the power of doing a bad job at the washing up: in October 2017, I created an incredibly clunky survey asking teachers to share how many teachers were on maternity leave in their school. The results claimed that 5% of the teacher workforce were on maternity leave at any given time. TeacherTapp posed the same question in December 2019 which yielded similar results, but also that 16% of respondents didn't know if any colleagues were on maternity leave at that time – again, these teachers in their schools were so invisible, that they hadn't thought to look for them.

Armed with this information and a three-week old Lucie, I presented at a DfE Equality and Diversity roundtable event. To the left of the table sat a group of three or four analysts whose faces dropped into utter panic when I stated my 5% figure. During the lunch break, one of them made a beeline for me: she had noticed, horrified, how badly I had done the washing up and wanted to understand more about how I could possibly have done such an awful job of things. Delighted, I described, in detail, how terrible my survey was and casually mentioned that I *had* submitted a freedom of information request some four weeks ago, but that I was yet to receive a response. Lo and behold, my FOI request was answered the following day, and the clunky survey was rendered redundant, replaced instead with accurate data from thousands of schools across England and Wales.

I knew now that there were 11,500 women like me out there – pottering around with their babies, some attending baby sensory, others writing books. Knowing how many of us existed was an important first step, but if we knew nothing about this 3.4%, then how could we persuade them to remain in the education sector when the “obvious conclusion” was that they were so vulnerable to leaving at this stage of their lives? And how could we empower them to address the gender pay gap and disproportionate representation of women at leadership levels by supporting their continued career progression during this time?

With MTPT Project community numbers swelling into the later months of 2017, we had increasing anecdotal evidence to begin to implement some of the solutions that sounded like they would help – role models, baby-friendly networking, coaching – but we were never going to be taken seriously with “obvious conclusions” and hunches about what women want. Even the “obvious conclusion” that women aged 30-39 are all impacted by motherhood erases the experiences of those women who are *not* mothers, and therefore only offers broad brushstrokes of common sense rather than actual data. We needed to know how the experiences shared by our community members matched the bigger picture across England and Wales.



By February 2018, the glorious Think Tank valkyrie I had hoped would ride down from the sky to complete this research for me was yet to show herself. The longed-for treasure chest of reports just out of reach of my professional network remained an unfulfilled yearning – a mirage in my data desert. Brett and Hillel the Elder echoed in my mind: “If not now, then when? If not me (accompanied by Lucie and completed diverted by Hugo on Thursdays and the weekend), then who?” Well, at least it gave me something to do on my second maternity leave...

Drawing on the various reports into teacher retention and attrition, gender and professional development that I had collected and read between 2016 and 2018, as well as invaluable support from academics, researchers and colleagues with experience designing questionnaires, two surveys were created and shared with The MTPT Project community. The first asked female teachers who had left state school teaching aged 30-39 to identify the reasons that they had left. The second asked female teachers who were still in education aged 30-39 what had enabled, forced or convinced them to stay. In the five months that followed, sharing the surveys on social media platforms, through our own newsletters and those of our partners and hoping for additional word-of-mouth attention, we collected more than 500 responses to each survey and conducted more than 80 qualitative interviews – a figure Google, and a number of eyebrow-raised academics, assured me was sufficient to get away with doing the washing up badly.

What follows is a series of reports focusing on the four groups explored in this study:

- Mothers who left teaching aged 30-39
- Mother who remained in teaching aged 30-39
- Women who left teaching aged 30-39
- Women who remained in teaching aged 30-39

Each shorter report, published on The MTPT Project’s website on a fortnightly or monthly basis throughout 2021-2022 and possibly beyond, will present the findings on the themes that came out of the initial quantitative survey, which were then enriched by the qualitative interviews.

