

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

A 2018-21 study by The MTPT Project

03. What Did We Find Out?

As explained in the methodology report, **02. What Did We Do and How Did We Do It?** We received 568 responses to our initial survey aimed at women who had stayed in teaching aged 30-39 (the “Staying in Teaching” survey), 518 of which were valid. Over three quarters of responses were from secondary school teachers; 21% were from primary teachers and only 1% of responses came from EYFS or Post-16 teachers.

The “Leaving Teaching” survey, aimed at women who had left teaching aged 30-39, received 533 responses, 498 of which were valid. 61% of responses were from secondary school teachers; 29% were from primary teachers and 10% gave a variety of responses in the “Other” category, including special schools, Alternative Provision, EYFS, Post-16, middle schools and all through schools.

78% of the respondents to the “Leaving Teaching” survey had left within the last five years (since 2014); 16% had left between 5-10 years ago, and the remaining 6% left more than ten years ago.

Simons’ original hypothesis in *The Importance of Teachers: A collection of essays on teacher recruitment and retention* (Policy Exchange, 2016) posited that the ‘bulge in leavers for women aged between 30-39’ is ‘maternity related’, and suggested that improved practice around flexible working, and increased offers of part time and flexible positions may act as the most impactful solution for this mother demographic. Because of this, The MTPT Project were particularly interested in the connection between teacher retention, motherhood and flexible working.

This relationship is not a new idea, but with the Part Time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations only passed in 2000, the Employment Act introducing the right for parents of young and disabled children to apply for work flexibly in 2003, and the 2014 amendment to extend this right to all employees who have worked for 26 weeks with the same employer, it can feel as if part-time and flexible working has only recently been invented, or at least noticed as a valid way of contributing to our workforce.

The belief that flexible and part-time working can be an empowering tool for working mothers has gained particular traction in wider society with campaigners such as Mother Pukka, Pregnant then Screwed and the rise of social media and the ability for these twenty-first century suffragettes to amass and influence large audiences – often seeking distraction from a baby, household chores, on their commute or over a cappuccino – through a smartphone screen. At a similar time, the founding of organisations such as WomenEd, Flexible Teacher Talent, Return to Teach and The Shared Headship Network began to draw attention to flexible



working within education, informed by research completed by (amongst others) NASUWT and the NFER into the experiences of flexible working in teaching.

Again and again, the ‘obvious conclusion’ of the connection between working motherhood and flexible working was made with NASUWT finding that ‘90% of flexible working requests were made by women teachers’, the majority of whom were aged (you guessed it!) 30-40 with ‘twenty-five per cent of flexible working requests made by teachers ... for support with childcare’¹. Similarly, the NFER’s analysis of data from 2010 to 2015 found that ‘part-time employment peaks among women in their late 30s and early 40s, which corresponds to the period in which women are most likely to decrease their employment workload to take on childcare responsibilities’, and concluded that ‘greater flexibility over working patterns in the secondary sector may incentivise former teachers who left the profession to have families, to care for relatives, etc., to return to work part-time.’²

The following tables explore the extent to which, firstly, motherhood influences teachers’ decisions to stay in, or leave teaching and, secondly, the impact that flexible working (or lack thereof) has on teacher retention, particularly amongst the mother demographic.

Findings

Women aged 30-39 who stay in teaching

The top 5 reasons that women aged 30-39 stay in teaching are as follows:

Reason	%
1. Financial	74%
2. Job satisfaction	37%
3. Professional commitment	30%
4. Compatible childcare logistics	29%
5. Flexible/ part time arrangements	27%

Table A: Top 5 reasons that women aged 30-39 stay in teaching

It is also worth noting the 6th and 7th most popular reasons, given the small percentage difference between rankings 3-7:

Reason	%
6. Progression opportunities	26%
7. Unqualified for other industries	24%

Table B: 6th and 7th reasons that women aged 30-39 stay in teaching

¹ NASUWT, *Flexible working: the experiences of teachers*, 2016, accessed at: <https://www.nasuwat.org.uk/uploads/assets/uploaded/6fd07ce3-6400-4cb2-a8a87b736dc95b3b.pdf>

² De Lazzari, G. et al., NFER, *Teacher Retention and Turnover Research – Interim Report*, 2017, accessed at: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/NUFS03/NUFS03.pdf>

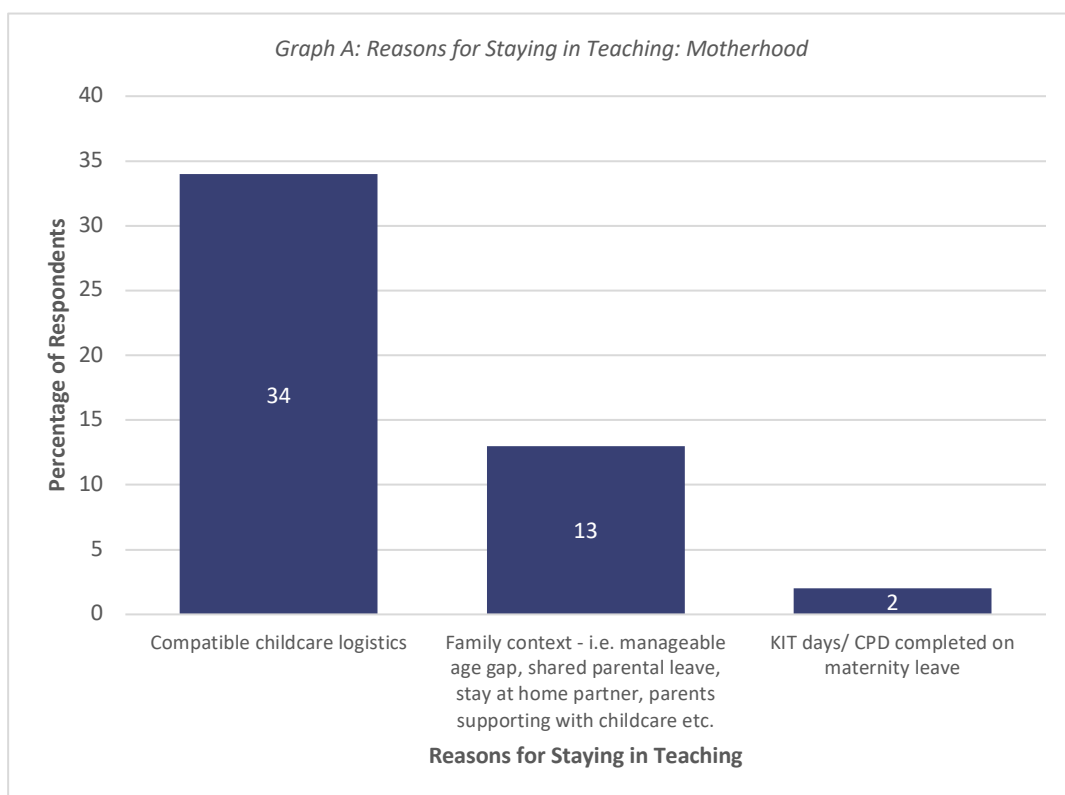


Motherhood as a reason for staying in teaching

Three options on the survey indicated that respondents were mothers:

- Compatible childcare arrangements
- Family context - i.e. manageable age gap, shared parental leave, stay at home partner, parents supporting with childcare etc.
- KIT days/ CPD completed on maternity leave

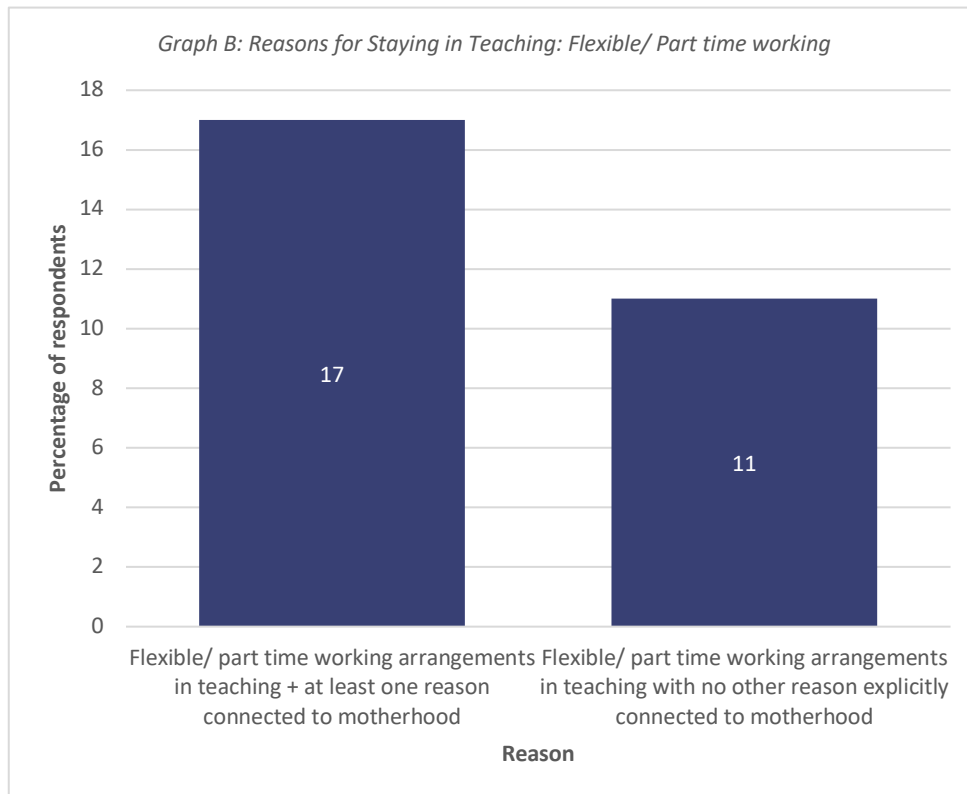
In total, 36% of respondents explicitly indicated that a reason connected to motherhood had influenced or allowed them to **remain** in teaching – 41% of primary respondents and 34% of secondary respondents.



Flexible/ part time working as a reason for staying in teaching

In total, 27% of respondents chose ‘Flexible/ part time arrangements in teaching’ as a factor that helped them to stay in the classroom: 27% of the secondary respondents, and 30% of the primary respondents.

However, not all of these respondents explicitly indicated that they were mothers, or made the connection between their status as mothers and these flexible working arrangements.



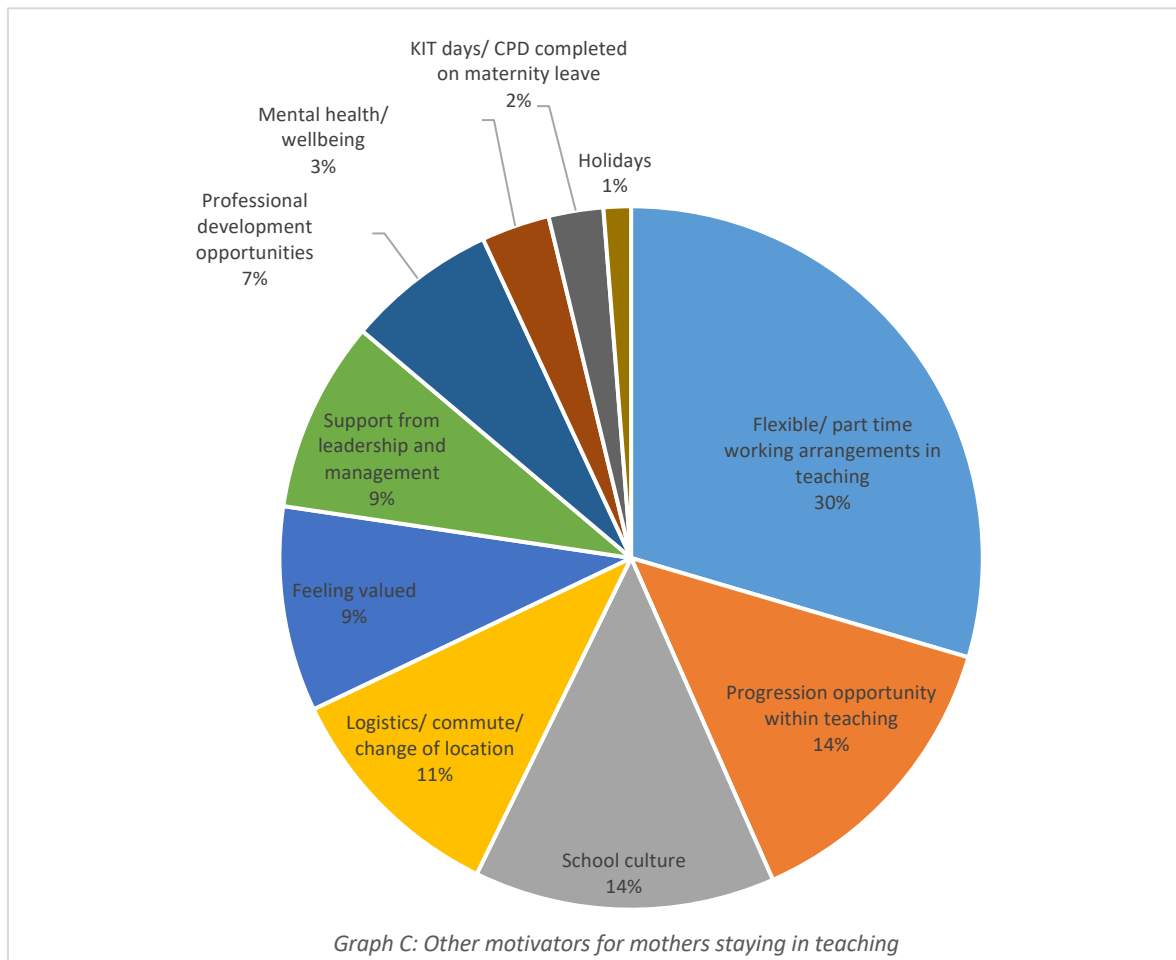
Of the 17% of respondents who gave both ‘flexible/ part time working arrangements’ and a reason connected to motherhood as a reason for staying in teaching, 70% were secondary teachers and 30% were primary teachers.



Other motivators for mothers staying in teaching

The MTPT Project is interested in the different things that schools can do to help to keep teachers in the classroom after they become mothers.

Of the 36% of respondents who explicitly indicated that they were mothers, 80% also chose 'Financial' as a reason for staying in the classroom. The following reasons were also given as motivators by this 36% of mothers:



In particular, it is interesting that the stereotyped assumption that teaching is a family-friendly career because of its generous holiday allowance made up just 1% of the responses from teachers who have chosen to stay in teaching. In comparison, reasons associated with the working environment, which affect all colleagues regardless of their demographic – progression opportunities, school culture, feeling valued, support from leadership and management, professional development opportunities and mental health and wellbeing – were chosen by a total 56% of respondents.



Women who left teaching aged 30-39

The top 5 reasons that women left teaching aged 30-39 are as follows:

Reason	%
1. Workload	69%
2. Lifestyle choice - i.e. wanting to work fewer hours, seeking a better work-life balance or to pursue other interests	53%
3. Mental health/ wellbeing	50%
4. Family commitments – children	42%
5. School Culture	38%

Table C: Top 5 reasons that women left teaching aged 30-39

It is also worth noting the 6th to 8th most popular reasons, given the small percentage difference between rankings 5-8:

Reason	%
6. Pressure from educational monitoring bodies/ school leadership and management	34%
7. Lack of flexible/ part time working arrangements in teaching	33%
8. Childcare logistics	32%

Table D: 6th-8th reasons that women left teaching aged 30-39

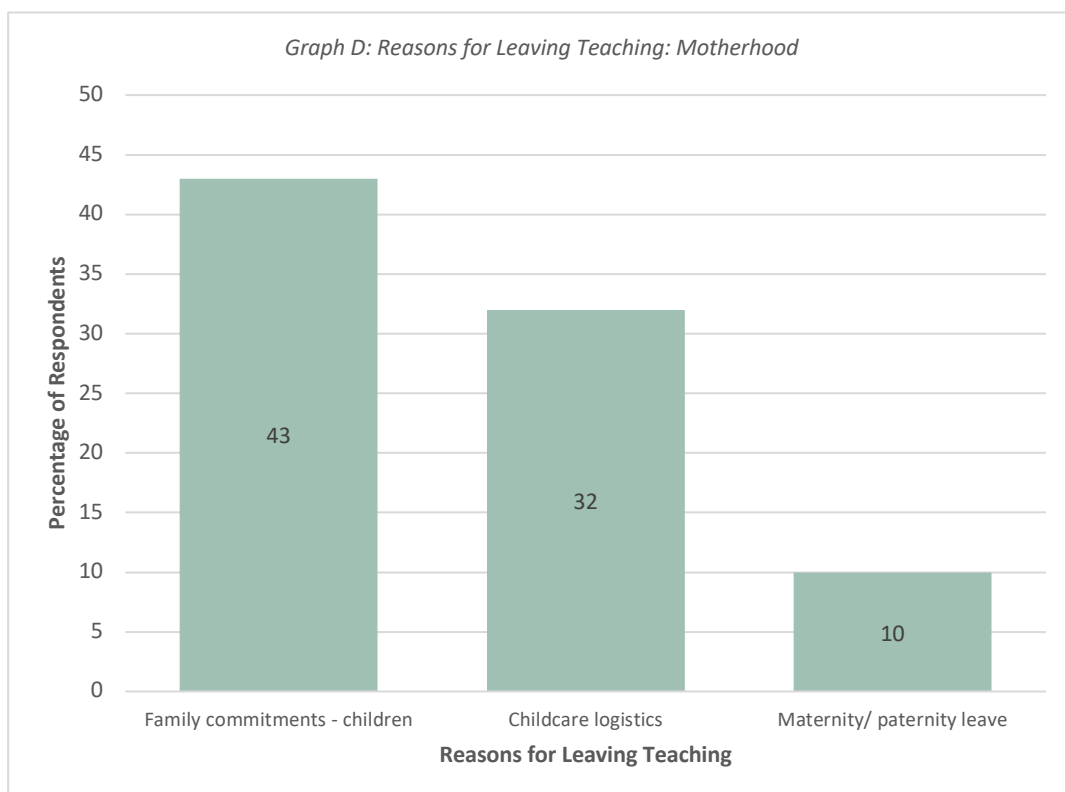


Motherhood as a reason for leaving teaching

Three options on the survey indicated that respondents were mothers:

- Family commitments – children
- Childcare logistics
- Maternity/ paternity leave

In total, 50%³ of respondents explicitly indicated that a reason connected to motherhood had influenced them to leave teaching – 55% of primary respondents, 49% of secondary respondents and 46% of respondents working in other settings.



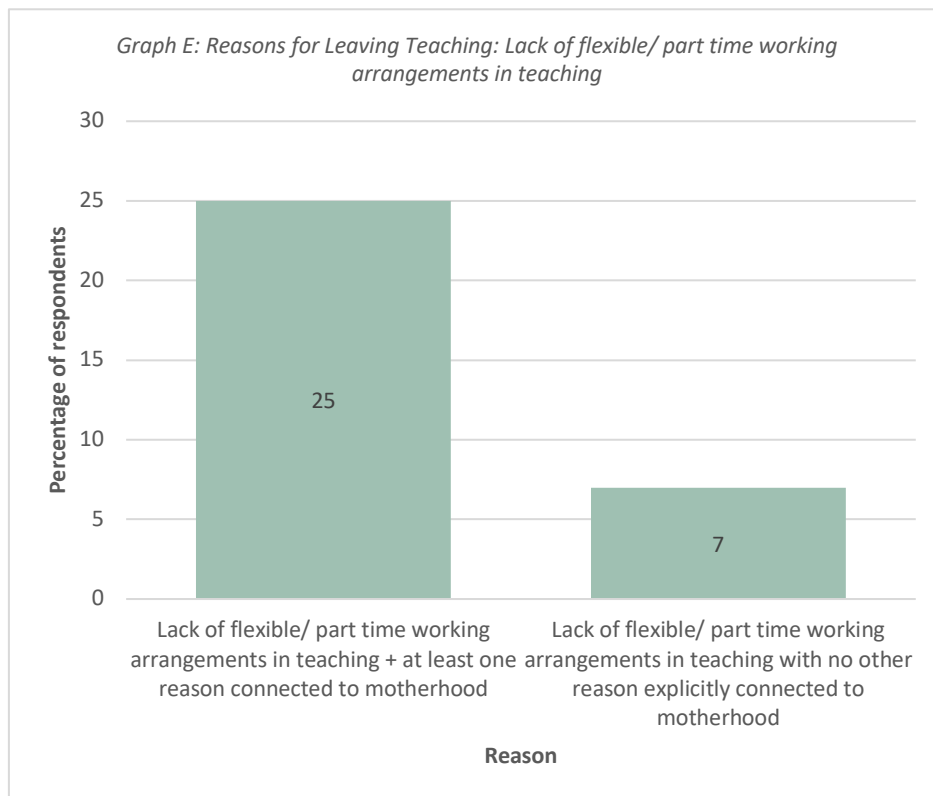
This indicates, without question, that the motherhood plays a significant part in the attrition of female teachers aged 30-39. The education system does indeed suffer from a ‘motherhood penalty’.

³ 2 respondents used the “Other” option to refer to reasons related to “Family commitments”

Lack of flexible/ part time working as a reason for leaving teaching

In total, 32% of respondents chose ‘Lack of flexible/ part time arrangements in teaching’ as a reason that influenced their decision to leave the classroom: 28% of the primary respondents, 38% of the secondary respondents and 36% of those working in other educational settings.

However, not all of these respondents explicitly indicated that they were mothers, or made the connection between their status as mothers and the lack of flexible working arrangements.

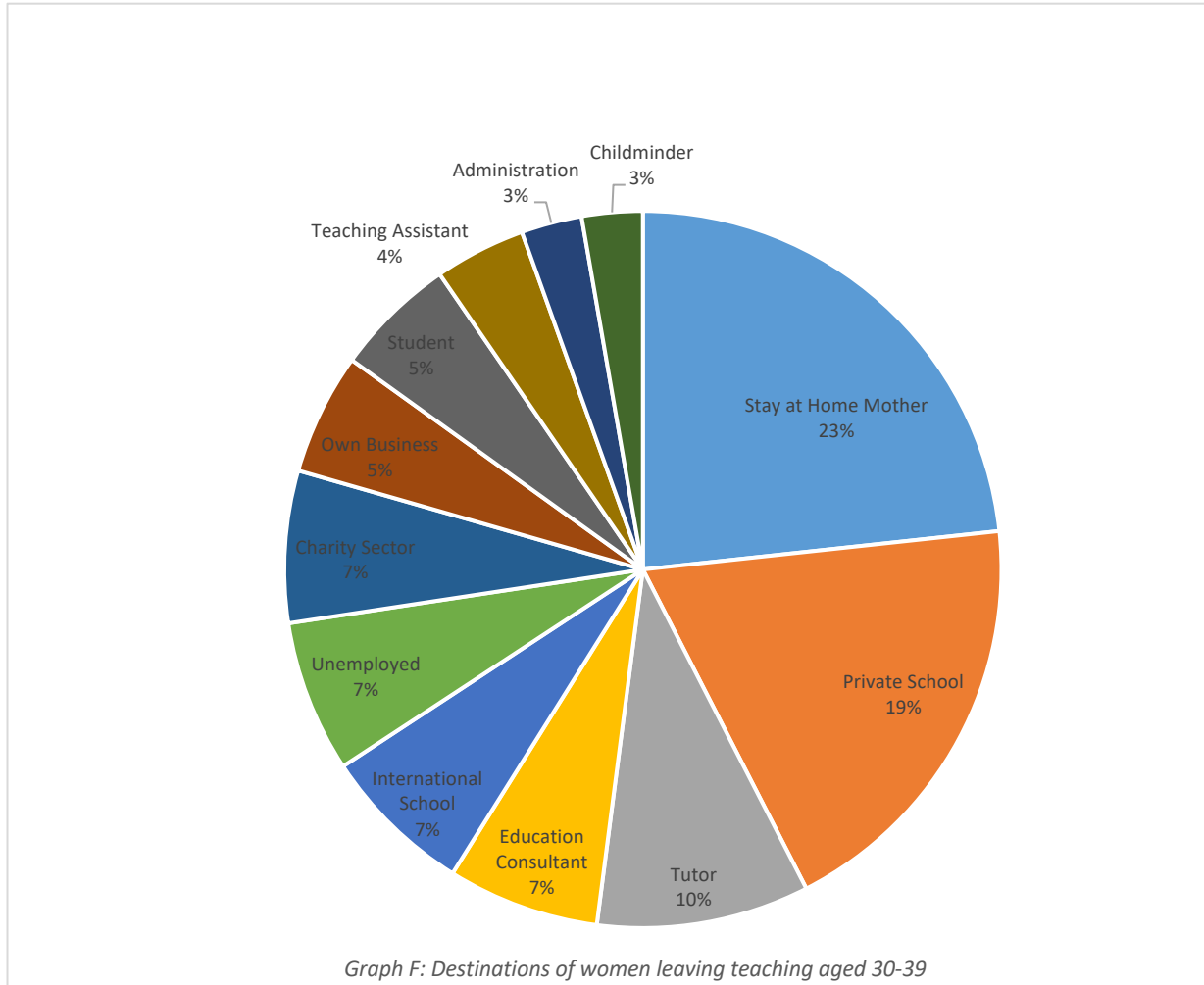


21% of primary teacher respondents gave both ‘lack of flexible/ part time working arrangements in teaching’ *and* a reason connected to motherhood as factors influencing their decision to leave, in comparison to 26% of secondary respondents and 30% of those working in other types of schools.



Destinations of women aged 30-39 leaving teaching

Respondents no longer teaching in the UK state sector have left for a broad variety of destinations, the most popular of which are shown in Graph F.



Here we can compare the destination of leavers with the NFER’s analysis of teacher destinations in *Should I Stay or Should I Go? NFER Analyses of Teachers Joining and Leaving the Profession*:

Destination	Leavers, NFER, 2016	Women aged 30-39 Leavers, MTPT Project 2018-2021
Teacher in a private school	16%	19%
Teaching assistant in a school	15%	4%
Non-teaching role in a school	19%	7%



Employed in the non-school public sector	9%	29%
Working outside the UK	1%	7%
Looking after family	7%	23%
Unemployed	8%	7%
Student	1%	5%

Table E: Comparison of Leavers' Destinations – NFER, 2016 / MTPT Project 2018-21

Of the 251 respondents giving a reason linked to motherhood as influencing their decision to leave teachers, 100 (40%) described their status as either “Stay at Home Mother” or “Unemployed”. 39 (16%) of these mother-respondents are now teaching in private or international schools.

The specific destinations of these mother-leavers will be explored in more detail in later reports, however if half of the respondents to the survey were mothers, then Table E highlights the deception that may lie in the original NFER analysis of labour force data. As well as the 7% of teachers leaving to ‘look after family’, motherhood is likely to be contributing to a significant number of teachers who are leaving the profession to work in private schools, in the public sector, to work in international schools and to study. Motherhood (or fatherhood) could therefore be a factor at play in the decision-making of up to 34% of those teachers who leave the workforce every year, even beyond the women aged 30-39 demographic.

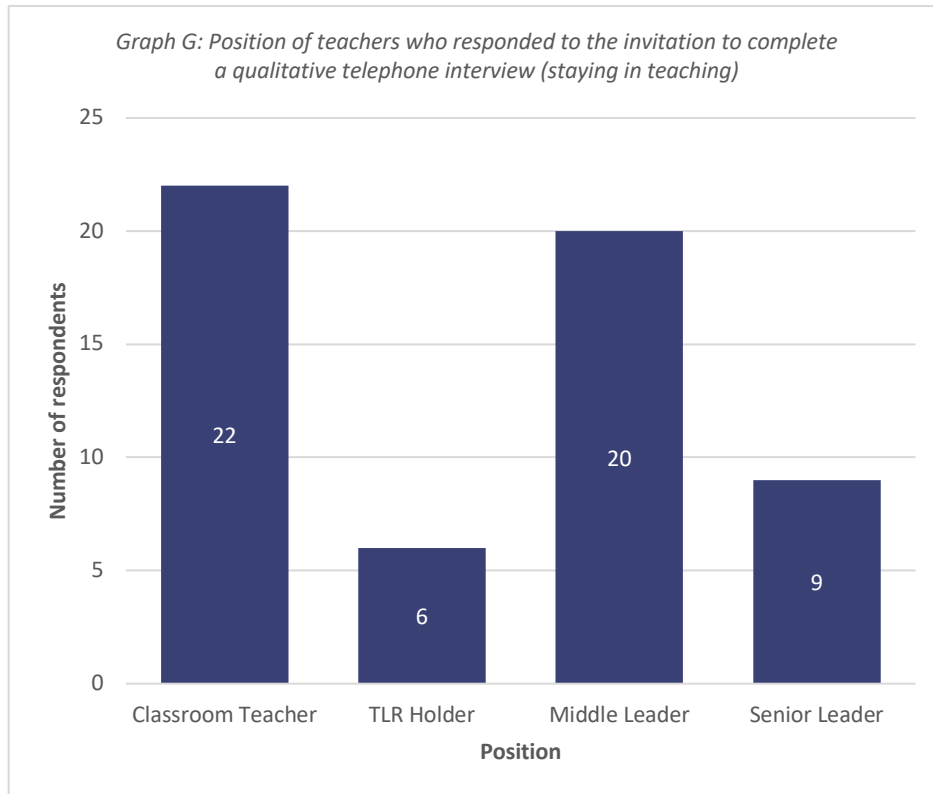
Findings

Telephone Interview Respondents

56 participants aged 30-39 who were **still teaching** agreed to take part in the qualitative telephone interviews and provided additional information as part of their agreement to take part in the interviews. 81% of the 56 teachers who were invited to take part in the interviews were mothers, and of the 44 interviews that took place (43 of which could be transcribed), 90% were mothers.

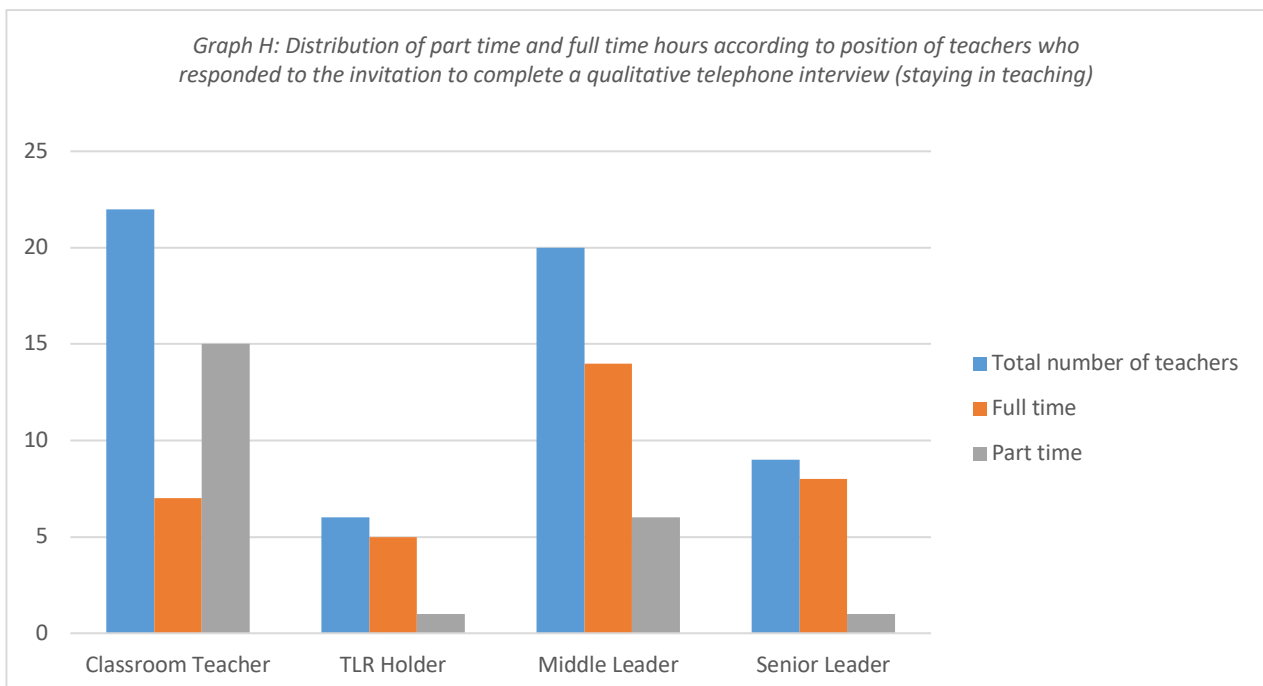


Graph G below shows the positions of the original 56 respondents:



Of these 56 teachers, 33 worked full time, 23 worked part time. The overwhelming majority were mothers (82%) and of those mothers, 52% worked full time, and 48% worked part time.

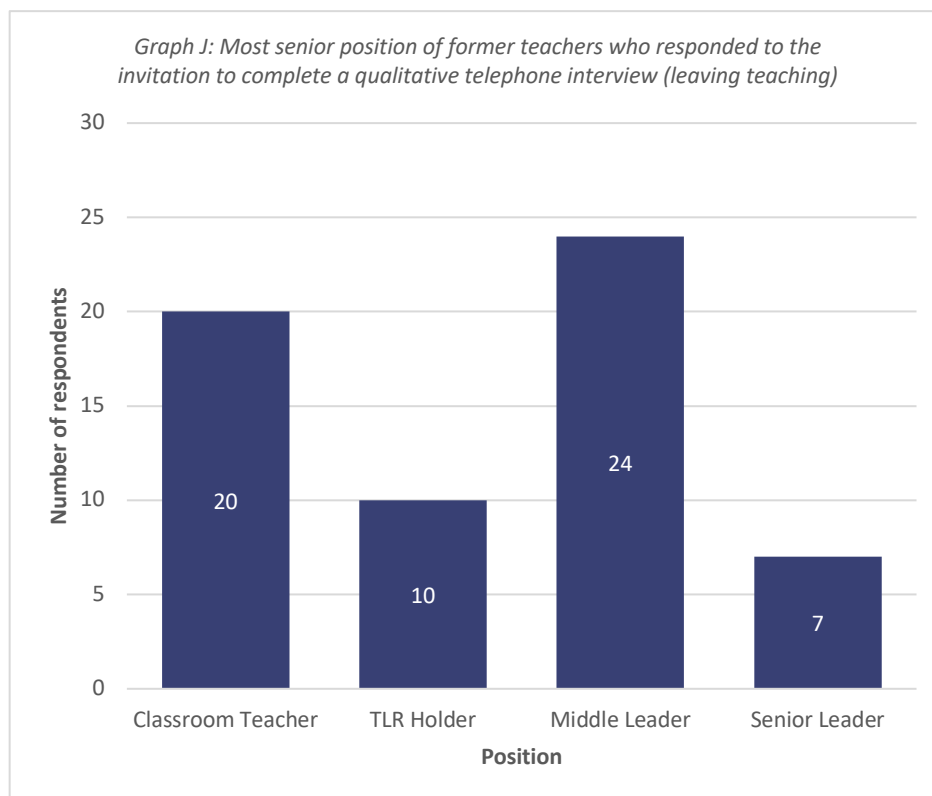
Graph H shows the distribution of part time and full time hours worked according to position.



60 participants who had **left teaching** aged 30-39 agreed to take part in the qualitative interviews and also provided additional information when they signed up. 82% of the 60 teachers invited to interview were mothers, and of the 38 that took part in the interviews (34 of which were transcribed), 83% were mothers.

Graph J below shows the most senior positions held by the original 60 respondents during their teaching career. However, it is important to note that this may not be the position they held in the year they left teaching. As later reports will show, one of the conflicts between motherhood, flexible working and teaching is that some participants chose, or were forced to relinquish positions of responsibility in order to secure flexible or part time working hours, or when attempting to achieve a desired work-life balance.

Graph J should therefore be read as the teaching or leadership *capacity* or potential for leadership that has been stunted, redirected or lost, as represented by those women aged 30-39 willing to participate in our interviews.

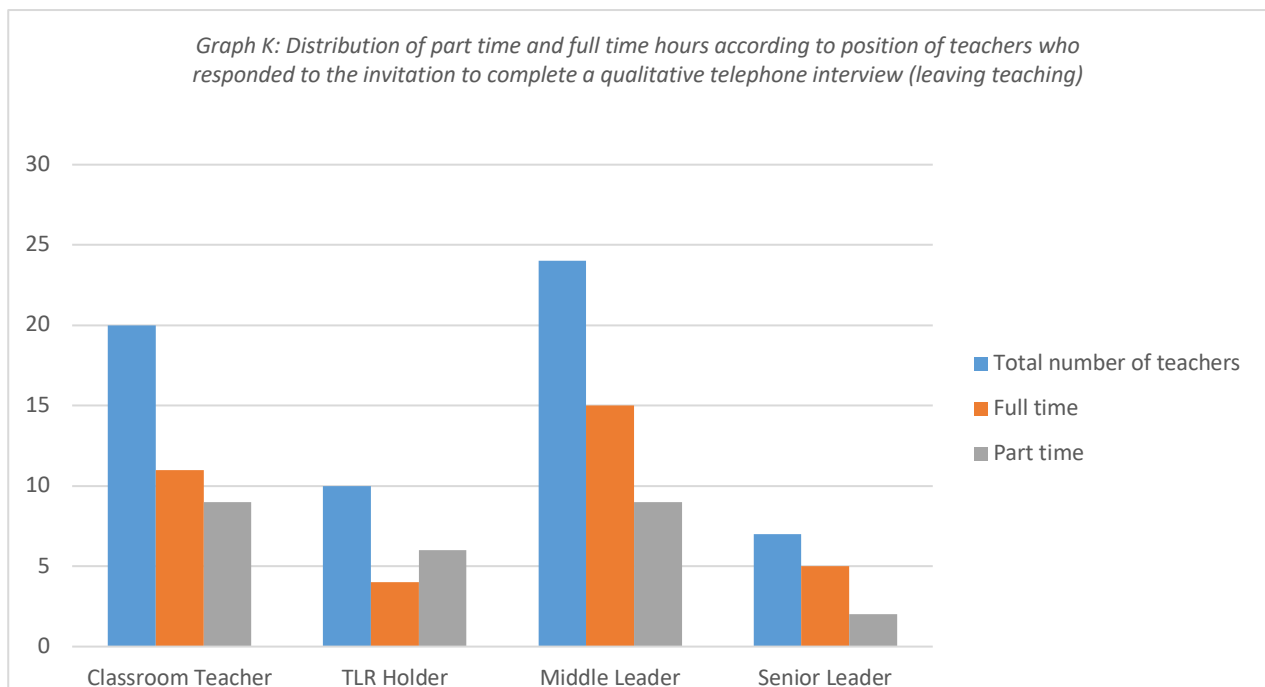


An interesting correlation is appearing around the vulnerability of classroom teachers and middle leaders and the attraction of the support and networking / coaching / CPD provision of The MTPT Project between the information in Graph J and The MTPT Project's 2021 members' survey (also available through your Light Research subscription). This data encourages school leaders to pay particular attention to class teachers and middle leaders in the 30-39 age bracket, particularly if they are mothers. It also draws our attention to the relationship between women in the 30-39 age bracket, motherhood and the gender disparity in school leadership pointing to a career ceiling for mothers at the middle leader mark.



Of these 60 teachers, 32 worked full time in the year that they left teaching, 27 worked part time and one worked full time, flexibly. The overwhelming majority were mothers (83%) and of those mothers, 54% worked part time, and 44% worked part time. All of the respondents who worked part time were also mothers.

Graph K shows the distribution of part time and full time hours worked according to the most senior positions held by respondents before they left teaching. Again, whilst this graph gives us a taste of the distribution of flexible working across women aged 30-39 who are leaving, it is important to note that this data refers to the year before respondents left teaching, but their position is the highest level they held throughout their careers. Our two part time senior leaders, for example, could have taken a demotion to return to the classroom part time before leaving altogether.



For context, Patience’s graph, included in an article on flexible working for the Chartered College of Teaching’s Impact journal⁴ is a helpful point of comparison:

⁴ Patience, L, *A Raw Deal for Part-Time Leaders?*, Impact Journal, 2021, accessed at: <https://impact.chartered.college/article/a-raw-deal-for-part-time-leaders/>



Number working part time as proportion of full-time equivalent (%)	Heads	Deputy heads	Assistant heads	Teachers
All schools	5	11	13	29
Nursery and primary schools	6	13	18	35
Secondary schools	3	4	7	23
Special schools	5	8	13	26

Here we can see that 29% of teachers across all schools work part time (male and female) in comparison to the 54% of female teachers who left teaching aged 30-39 and the 48% of this demographic who have stayed in teaching. We know that flexible working isn't *just* for parents, but a large part of our part time teaching population is therefore likely to be mothers. However, we can also see that it takes more than the offer of part time hours to retain teachers in the profession.

We can also see that 24% of senior leaders (excluding head teachers) work part time, in comparison to 16% of women who have stayed in teaching aged 30-39, and 3% who *possibly* worked as part time senior leaders at some point during their teaching careers. Senior leadership positions are disproportionately held by men, and so further investigation is needed into the extent to which part time leadership could be a retention measure for women aged 30-39, and mothers in particular, but these findings illustrate that flexible working is just *one* solution for the demographic of this study. If it is paraded as the *only* solution, then much larger issues that push women and mothers to leave will be ignored and therefore perpetuated.

The Motherhood Penalty in Education

To avoid influencing the reasons that were at the forefront of participants' minds when they were responding to the questions in the initial surveys, we deliberately *didn't* ask them whether they were or were not mothers. After all, the initial statistic that we were investigating was *women* aged 30-39, and even the assumption that every woman in this age bracket is a mother is inaccurate. To place a question about motherhood at the start of this more generic exploration risked deterring women aged 30-39 who were *not* mothers from completing the survey, even if the parameters had been made clear. Equally, greater objectivity around the specific reasons that those women who *were* mother had stayed or left teaching is likely to have been achieved without signposting towards their motherhood,



and the bias that results from their own perception of working mothers, teaching as a family friendly career option, the motherhood penalty, or forms of discrimination.

In the Policy Exchange, NFER and NASUWT reports, we see a repeated assumption that women aged 30-39, and those requesting flexible working would be significantly impacted by their status as mothers. Of course, this assumption is not unfounded, but part of the ‘obvious conclusion’ that Simons referred to in 2016: the average age of a first-time mothers in the UK is 28.8 years old⁵ and, according to The Working Families *Modern Families Index, 2019*, “When couples have children, women are even more likely to move to part-time work to accommodate the new demands of home and family”⁶. Indeed, 87% of the 76 teachers who participated in the qualitative interviews that will form the basis of later reports, were mothers – of those who had stayed in teaching aged 30-39, 90% were mothers, and of those who had left, 83% were mothers.

Whilst it is common sense, therefore, that there will be direct links between motherhood when exploring this 30-39 demographic, our initial survey data indicates that even when teachers *are* mothers, this is not necessarily the most significant factor in their professional decision-making. Rather, motherhood and associated logistical and emotional factors are added to an already overburdened saddle-bag, weighed down by the more generic issues facing all teachers – manageable workload, lifestyle choices, mental health, job satisfaction and the simple need to pay the bills.

Motherhood may not be *the* reason that teachers leave aged 30-39, but it may be the straw that breaks the camel’s back in an industry that sometimes allows little movement for any other interests outside of work.

Equally, with only a third of participants citing reasons associated with motherhood as a factor that enabled them to *stay* in teaching, our education system – even with its long holidays and mutually enriching skill-set – may not be as idealistically family-friendly as those outside of teaching may think.

⁵ ONS, *Birth characteristics in England and Wales: 2017*, accessed at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthcharacteristicsinenglandandwales/2017>

⁶ Working Families and Bright Horizons, *Modern Families Index 2019*, accessed at: https://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/BH_MFI_Report_2019_Full-Report_Final.pdf

