

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

A 2018-21 study by The MTPT Project

The names of the participants in these interviews have been changed.

05. We Don't Need Another Hero...?

Although our original survey did not ask leavers whether a lack of role models had anything to do with their decision to leave teaching, 10 of the 28 interview participants who were mothers made reference to an experience associated with a type of role model when talking about their decision to leave. In the context of the interviews, and for this report, when we talk about 'role models', we could be referring to one of the following groups of people:

- Members of school leadership teams
- Much more experienced / older colleagues
- Colleagues at similar ages / stages of parenting or career
- Colleagues slightly ahead of interview participants in terms of age / stage of career / age of children
- Specific formal / informal mentor figures
- Direct influence as well as wider professional circles – i.e. 'colleagues', 'turnover', 'people who had left'

Clearly, within these groups, there are the overlapping identities of leaders, mentors, and peers, and within the interviews we hear about both positive and negative role models. By this, we mean those who have personal or professional characteristics to which interview participants aspire, and that are already aligned to their own values (positive role models), as well as those held up as a bad example, a warning, a future to be avoided (negative role models).

We have collected these different groups under the more generalised heading of 'role models' because the comments in the interviews indicate that they offered participants some form of future vision of their lives, and their choices to leave were influenced in some way by a potential reality that they either did, or did not want. Donald E. Gibson refers to this as the forming of a 'viable self-concept'¹, and his, and numerous other studies point to the importance of both positive and negative role models and mentors in organisations – from schools and universities to large corporate companies.

When exploring the importance of role models, Gibson found that – more than a simple good / bad dichotomy – individuals' choice of role models changes according to their age and stage of life. Gibson refers to patterns in employees at different stages of their careers, noting that 'in early stages, individuals pay attention to role models to create a viable self-concept; in middle stages they seek to refine their self-concept, and in late stages, they seek to enhance

¹ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4135151>



and affirm their self-concept.’ This is particularly interesting for the participants in this report who fall into the ‘middle stage’ demographic where, according to Gibson, they are ‘more likely to see their role models as sources of specific, and often negative attributes.’² According to this research, mother teachers are therefore more likely to focus on who they *don’t* want to be like, rather than seeking out mentors and role models that provide them with a model of a positive future.

Increasingly, studies around role models are focusing on their importance to minority communities, including women and ethnic minority groups. Lockwood’s review of research into effective role models for college students found that ‘the importance of gender matching in mentor relationships is mixed’, however her own 2006 study consistently demonstrated that same-gender matching proved beneficial for women in professional environments: ‘After exposure to the outstanding women, female participants viewed themselves as more successful; outstanding men had no impact on their self-perceptions’; ‘women often chose female role models who overturned rather than confirmed traditional gender role stereotypes’. Lockwood found that female role models were important to women ‘because women may expect to face gender-related obstacles in their careers’ so ‘it may be especially important for them to know that another woman has been successful.’³

In her research, Lockwood explores both male- and female-dominated professions. For the female-heavy education sector, the good news is that Lockwood’s research found that men were affected very little by the gender of role models offered to them as ‘outstanding’. Our female colleagues and leaders therefore arguably have as positive an impact on men as women. However, as men are proportionately overrepresented at leadership level, particularly in secondary schools, women in the 30-39 age bracket have fewer women to look up to. This could particularly impact secondary middle leaders whose interest in the next step into senior leadership coincides with the childbearing bracket of their thirties.

Indeed, of the 10 respondents in this report, 8 were former secondary teachers, 1 was a primary teacher and 1 was an EYFS teacher. Their level of seniority provides a fairly even spread with 3 middle leaders, 4 TLR holders and 3 classroom teachers. However, it is interesting that the middle leadership ceiling that we are seeing amongst MTPT Project community members and many of the leavers participating in our initial survey, is coming up once again amongst the group of participants in this report.

The findings of the 2019 WomenEd survey delved into female role models in education more specifically, exploring the impact of the early stages of the WomenEd network in the UK. Kay and Berry talk specifically about the network providing ‘opportunities for role modelling, mentoring and sponsorship... and career coaching’, which provides ‘alternative constructions of leadership’ beyond stereotypically male models. Findings from Kay and Fuller’s interviews revealed that ‘the majority of the women thought making connections with like-minded people was important... The relationships being built were described as deepening friendships’⁴, a relationship that we will see can sometimes be lacking for mothers aged 30-

² <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4135151>

³ <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.661.5679&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

⁴ <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/crelm/documents/womened-report.pdf>



39 within their immediate school contexts. According to the WomenEd survey, the impact of providing female teachers with positive role models, or highlighting alternative ways of working and leading to the negative role models in teachers' surroundings, is exponential. When women have role models, they feel more confident to be a role model to others, support 'colleagues in seeking equitable pay', signpost 'opportunities for other women', apply for headship, become trustees, and speak at events.

However, we have no data indicating how many female head teachers take periods of maternity leave whilst in post, so we don't know the extent to which female teachers can see the combination of new motherhood and leadership modelled at the highest levels. What we *do* know is that the 2021 gender pay gap report from WomenEd, ASCL, NAHT and the NGA indicates a fiscal motherhood penalty that begins to widen significantly aged 30-39. This suggests that women's progression stalls around this key age bracket associated with motherhood⁵, and therefore the likelihood of women being exposed to visible role models who are new mothers / mothers of young children *and* leaders is low.

Earlier US-based research from Haslett et al. highlights why a lack of female role models in positions of authority damages the potential for gender equality along the leadership pipeline. Haslett et al. found that 'increasing the visible presence of female authority figures in the work setting is a major solution to the problems women face as leaders', increasing both interest in certain professional routes, and 'career achievement'. They go on to share the good news that 'the role models do not have to be persons with whom the women... have a personal relationship. They simply have to be visible.' This is a great reminder of why networks such as WomenEd and The MTPT Project are important, and the simple power of sharing case studies and stories through websites, social media presence and in-person networking events.

However, the sparsity of visible role models for mothers of young children in both education and wider society reflects the ongoing barriers that mothers may face in securing these positions in the first place, or the confidence they have in celebrating, rather than hiding the fact that they are balancing – even thriving – as both mothers and professionals.

Public figures such as Labour MP Stella Creasy, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Arden, or tennis superstar Serena Williams gain outpourings of support whenever the crossover between their motherhood and professional lives is visible, or when they speak up about their experiences of motherhood as leaders in their fields. Unfortunately, when these women are confronted with public conflict or backlash when combining these two identities, the ongoing existence of the motherhood penalty is also very evident to those who look up to them. Whether this be witnessing MPs being formally banned from bringing their babies into the House of Commons (Creasy 2021), athletes being deseeded for taking a period of maternity leave including the recovery from a traumatic birth (Williams 2018) or journalists challenging world leaders on their childcare plans (Arden 2017), we are still seeing mothers being penalised by social attitudes and organisational structures. As we will see later in this report, when role models are observed experiencing negative incidents in schools, mothers begin to

⁵ <https://www.nga.org.uk/getmedia/cfd4a912-52b6-4847-b249-33a0331c04c5/Closing-the-gender-pay-gap-in-Education-a-leadership-imperative.pdf>



‘refine their self-concept’ by weighing up whether they do or do not want to fall victim to similar circumstances.

The comments about role models from the 10 participants included in this report occurred when they were asked to expand on their reasons for leaving teaching selected in the initial survey:

- Mental health or wellbeing
- School culture
- Lack of flexible / part time working arrangements in teaching
- Lifestyle choice - i.e. wanting to work fewer hours, seeking a better work-life balance or to pursue other interests
- Family commitments (children)

One respondent also added ‘Health-related reasons’ using the ‘other’ option in her initial survey response, and expanded on this in her interview. Role models were also mentioned in response to two of the follow up questions posed exclusively to interview participants:

- What conditions, if any, would tempt you to return to teaching in the future?
- Could you describe your maternity leave experience to me?

The impact of role models on teachers’ decision to leave the profession fall largely into two categories: undesirable or negative role models, or lack of role models altogether, with some brief insight from two participants into the impact of positive role models in their former school settings.

We will go into a full analysis of the comments from all 10 participants later in this report, but below is an example of the five subcategories we have organised their comments into:

Negative Role Models

Undesirable role models

“It made me stop and think: these were all good people. They were all hardworking people. They had young families. Why were so many of us, you know, struggling physically and mentally with the demands of the job?”- *Rebecca*

Lack of role models

“They were sacrificing family time as well and so they left teaching completely. And so, I had very few people to call on.” – *Seren*

Lack of trust in supposed role models

“Unfortunately I didn’t have the confidence in the leadership team to enact the values that they said they held in a way that had integrity and purpose.” – *Harriet*



Positive Role Models

Positive role models

“There were a few individuals who made a big difference who did interact on a much more human level and middle managers and then just colleagues and that was what kept me going.” – *Sara*

Being the role model

“I was the only person at the conference with children. But again, it makes a mark, it made them you know, set the trend. I think if people did bring their children in following years.” – *Gauri*

Trigger warning: before continuing with this report, please be aware that some interview comments refer to specific anecdotes about terminal illness and death, which some readers may find upsetting.

Undesirable role models

7 of the 10 participants who referred to role models spoke anecdotally about negative role models, selecting the ‘specific, and often negative attributes’ that Gibson identified as typical of middle-stage professionals. These attributes included:

- Poor physical health of older, more experienced colleagues
- Poor mental health of colleagues, often as a result of workload
- The perception of damaged relationships with families or spouses
- Colleagues as victims of negative school cultures

Poor Physical and Mental Health of Role Models

A 2020 study by UCL and the Nuffield Foundation found that the primary causes of teacher stress were workload and ‘emotional contagion’ where the stress felt by colleagues causes others to feel stressed. Whilst this study concluded that ‘the mental health and personal wellbeing of teachers in England seems to have remained broadly stable over the last 20 years’, it highlighted that teachers ‘may be more likely to report mental health problems now... than previously’⁶, which could misleadingly indicate an objective *increase* in stress levels. Indeed, this increase is reflected in Education Support’s 2021 Teacher Wellbeing Index which reported more concerning findings: 72% of respondents felt stressed, 46% ‘always go into work when unwell’, 42% ‘think their organisation’s culture has a negative impact on their wellbeing’ and 54% ‘have considered leaving the sector in the past two years due to pressures on their mental health’.⁷

⁶ <http://repec.ioe.ac.uk/REPEC/pdf/qsswp2101r.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-organisations/research/teacher-wellbeing-index/>



A 2018 DfE qualitative study of former teachers found that ‘one in five primary and secondary teachers... reported that they suffered stress and health issues due to heavy workloads, and a lack of support shown by their SLT.’ These health issues included ‘sleeping problems, panic attacks and anxiety issues’, ‘physical health and ... memory’ and were experienced by teachers who had been in the profession for over 15 years⁸ – fitting with the demographic of our own study, of teachers aged 30-39, presuming that the majority of our participants began their teaching careers in their early twenties.

The following anecdotes from participants Rebecca and Josephine recount very specific examples of poor physical health, including moments of tragedy in the lives of more senior colleagues. Whilst these health incidents were not *caused* by the practical or emotional strain of teaching, they gave Rebecca and Josephine pause to reflect on their own futures, and priorities:

“The Head of Maths had a very serious stroke and nearly died and then had to recover his ability to walk and speak. One of my friends left teaching. She was a slightly older lady. She left teaching and within a couple of weeks she was diagnosed with terminal cancer.” – *Rebecca*

“It made me stop and think: these were all good people. They were all hardworking people. They had young families. Why were so many of us, you know, struggling physically and mentally with the demands of the job?” – *Rebecca*

“The other people that I was working with also went off very ill with stress and were ill as a result – physically or mentally.” – *Rebecca*

“Our head teacher became terminally ill and so she had to leave.” – *Josephine*

The variety of terms used as labels for the different colleagues referred to in these comments – ‘The Head of Maths’, ‘one of my friends’, ‘slightly older lady’, ‘head teacher’, ‘good people’, ‘hardworking people’, ‘us’, ‘other people that I was working with’ – emphasises the variety of role models that surround teachers – the influences that are shaping teachers’ perceptions of their futures are not simply senior leaders, mentors, or mothers with older children. Particularly poignant is the reflection to Kay and Fuller’s findings that supportive female communities offer teachers ‘deepening friendships’, in Rebecca’s reference to ‘one of my friends’. Hearing about her ‘friend’s’ diagnosis of cancer would have had an important emotional impact on Rebecca, influencing her own sense of perspective and priorities.

Equally, however, Josephine’s reference to her ‘head teacher’ possibly echoes Haslett et al.’s findings that role models do not always have to be ‘persons with whom the women... have a personal relationship’. What is notable here is the symbolism of a head teacher as one of the career pinnacles to which some teachers may aspire. Head teachers are leaders in their community, and their actions, decisions and experiences impact their staff, students, their students’ families, governors, all those involved with the wider network of the school and

⁸ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/686947/Factors_affecting_teacher_retention_-_qualitative_investigation.pdf



even local or national school leadership networks. The suffering of such a significant figure can make a huge impression on those who look up to them as role models and leaders. When confronted with the impending death of a school leader, teachers aspiring to headship may significantly re-evaluate their ambitions or question their worth in comparison to the other priorities in their lives.

The pain and shock of bearing witness to this suffering is also highlighted in Rebecca and Josephine's word choice: 'very serious stroke', 'nearly died', 'terminal cancer', 'terminally ill', 'struggling'. Rebecca's subsequent comment – 'It made me stop and think' – and her use of 'us', illustrates the extent of the impact of being confronted with others' and therefore her own mortality. Rebecca sees the commonalities between herself, her Head of Maths and her 'slightly older lady' friend, collecting the values of 'good people', 'hardworking' and priorities of 'young families' and focuses on the negative attributes of 'struggling physically and mentally with the demands of the job' as something to which she does not aspire.

Rebecca's less specific comment about 'other people... off very ill with stress' who 'were ill as a result – physically or mentally' reflects the landscape painted by the 2021 Teacher Wellbeing Index Report and suggests that some female teachers within our 30-39 demographic can feel as if stress, physical and mental illness, are unavoidable aspects of their futures in teaching. This focus on poor mental health as a negative aspect of the available role models – 'colleagues within my department' – was also referenced by Olivia:

"I've seen colleagues within my department, not even just within my school, within my own department have to take longer periods of time off work for their mental health." – *Olivia*

These comments focusing on colleagues' and leaders' poor mental and physical health of role models could be one of the reasons that teachers of *any* demographic leave teaching, not just mothers aged 30-39. Indeed, stress and teacher wellbeing linked to poor behaviour, job satisfaction and workload are mentioned throughout the 2021 RAND report, *Understanding Teacher Retention* which deals with the teaching profession as a whole.⁹ The MTPT Project's study revealed that rather than one stand-out push-factor for women aged 30-39, there were numerous smaller grains of sand that became particularly impossible to manage when motherhood was thrown into the equation, and the negative physical and mental health experiences of our participants' role models was one of these grains.

The Perception of Role Models' Damaged Relationships with Family / Spouses

Where comments began to specify motherhood, we see again that the role models on offer are predominantly negative:

"I started to look at the people who were above me and noticed that a lot of them had got divorced or were seeing their children a lot less." – *Kallie*

⁹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/958634/Understanding_Teacher_Retention_Report_by_RAND-February_2021.pdf



“I was sat in the staff room and a colleague came in crying. She had children that were older than me. And I said, “What’s wrong?” and she said, “Oh, I asked if – I’ve got a free period on Friday – and I asked if I could have my form covered so I could go and see this assembly that my child was speaking in... It was refused. She had to be there for form.” – *Sophie*

“I remember another colleague who had just retired... she turned to me and I said, “oh, are you excited to retire?” She said, “yeah”. “Well you can spend more time with your children.” “Well, they’re grown older now, so it doesn’t really matter.” But her daughter had said to her that she felt, you know, that she was a great Mum and blah, blah, but looking back, “you gave all your time to other children but you were never there at any of my events.”” – *Sophie*

Tangled up in these comments are a number of social narratives that dictate our perceptions of positive and negative identities, namely being in a ‘happy / unhappy relationship’, and being a ‘good / bad mother’. These two identities are deliberately in quotation marks as we know what a complex concept they both are, and it is a core value of The MTPT Project’s to understand that wellbeing means different things for different people, and to celebrate individuals choice.

Divorce can be the best decision for both a couple and their family, but Kallie’s comments suggest that she perceives it to be a negative thing, and somehow linked to her colleagues’ status as leaders (i.e. put very simply, the stresses of leadership result in divorce). Whilst her assumption is over-simplified, there is some data to suggest that ‘promotion to top jobs’ increases the likelihood of divorce for women in heterosexual couples more so than it does for men, though the reasons for this are multifaceted¹⁰. Indeed, our previous report, **04. What’s Love Got to Do With It?** highlighted the impact that an unhappy teacher-wife can have on her husband / partner and wider family, and the improvements that leaving teaching made to some teachers’ relationships. When it comes to the role modelling of what Kallie perceived to be ‘happy / unhappy relationships’, her phrasing of ‘I started to look at the people who were above me and noticed...’ suggests the realisation of a pattern she did not want to replicate.

For both Kallie and Sophie, the models of motherhood they are offered by their role models also do not meet the expectations or desires they have of themselves. ‘Seeing their children a lot less’, giving ‘all your time to other children’, missing their own children’s events, and finding that it is only when children are ‘grow older’ that mothers have the time to spend with them, are all perceived to be undesirable examples of motherhood. This jars against Lockwood’s findings that women were attracted to role models that ‘overturned rather than confirmed traditional gender role stereotypes.’ For Kallie and Sophie, the inability of female role models to combine traditional ideas about being a wife and a mother seem to serve as cautionary tales of what they do *not* want to become. In this way, Sophie and Kallie have opted for choices that conform to the more traditional expectations of marriage and

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200121-why-promoted-women-are-more-likely-to-divorce>



motherhood because they have not been exposed to role models where they perceive their personal values combined with professional success or fulfilment.

What is noticeable about Sophie's first comment is the weighing up of what teaching may ask of her, and what she will be permitted to ask of teaching. For the colleague in her anecdote, the 'assembly' that her child was speaking in seems to have far more value placed on it than the form time that colleague had requested to be covered on one occasion. The description of the colleague's reaction – 'came in crying' – emphasises the emotional significance of this event and the mismatched values between the colleague and her senior leadership team. Not only does the refusal to cover her form time result in a damaged relationship with the colleague in the anecdote, it also has a knock on effect on those witnessing the event. When Sophie makes specific reference to the fact that her colleague is slightly ahead of her in terms of the age of her children – 'she had children that were older than me' – it is clear that she is time travelling to a future where she, too, will make such requests and have them refused.

The same is true for Sophie's second anecdote with her 'colleague who had just retired'. The direct connection between the 'assembly' and the fact that the colleague nearing retirement was apparently 'never there' for any of her own children's events have stayed in Sophie's mind. The recounting of 'you gave all your time to other children but you were never there at any of my events' is heavy in a sense of guilt and betrayal, all of which seems to have shaped a model of motherhood that Sophie doesn't want – an absent mother, with the comment 'it doesn't really matter' and 'blah, blah', possibly even suggesting a perception of misguided or erroneous priorities – a motherhood wasted in the name of teaching.

Studies from Harvard University have actually revealed that there are many benefits to the children of working mothers: daughters are more likely to have supervisory positions at work, and higher earnings, and sons are more likely to have 'egalitarian gender attitudes about women and men in the workplace', and contribute more to caring responsibilities.¹¹ An informal poll focusing specifically on UK teachers, later blogged about by Pippa McKay, found that the vast majority of the children of teachers responding to her survey felt that they had benefitted from having a teacher as a parent. Whilst the conversation called upon adults to share their childhood experiences, and therefore relates to 'the lives of teachers twenty years ago' rather than being comparable to the participants in this study, 89% of whom had left teaching in the last decade since 2011, the poll revealed a disconnect between the parents' view – particularly mothers' – and their children. McKay found that 'parents are intensely worried that their children will miss out, but the majority of the children are, even with retrospect, happy.'¹²

That Sophie's perspective is in conflict with some of the wider research available, however, is almost irrelevant. What was missing, for both her and Kallie, were the role models who exemplified this research by showing her the positive aspects of working motherhood. Without a blueprint to work from, Sophie and Kallie were therefore only able to see the negative attributes to which they did not aspire.

¹¹ <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/kids-of-working-moms-grow-into-happy-adults>

¹² <https://msmksays.wordpress.com/2020/08/06/can-you-really-manage-a-teaching-career-and-be-a-good-parent/>



Role Models Falling Victim to Toxic School Cultures

In our report **03. What did we find out?** we shared that workload was the main reason that teachers left the profession aged 30-39, and poor school culture the fifth most popular reason on our initial survey. However, the issue of workload and school culture are push factors for teachers of all demographics, and have been widely reported on for decades. It is for this reason that we are not focusing exclusively on these topics in our report write-ups.

However, because of their significance to retention and staff wellbeing, there will be an inevitable crossover between workload and school culture and the other themes that we *will* focus on in our reports. When it comes to the topic of role models, we see workload and toxic school cultures increasing staff attrition and negatively impacting staff wellbeing. For Seren and Sara, this meant either that the role models available to them were those suffering because of toxic school cultures, or were non-existent because they had chosen (or had felt forced) to leave:

“The school I was in, before I went on maternity leave, there had been quite a few people that I’d worked with there who had a lot of experience who had actually left teaching completely due to maybe the ideas and score of how hard you are meant to work.” – *Seren*

“They were sacrificing family time as well and so they left teaching completely. And so, I had very few people to call on.” – *Seren*

“I was told on my first day to watch my back by a senior leader, actually, oh no by a middle leader. I said something – I made a compliment about one of the senior leaders. I said, “oh, she seems friendly”, and the middle leader who I said it to said, “Yeah, watch your back.” So that was on my first or second day. And it was quite warranted, actually. There was about 50% staff turnover in the first year I was there and then another 25% or something in the second year.” – *Sara*

The role models referred to in these comments are far vaguer than the colleagues specified by Kallie, Sophie, Olivia, Rebecca and Josephine – ‘quite a few people that I’d worked with’, ‘they’, ‘very few people’, ‘a senior leader’, ‘a middle leader’, ‘staff’. However, Haslett et al. remind us that ‘role models do not have to be persons with whom the women... have a personal relationship. They simply have to be visible.’ In this case, the visible role models are perceived to be leaving because of workload or school culture, and from each of these groups, Seren and Sara are collecting the negative attributes to which they do *not* aspire: ‘how hard you are meant to work’, ‘sacrificing family time’, the need to ‘watch your back’, and high rates of staff turnover. Here, we see that the ‘alternative constructions of leadership’ that Sara, Seren and their colleagues may need, are not modelled in the way that Kay and Fuller identified was so powerfully done within the WomenEd community.

In Seren’s first comment, and in Sara’s anecdote there is the sense that those who are leaving have the right idea, escaping otherwise overworked or toxic school environments. Whilst the



workload and sacrifices are negative attributes, these colleagues could be viewed as positive role models in that they are refusing to continue to accept these conditions by leaving. Seren's descriptions of these teachers as having 'a lot of experience' and refusing to continue to sacrifice 'family time' suggests a value set that she admires. By leaving teaching herself, Seren may actually be fulfilling an attribute that she has perceived to be positive: the ability to set boundaries and the courage to act in accordance with her core beliefs. Equally, Sara's comment, 'it was quite warranted, actually', and the high percentages of staff turnover she cites, hints at a sense of justification – not just for her role models' decisions to leave – but for her own, later decision to quit teaching.

Whilst leaving may have been a brave and values-based decision for Sara and Seren, the impact of losing experienced teachers like them is hugely negative for our students. Research summarised by David Weston indicates that retaining experienced teachers has a positive impact not just on academic and pastoral outcomes for students, but also that 'more experienced teachers make their colleagues more effective'. Weston writes, 'We can help our most inexperienced teachers simply by ensuring that they are working loosely alongside more experienced colleagues'.¹³

However, as we see with Seren's experience of returning from maternity leave and then as a working parent to a very young child, when role models with 'a lot of experience', leave, so too do colleagues like Seren. According to her comments, this is partly due to the fact that new parents find themselves with 'very few people to call on'. In an environment that – from Seren's perspective – demanded hard work and sacrifice, she had no opportunity for the 'career coaching' that Kay and Fuller found so important to members of the WomenEd community. Weston's literature review tells us that, as an experienced teacher, Seren and Sara themselves are important role models. However, when they leave because they have no one to support them through the challenges they face, this has a further negative impact, creating a catch-22 situation for remaining colleagues and students.

Lack of Trust in Supposed Role Models

Interview comments in the previous section refer to negative attributes modelled by role models who were not necessarily perceived to be at fault, or demonstrating these negative attributes deliberately. Rather, the colleagues, friends and leaders that Rebecca, Josephine, Kallie, Sophie, Sara and Seren talk about are presented as victims of circumstance – suffering from poor physical or mental health, overworked and brought to the end of their tethers by indifference, lack of understanding or toxic school cultures.

Harriet's comments, however, reveal what happens when the leaders, our supposed role models, behave in a way that destroys trust and breeds contempt and scepticism.

“Unfortunately I didn't have the confidence in the leadership team to enact the values that they said they held in a way that had integrity and purpose.” – *Harriet*

¹³ <https://tdtrust.org/2019/03/02/getting-better-teaching-part-1-teacher-experience/>



“There was a lot of talking about what we wanted to do and how we wanted to improve things for the children but then actually, that not really being demonstrated in the way that senior leaders and head teachers conducted themselves.” – *Harriet*

At the heart of these comments is Harriet’s articulation of her own value set: ‘integrity and purpose’, ‘for the children’, ‘the way that senior leaders and head teachers conducted themselves’, a comment that implies that another of Harriet’s core values is that positive role modelling is about behaviour, not just words. Indeed, this reflects Brené Brown’s assertion that for leaders to build trust, they must enact their values:

‘Living into our values means that we do more than profess our values, we practice them. We walk our talk – we are clear about what we believe and hold important, and we take care that our intentions, words, thoughts, and behaviours align with those beliefs.’¹⁴

Harriet is looking for the ‘alternative constructions of leadership’ found to be modelled by the WomenEd community in Kay and Fuller’s survey. Although her leadership team claimed a set of values aligned with her own, and which position them as positive role models – ‘improve for the children’, ‘values they said they held’ – the issue for Harriet were that these values were not enacted. There is therefore a sense of betrayal in Harriet’s comments that her leadership team did not ‘walk their talk’ in the way they ‘conducted themselves’. As we have seen in previous comments about school culture and staff turnover from Sara, Seren and Sophie, such mistrust in leadership or a sense of disappointment in role models leads to unhappy school cultures, in-fighting, high teacher turnover and poor staff wellbeing.

Lack of role models

Seren’s experience of having ‘very few people to call on’ because of staff turnover, appeared as a theme in four further interviews, where participants’ lack of role models contributed to their decision to leave teaching:

“There was a sense that you’re a teacher in school, and you can talk about your family issues, but everybody has to deal with it, so we get on with it. And we don’t really, you know, empathise with each other to a great degree because everyone’s doing it.” – *Gauri*

“Having a senior leadership team who modelled what “enough” looked like as opposed to just saying, “yes, you need more” would have been really helpful for me to keep that balance and keep things in perspective.” – *Harriet*

“It has struck me several times: I just don’t know how people, how mothers, managed to teach and be mothers at the same time. I’m totally like, I can’t imagine coming home from school and looking after my child and then having to plan lessons as well. So I’m

¹⁴ Brown, B. *Dare to Lead*, 2018, Vermilion, London



amazed. It's not a judgmental thing. I think people work differently from me, but it has struck me a few times how hard that must be to have a small child – one year old – going back to a full-time teaching job and dealing with the pressures of motherhood and teaching simultaneously. I think it must be really, really hard.” – *Sara*

“I don't know how people juggle. I know people do. I think if you're passionate enough about it, then you probably make it work.” – *Nicki*

Gauri's comments highlight a missed opportunity for collegiality and role modelling within her school community. She suggests that although there *were* other colleagues with families, and that 'family issues' were discussed, there was no sense of empathy, and no practical solutions to 'face gender-related obstacles' which Lockwood found to 'be especially important' for women to help them improve any conflicts between parenting and teaching. Because of this, the 'deepening friendships' described by Kay and Fuller as so important within the WomenEd community did not seem to exist in Gauri's setting. Rather, she describes a fatalistic sense of 'get[ting] on with it' without empathy or the permission to bring our 'whole selves' to work.

This concept of 'whole self' is touched on by research into organisational leadership by Brené Brown, and asserts that when employees dare to be honest about their vulnerabilities, and can build safe spaces to ask questions and receive emotionally and practically supportive responses, companies benefit from more compassionate, grateful, creative, risk-taking and powerful teams. Instead of this, we see in Gauri's description of her former school, a culture that reinforces 'the myth that if we sever the heart... from our work, we'll be more productive, efficient, and... easier to manage'. Of course, our children, and the demands of being both a teacher and a working parent are part of our 'whole self', but whilst mother-teachers may have a blueprint of what it means to be a 'good mother' and a 'good teacher / leader' *separately*, Gauri, Nicki, Harriet and Sara's comments reveal confusion about how exactly to be *both* these things in a way that feels manageable, fulfilling or authentic.

The result, implied by Gauri's comments, is to secret away the accompanying worries, pre-occupations, challenges, and joys of parenthood, and just 'get on with it'. Alternatively, as we can see in Sara, Harriet and Nicki's comments, navigating these two identities alone can lead to a sense of shame or inferiority in relation to our performance as teachers and parents, consequently creating an unrealistic superhero myth of working mothers doing everything, perfectly, all at the same time. Brown's research found that such feelings are a result of organisational cultures that focus on perfectionism, fear of failure, 'attaching productivity to self-worth' and numbing – a style she refers to as 'armoured leadership'.

Sara and Nicki's comments suggest that a lack of role models who foster what Brown refers to as 'daring leadership' – empathy and compassion, boundary-setting, and the modelling of 'rest, play and recovery' – drives a sense of inaccurate, even fictitious, comparison. Sara uses multiple phrases that indicate this: 'I just don't know', 'I can't imagine', 'how hard that must be', 'it must be really, really hard'; Nicki talks about the 'juggle' of parenting and teaching, and Harriet describes her inability to 'keep things in perspective'. All three participants then



compare themselves with an unknown and exaggerated role model, with Sara saying ‘I think people work differently to me’, Nicki feeling that a teacher-mother needs to be ‘passionate enough’ to ‘make it work’ and Harriet feeling that ‘more’ was always needed. What is problematic here is not Sara’s different way of working, Nicki’s implication that she was *not* passionate or Harriet’s desire for balance, but the idea that the correct way to teach manifests itself in the form of the armoured leadership that Brown describes – ‘weaponising fear and uncertainty’, ‘driving perfectionism’, ‘rewarding exhaustion as a status symbol’ and ‘collecting gold stars’.

Lockwood’s study found that ‘After exposure to the outstanding women, female participants viewed themselves as more successful’ partly because in sharing their stories, these women provided solutions to ‘gender-related obstacles in their careers’. According to Kay and Fuller, when women are surrounded by female role models, they gain insight into ‘alternative constructions of leadership’ and are offered ‘opportunities... for career coaching’. However, Sara’s comments reveal a confused idea about the requirement to ‘teach and be mothers at the same time’, repeating the idea that ‘motherhood and teaching’ happen ‘simultaneously’. Both she and Harriet also refer to a heavy workload that invades their home life, with Harriet feeling that ‘more’ was always needed and ‘balance’ and ‘perspective’ were unattainable, and Sara talking about ‘coming home from school and looking after my child and then having to plan lessons as well’.

To tackle this impossible narrative of doing everything, all at once, to the highest possible standards, Kay and Fuller, and Lockwood’s research suggests that effective role models could have provided mothers with young children like Harriet, Sara and Nicki with practical solutions. These might include:

- Sharing a wider range of childcare options compatible to teaching
- Providing emotional support and modelling how to diffuse or reframe feelings of guilt or divided attention
- Supporting with the setting and maintaining of boundaries over the demands on them as both mothers and teachers
- Modelling where to cut corners, or ditch the perfectionism so that they could comfortably feel that ‘good enough really is good enough’
- Revealing different ways to outsource professional and domestic tasks
- Empowering mother-teachers with a voice to speak up against impossible expectations around workload
- Providing alternative models of leadership

Harriet’s desire for a ‘senior leadership team who modelled what “enough” looked like’ *can* be a reality, as we will showcase in later reports from teachers who stayed in the profession aged 30-39. However, the gender imbalance in school leadership positions means that this modelling does not exist in every school, particularly in Harriet’s secondary setting where only 40% of leaders are women (in comparison to 74% of the workforce). What’s more, male head teachers remain a third more likely to be fathers than female head teachers are to be



mothers¹⁵. This means that the likelihood of a school leader who has lived experience of early motherhood, teaching and leadership in secondary settings is low. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Harriet did not have the ‘balance’ and ‘perspective’ she needed to see as a mother, modelled by her senior leadership team.

This creates a catch-22 situation for teacher-mothers: they do not have positive role models surrounding them at their level, just above them, or in senior positions. This limits their growth, or contributes to their decision to leave teaching altogether. Those who come behind them suffer a similar lack of role models, and so few teacher-mothers retain or progress to senior leadership positions to model the practical ways to manage the ‘juggle’, or different ways of leading that enable new mothers to find ‘balance’ and ‘perspective’.

Experience of Positive Role Models

Haslett et al. remind us that ‘increasing the visible presence of female authority figures in the work setting is a major solution to the problems women face as leaders.’ Where these positive role models do exist, therefore, they have a significant impact on their colleagues and staff they lead, as we see in comments from Gauri and Sara:

“I was actually pulled aside when I was about to go on maternity leave for the first time by the head teacher and said, ‘Look, this vacancy’s come up with an SLT position. I don’t want you not to apply because you’re pregnant. And she sat me down, mentored me in her experience – she had her own fears of being passed by because she was pregnant. She said, you know, I don’t want this to happen to you. That was risky, but also a very key moment and a key moment that shaped my understanding of mentoring female, young, pregnant, potential leaders at critical points in their lives.” – *Gauri*

“I was really glad that someone had thought to consider me even though I was about to go on maternity leave.” – *Gauri*

“Leaders can really encourage female teachers to stay within the profession and also to make them feel appreciated that the work that they do, regardless of whether they’re in the classroom or on leave.” – *Gauri*

Gauri’s anecdote is rich in the language of mentoring and powerful leadership – ‘sat me down’, ‘mentored me’, ‘mentoring female, young, pregnant, potential leaders’, ‘shaped my understanding’, ‘encourage female leaders’ – and demonstrates the impact of the ‘career coaching’ that was mentioned in Kay and Fuller’s survey of the WomenEd community. What is noteworthy about the headteacher in Gauri’s story is her insight into the reality of a situation created by societal norms – i.e. the assumption that pregnancy or early motherhood is no time to go for a promotion and the way this expectation disadvantages women at work.

¹⁵ <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/7260/1/download%3Fid%3D17191%26filename%3Dgender-and-headship-in-the-21st-century.pdf>



This head teacher understood that if *she* did not take the risk to explicitly shoulder-tap Gauri at this ‘critical point’, ‘key moment’ in her professional life, and ensure she knew this vacancy was open to her, then nobody else would have done.

This head teacher’s pro-active response to her own ‘fears of being passed by because she was pregnant’ and determination that this would not happen to Gauri, positions her well to act as the same-gender role model conscious of the ‘gender-related obstacles’ that Lockwood found to be so powerful to women. However, the resulting impact of such role-modelling can be achieved by all leaders, regardless of their gender or parenting status. Gauri describes feeling ‘really glad that someone had thought to consider’ her, and believes that such gestures can make female teachers ‘feel appreciated’. These relational outcomes cultivate ‘a culture of belonging, inclusivity and diverse perspectives’¹⁶, building trust and loyalty within teams, and are a powerful antidote to the toxic school cultures we saw in Seren, Sara, Kallie and Olivia’s earlier comments. Where such trust and understanding of our colleagues exists, leaders will know when and how to take advantage of ‘critical points’, even if they can represent ‘risky’ challenging of social norms.

As we outlined at the beginning of this report, the role models referred to in participants’ interview responses were not always senior leaders, but also included colleagues at the same or similar stage, personally and professionally:

“I think a great way forward would be to create the kind of community feeling like the MTPT Project is doing. Creating collegiality between mothers and parents and really addressing the issues that could be really practical and helpful to enabling you to retain your status as an excellent teacher and meet the needs that you want to meet as parents.” – *Gauri*

“There were a few individuals who made a big difference who did interact on a much more human level and middle managers and then just colleagues and that was what kept me going.” – *Sara*

Sara and Gauri refer to ‘individuals’, ‘middle managers’, ‘colleagues’ and ‘The MTPT Project’ as sources of positive role modelling who, when present, were able to make ‘a big difference’ to them as working mothers. This list of role models echoes the ‘Head of Maths’, ‘friends’, ‘good people’ ‘staff’ etc. that were listed as negative role models in earlier comments from Josephine, Rebecca, Sara and Seren. What is important for a positive role model, therefore, is not their position, status or the ‘personal relationship’ we have with them, but the attributes that they represent. For Gauri and Sara these positive attributes include ‘community feeling’, ‘collegiality’, ‘addressing the issues’, ‘practical and helpful’, ‘interact on a much more human level’.

Ronfeldt et al. refer to this sense of ‘community’ and ‘collegiality’ as part of a school’s ‘social resources’, which is essential in building trust between colleagues, and between staff and students to secure positive student outcomes. Where turnover is high in a school – as we

¹⁶ Brown, B. *Dare to Lead*, 2018, Vermilion, London



saw in Seren and Sara's comments – the development and maintenance of these social resources is damaged.¹⁷ However, the impact of such positive attributes is that, instead of leaving mother-teachers with unanswered questions – 'I don't know how', 'I can't imagine' – these positive role models concretely demonstrate the 'practical' ways to 'keep going' and even be an 'excellent teacher and meet the needs that you want to meet as parents' and 'encourage female teachers to stay within the profession' when managing the transition into motherhood and then working motherhood. This is one of the reasons that – as Weston asserts – experienced teachers increase teacher retention, simply by showing up, acting as role models, whether they do this explicitly, or through a quiet sense of 'collegiality', and safeguarding the 'social resources' of a school community.

Being the Role Model

Like Sara, who was left with 'very few people to call on', when mother-teachers find themselves without role models, the challenge is to *be* the role model for others, and take pioneering steps to influence policy and cultural change in organisations. However, this requirement comes at a vulnerable time for mother-teachers. Not only are they managing the transition back into school following a period of maternity leave, or responding to the ongoing 'juggle' of working parenthood, they may be tired or experiencing discrimination at work¹⁸. Being a visible role model for others at this time takes courage, determination and great resilience, but can be a hugely empowering experience:

"I was sent on CPD during maternity leave because I asked to go and I took my children with me. And I was the only person at the conference with children. But again, it makes a mark, it made them you know, set the trend. I think if people did bring their children in following years." – *Gauri*

Here, Gauri seems to have used past experiences of positive and negative role models to shape her own concept of role modelling for others. Gauri felt confident enough to 'ask to go' to a conference whilst on maternity leave despite the fact that she had not seen this modelled previously. Potentially in response to the negative attributes (lack of empathy and feeling of having to 'get on with it') that she felt at her school, Gauri responded by refusing to make her children invisible, or secondary at a time when doing so may have impeded or made her access to professional development far more difficult. In this way, Gauri adheres to Gibson's findings that middle-stage professionals use negative attributes to 'refine their self-concept' by pushing back against behaviours and attitudes that do not align with her own needs and value set.

Gauri's anecdote suggests that she was conscious that, in refining this self-concept, she was taking similar risks, and a similar role to the head teacher who made such a difference to her when inviting her to apply for a promoted position when pregnant. Gauri refers to 'mak[ing] a mark' and 'set[ting] a trend'. According to Gauri's experience, and her reference to the

¹⁷ <https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/TchTrnStAch%20AERJ%20RR%20not%20blind.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-research-findings>



impact of members of The MTPT Project who act as visible role models in similar ways, where it is possible to *be* the role model that mother-teachers find lacking, simple but brave steps can make systemic differences, as Gauri imagines – ‘I think if people did bring their children in following years’.

Suggestions for Schools and Individuals

Providing mother-teachers with access to positive role models within their own schools, or in wider educational networks is very easy to do, but it does rely on a pro-active attitude on the part of the individual or the school.

The benefits of schools to doing so include the retention of experienced teachers, increased leadership capacity across school, increased diversity at leadership level and improved school cultures. This is of particular benefit to schools serving disadvantaged communities where staff turnover can be higher than average.

In general terms, the responses from these 10 participants have indicated that schools can take the following actions to provide mother-teachers aged 30-39 with positive role models who may make the difference between them leaving, or staying in the profession:

- Take the time and steps to know your staff, and understand their values and priorities
- Appoint a volunteer, or create a TLR position for a formal Parent Rep to act as a buddy or point of contact for working parents and teachers approaching, on, or returning from leave
- Offer informal opportunities for parent-teachers to network and build community, by considering family-friendly logistics of professional and social events – lunches or coffee mornings within the school day or during INSET or drop-down days, or good notice for evening or after school events
- Create formal mentoring, and shadowing experiences between colleagues, considering same-gender matching as part of the process
- Signpost mother-teachers to organisations like The MTPT Project, WomenEd or Aspiring Heads so that they can connect with role models outside of their school
- Create an open culture to talk about, celebrate, and meet the needs of teachers balancing caring and working commitments
- Lead by example with leaders talking about their own experiences of working parenthood instead of making children invisible
- Review leadership teams and plan ways to make these positions more accessible to a diverse range of candidates
- Offer flexible working at leadership level, or address workload issues that prevent teachers and leaders from keeping their work within contracted hours
- Ensure that line managers and HR are fully trained in understanding the legal rights to training and development opportunities, and communication around promotions or changes to role for teachers who are pregnant or on maternity leave



- Conduct exit interviews for departing staff to understand motivations for leaving
- Offer 'flexi-days' and raise the awareness of unpaid / paid parental leave to be used for events such as assemblies, first days of school, graduations etc.
- If you are thriving as a mother in a leadership position, share your wisdom and your journey – reassure those who look up to you with practical advice and show them how it can be done, without superhuman abilities. We are all human!

For individuals who have read this report feeling that they are in the same or similar position to our 10 participants, but are not yet ready to leave teaching, there are some ways to improve things before leaving the profession entirely:

- Reach out to the visible role models within your networks, whether these be at school, in your wider communities, on social media or through communities such as The MTPT Project, WomenEd, Aspiring Heads or The Shared Headship Network (there are many more!)
- Case studies from The MTPT Project can be found at www.mtpt.org.uk/case-studies
- The MTPT Project run a bi-annual #mentorme #letmentor campaign on Twitter in September and January
- Curate your social media feeds so that you are following colleagues, celebrities, friends and influencers that affirm a positive, inspiring outlook, or who share empathetic and compassionate content
- Engage with coaching to identify the positive attributes to which you aspire, and the negative attributes you want to avoid to refine your 'viable self-concept' and create a medium- and long-term vision for yourself as a working parent – this is particularly helpful if you find you have to be the role model for others
- Be brave and have the confidence to ask for what you need from your senior leadership team – whether this be flexible working, shadowing or mentoring opportunities, a promoted position, or fairer / more manageable conditions, you may be pleasantly surprised by the support you are offered
- Tell colleagues when you appreciate them, how they have role modelled for you, and the impact that this has had
- If you are thriving as a teacher-mother, share your wisdom – reassure others with practical advice and show them how it can be done, without superhuman abilities. We are all human!

Want to find out more?

If you have any further questions about this report or our findings about the part that role models play in female teachers' decisions to leave teaching aged 30-39, please get in touch. We love engaging with professional and academic dialogue around things we might have missed, questions we haven't answered or ideas we might not have thought of.





If you are an academic or a student and our work is helping with your area of study, we're more than happy to chat informally, or organise more formal events or presentations to share this work with a wider audience.

Just email Emma Sheppard on mtptproject@gmail.com or find her spending too much time on Twitter [@maternityCPD](https://twitter.com/maternityCPD)

