

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.

06. We're on a Road to Nowhere

In our initial survey of women who had left teaching aged 30-39, one of the questions asked participants about the factors that had influenced their decision to leave. Participants were asked to select from a list of 24 reasons, and were invited to detail further reasons with an 'other' option'. Three of these reasons were "lack of progression opportunities in teaching", "lack of professional development opportunities" and "progression opportunity in another industry". Of the 498 respondents to the initial survey, 60 (11.1%) chose either one, or both of these options as reasons for leaving teaching.

Of the 28 participants who were mothers who took part in our qualitative telephone interviews with women who had left teaching aged 30-39, 11 either chose one of these options or commented on progression and professional development opportunities (or lack thereof), in response to the request to expand on the following reasons for leaving selected in the initial survey:

- Lack of flexible or part time working arrangements in teaching
- A desire for change
- Needing a break, i.e. you intend on returning to the classroom in the future
- Lifestyle choice, i.e. wanting to work fewer hours, seeking a better work life balance, or to pursue other interests
- Lack of job satisfaction
- School culture
- Workload
- Child care logistics

One respondent also referred to professional development and progression opportunities in response to an independently-identified factor, "career redirection". These themes were also mentioned in the response to the three follow up questions asked exclusively to interview participants:

- Are there any other factors that influenced your decision to leave teaching?
- What conditions, if any, would tempt you to return to teaching in the future?
- Can you describe your maternity leave experience(s) to me?

At this point, it is important to flag that, whilst there is a strong relationship between access to professional development and progression opportunities, they are not wholly interdependent. A classroom teacher, for example, can enrich their practice with extensive professional development without any formal progression other than their annual step up

the pay spine. Equally, a teacher can progress their career by taking on new or different responsibilities, changing pathways within education, or taking on a formal promotion without completing any form of professional development other than the experience of their day-to-day roles. Finances may be an indicator of progression in some, but not all cases. Additional responsibilities, for example, can be given without a TLR or increase in pay, and take home pay for roles of similar or increased status can fluctuate depending on region, school context, pay scales influenced by experience, or hours worked. A part-time headteacher outside of London, for example, could earn less than a full time Deputy Head in inner London, depending on the specific context.

Based on the literature that informed the design of the initial survey for both female leavers and stayers in the 30-39 age bracket, and the responses from the 11 interview participants included in this report, we are therefore working with the following definitions:

- **Professional Development** – professional learning linked to subject, pedagogy, leadership or another area and the implementation of this learning in an educational context, including (but not limited to) teaching and learning, leadership and management or the design and implementation of policies
- **Progression** – a formal or informal increase in responsibility, pay or status, or a sideways movement to a different role or area of responsibility in the same or a new school

Of the 11 participants included in this report, 1 was a senior leader, 6 were middle leaders, 1 was a TLR holder and the remaining 3 were classroom teachers. The dominant representation of middle leaders and TLR holders (7 / 11 participants) reinforces once again our finding of a middle leadership ceiling faced by mother teachers. All but one of these 11 interview participants worked in a secondary school, with the remaining participant working in an all-through school. At the point of leaving, 7 of these teachers worked full time and 4 worked part time.

What does the research say?

Research suggests that women's career progress slows when they become mothers, comparative to fathers, and both men and women who do not have children. According to the Government Equalities Office, 'women with children suffer large pay penalties', for taking time out of work for maternity leave, which sees them returning to 'jobs with lower occupational status than those they held previously' and 'moving to part-time work' in order to manage 'the competing demands of work and families'. Over three to five years, this study, called *Employment Pathways and Occupational Change After Childbirth* and conducted in partnership with the University of Bristol and Understanding Society, indicated that mothers either experience 'career stalling', reduce their status at work, or find that they have 'a lower chance of getting promotion', which slows their progress.¹

Within the education sector, data shows that 'men reached headteacher roles faster than women'² leading to the much-reported gender inequity in school leadership, particularly at

¹ Government Equalities Office, Understanding Society and Bristol University, *Employment Pathways and Occupational Change After Childbirth: Infographics*, Workplace and Gender Equality Research Programme, October 2019, accessed at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840848/Bristol_Summary_Report.pdf

² Department for Education, *School Leadership in England 2010 to 2016: characteristics and trends*, April 2018, revised July 201, accessed at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/725118/Leadership_Analysis_2018.pdf

secondary level. In primary schools, it took, on average, 14 years for a man to become a headteacher, but 18 years for a woman to become a headteacher. This rate of progression is interesting when taking into account the fact that 39% the incoming teacher workforce (excluding returners to the profession) are aged 25 or under³, and the most likely age for teachers to become first-time mothers is 30-35.⁴ A male primary head, therefore, is more likely to secure this leadership post aged 34-39, the exact age bracket where women are most likely to be taking and returning from their first period of maternity leave, when they are most vulnerable to the motherhood penalty.

Interestingly, this disparity is not seen at secondary level, where both men and women take 20-21 years to secure their first headteacher post. However, the gender inequity at secondary level is far starker than at primary, where 60% of headteachers are male⁵, despite making up only 37% of the total secondary workforce⁶ and only 60% are mothers, in comparison to 90% who are fathers⁷. The *Employment Pathways and Occupational Change After Childbirth* report confirms that teacher-mothers are not immune to this trend of career stagnation, with those working in 'education and health sectors' being 'more likely to stay at the same level after having children... with lower chances of career progression'.⁸

Over a five year period, just 31% of mothers (in comparison to 90% of fathers) remain in full-time employment, having shifted to part time working, or left the labour market altogether. The earning patterns amongst heterosexual couples reflect this, with a 13% increase in fathers acting as the sole earner, or breadwinner following the childbirth and an 11% decrease in equal-earning couples. The participants referred to in this report (**06. We're on a Road to Nowhere**) buck this trend, with 64% working full time at the point of leaving. Whilst part-time working in isolation does not necessarily indicate a lack of career progression, restricted access to professional development opportunities, or even necessarily lower pay than a partner (a part-time female school senior leader could still out-earn a male bank manager working full time, for example), evidence has shown that currently, 'returning to work part-time may be damaging for career progression'.⁹

The NFER tells us that in education, 'part-time teaching is most prevalent 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'.¹⁰ However, data from the School Workforce Census shows us that working part-time becomes less and less common as teachers progress higher up the leadership ladder. Across all schools, for example, 29% of classroom teachers work part-time, but only 13% of assistant headteachers and 5% of headteachers work part-time, with Flexible Teacher Talent stating that 'some schools do not see leadership as compatible with working flexibly' and finding that 'it is relatively common to be allowed to work flexibly but to have to give up leadership responsibilities'.¹¹ In fact, part of the reason why so many of the participants in this report

³ Department for Education, *School Workforce in England 2021/22*, accessed at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/fast-track/c3db7b73-778a-4177-51e2-08da374368c1>

⁴ MTPT Project, @maternityCPD, Twitter, 12th May 2022, accessed at: <https://twitter.com/maternityCPD/status/1524692855402471425?s=20&t=Lk0z170LRjZ66SMA2UWnCw>

⁵ ASCL, NAHT, NGA and WomenEd, *Closing the gender pay gap in education: a leadership imperative*, November 2021, accessed at: <https://www.ascl.org.uk/ASCL/media/ASCL/Our%20view/Campaigns/Closing-the-gender-pay-gap-in-Education-a-leadership-imperative.pdf>

⁶ Fullard, J., *Trends in the diversity of teachers in England*, Education Policy Institute, 19th October 2020, accessed at: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/diversity-of-teachers/>

⁷ National College for School Leadership, *Gender and Headship in the 21st Century*, 2005, accessed at: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/7260/1/download%3Fid%3D17191%26filename%3Dgender-and-headship-in-the-21st-century.pdf>

⁸ Government Equalities Office, Understanding Society and Bristol University, *Employment Pathways and Occupational Change After Childbirth: Infographics*, Workplace and Gender Equality Research Programme, October 2019, accessed at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840848/Bristol_Summary_Report.pdf

⁹ Harkness, S., Borkowska, M. and Pelikh, A., *Employment pathways and occupational change after childbirth*, Government Equalities Office, October 2019, accessed at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840062/Bristol_Final_Report_1610.pdf

¹⁰ Sharp, C., Smith, R., Worth, J., and Van den Brande, J., *Part-time Teaching and Flexible Working in Secondary Schools*, NFER, June 2019, accessed at: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/3476/part-time-teaching-and-flexible-working-in-secondary-schools.pdf>

¹¹ Patience, L., *A raw deal for part-time leaders?* Impact, Chartered College of Teaching, 2nd February 2021, accessed at: <https://my.charteredcollege.org/impact/article/a-raw-deal-for-part-time-leaders/>

worked full time at the point of leaving could be because the education system is so behind other industries when it comes to flexible and part-time working.

Despite the data that reveals inequalities more likely to negatively impact women and mothers, the 2010 Equalities Act exists to prevent discrimination against employees falling under the protected characteristics of pregnancy and maternity, and sex. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) tells us that, legally:

- “Your employer must not stop you from doing training because you are pregnant, on maternity leave or due to take maternity leave, or on pregnancy- or maternity-related sickness absence.”
- “Your employer must not deny you promotion opportunities because you are a woman who is pregnant or on maternity leave.”
- “If you are on maternity leave, you must be considered for promotion in the same way as any other worker who is not on leave.”
- “Your employer should tell you about promotion opportunities when you are on maternity leave, and give you the opportunity to apply for any promotion you would have been told about had you been at work.”
- “Acting on an assumption that a woman with children will be unreliable, inflexible or not interested in a demanding role, and therefore unsuitable for promotion, would almost certainly be unlawful direct discrimination.”¹²

Whilst these obligations are outlined very clearly by the EHRC, the fact that ‘equality law does not require an employer to advertise vacancies or opportunities for promotion either inside or outside their organisation’¹³, means that mothers risk falling victim to discrimination with little ability to challenge it when it does occur.

For schools, ensuring that teachers are engaging in professional development opportunities is good for business. In *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention*, Booth et al. remind us that ‘time and experience alone do not make an expert teaching’, which is why ‘continuing professional development for teachers beyond the early years of their career’ is so important. Whilst research from Kini and Podolsky indicates that experienced teachers *are* likely to have a positive impact on their students’ outcomes¹⁴, if these experienced teachers do not invest in ‘career-long learning’, ‘recharging batteries’ or ‘renewal / refreshment’, they could eventually disengage and withdraw from the profession.¹⁵

The Teacher Development Trust have found that ‘carefully designed’ CPD opportunities that ‘have a strong focus on pupil outcomes have a significant impact on student achievement’¹⁶, which is why the DfE expect teachers to ‘take responsibility’ for ‘keep[ing] their knowledge and skills ... up-to-date’.¹⁷ *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of*

¹² Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Your Rights to Equality at Work: Training, Development, Promotion and Transfer*, May 2014, accessed at: https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/your_rights_to_equality_at_work_-_training_development_promotion_and_transfer.pdf

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Kini, T. and Podolsky, A., *Does Teaching Experience Increase Teacher Effectiveness? A Review of the Research*, Learning Policy Institute, 3rd June 2016, accessed at: https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Teaching_Experience_Report_June_2016.pdf

¹⁵ Booth, J., Coldwell, M., Müller, L., Perry, E., and Zuccollo, J., *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention*, Education Sciences, Volume 11, Issue 6, 10.3390/educi11060299, 16th June 2021, accessed at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/6/299/html>

¹⁶ Higgins, S., Cordingley, P., Greany, T., and Coe, R., *Developing Great Teaching: Lessons from the international reviews into effective professional development*, The Teacher Development Trust, September 2014, accessed at: <https://tdtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/DGT-Summary.pdf>

¹⁷ DfE, *Standard for teachers’ professional development*, July 2016, accessed at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/537031/160712_-_PD_Expert_Group_Guidance.pdf

Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention reiterates that for all teachers, professional development should be ‘tailored to individual teachers’ particular context’ and needs’ and that personal conditions such as ‘motivation, autonomy, self-efficacy’ and contextual conditions such as ‘in-school support’ are ‘vital for professional development to be successful. However, according to Booth et al., the ‘learning needs’ of mid-career colleagues are often ‘unmet’, potentially leading to teachers plateauing, disengaging and leaving the profession altogether.¹⁸ This concern is definitely not unfounded: in 2021, 53% of all teachers leaving were aged 30-49, and 22% were female teachers aged 30-39¹⁹.

In their *Standard for teachers’ professional development* document, the DfE reminds us that “Effective professional development should be seen as a key driver not only of staff development, but also of recruitment, retention, wellbeing, and school improvement.”²⁰ Indeed, the NFER found that ‘increasing teachers’ reported influence over their professional development goals... is associated with a nine-percentage-point increase in intention to stay in teaching’, echoing the Teacher Development Trust’s findings that increased autonomy and ‘buy-in’ for professional development is a key definition of the ‘carefully designed’ activities that lead to student success.²¹

American studies also suggest that where teachers are given leadership responsibilities, or work within a ‘career ladder’ structure, they are less likely to leave because of increased job satisfaction. This is particularly relevant for ‘mid-career’, ‘expert teachers’ whose retention provides the additional bonus of providing mentoring and support systems for less experienced colleagues, as we saw in our exploration of the impact of role models in **05. We Don’t Need Another Hero...?** This finding is particularly important for the demographic of our study who fall neatly into the stage of ‘mid-career’ professionals.

The comments from participants in this report about professional development, progression or lack thereof, and the impact this had on their decision to stay in teaching fall into seven categories:

A sense of stagnation in career progression or feeling trapped

“I started to feel very stale in what I was doing because I had been doing it successfully for a number of years and felt I needed the change for my own professional development.” – *Jenny*

Progression being limited by their school or budgets

“Within the school I was in, due to budget again, because basically, we weren’t allowed to do any sort of CPD courses outside the school, and there wasn’t that much opportunity for progression.” – *Esther*

¹⁸ Booth, J, Coldwell, M., Müller, L., Perry, E., and Zuccollo, J., *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention*, Education Sciences, Volume 11, Issue 6, 10.3390/educi11060299, 16th June 2021, accessed at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/6/299/html>

¹⁹ Department for Education, *School Workforce in England 2021/22*, accessed at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/fast-track/e3db7b73-778a-4177-51e2-08da374368c1>

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Higgins, S., Cordingley, P., Greany, T., and Coe, R., *Developing Great Teaching: Lessons from the international reviews into effective professional development*, The Teacher Development Trust, September 2014, accessed at: <https://tdtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/DGT-Summary.pdf>

Choosing or being forced into demotions as working parents

“I was a secondary school teacher and I went back to start teaching last September as an ordinary teacher of History. Before that I was the Head of History.” – *Rochelle*

Progression and flexible working

“There’s nowhere for me to go with progression because you will not, if we apply for things part time, as part timers, you’re telling us we can’t have it because we’re part time.” – *Stacey*

Experiences of discrimination linked to progression

“My head of department was not very supportive across the board to me and to other members of staff ... they always used it as part of performance management – you weren’t doing a good job, you wouldn’t be able to move up because you had children.” – *Rochelle*

Aspirations and ambitions as parent-teachers

“Before I went back on maternity leave and in the first month after going back after maternity leave, I was really looking forward to going back and quite ambitious about what I wanted to achieve in teaching: getting a promotion, that kind of thing.” – *Hanna*

Experiences of progression in their new careers

“I have got potential for the future. They seem to be good at investing in staff. So even though it’s not a very exciting role at the moment, I think there probably is the potential to be supported in developing and progressing and getting promoted in the future.” – *Abigail*

Three further sub-themes were also interlaced in the comments from participants in this report:

- A sense of fulfilment linked to career progression and professional development opportunities
- Emotions of frustration in response to lack of career progression
- A tendency to become accusative towards school leadership or symbols of authority

A sense of stagnation in career progression or feeling trapped

6 of the 11 participants in this report referred to a sense of stagnation in their career progression. This is an exact reflection of the findings both from the *Employment Pathways and Occupational Change After Childbirth* report from Bristol University et al. and Booth et al.'s *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention*, which states that if mid-career teachers do not have 'the confidence to experiment with the intention of increasing their impact', or cannot 'make changes in their context by seeking promotion or becoming an "activist", then they 'grow stale'²².

What was quite remarkable across all six interviews, was the similarity in the semantics used to describe this experience, with participants using the same, or almost the same words and phrases as each other. In some interviews, participants fell back into the same semantics, repeating and emphasising the dominance of this feeling of stagnation:

<i>Employment Pathways and Occupational Change After Childbirth</i> , University of Bristol et al.	Comments from Participants
<p>'These returners risk becoming stuck in their job role, with limited career progression.'</p> <p>'even when women return to the same job, we show that they are far less likely than their male counterparts to progress at work'</p>	<p>'hadn't changed'</p> <p>'stay still'</p> <p>'stale'</p> <p>'got to wait'</p> <p>'stuck'</p> <p>'trapped'</p> <p>Repeated</p> <p>'nowhere for me to go'</p> <p>'get stuck'</p>
<p>'on their return to work women ... their careers may progress at a slower rate than those of childless women or men.'</p>	<p>'very slow progress'</p> <p>'progress was very slow'</p> <p>'lack of progression'</p> <p>'wasn't improving'</p> <p>'harder to progress'</p>
<p>'For new mothers – but not fathers – staying with the same employer is associated with a lower risk of downward occupational mobility but also with lower chances of progressing'</p>	<p>'can't have it'</p> <p>'couldn't go'</p> <p>'not possible to get to another school'</p>

²² Booth, J, Coldwell, M., Müller, L., Petry, E., and Zuccollo, J., *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention*, Education Sciences, Volume 11, Issue 6, 10.3390/educi11060299, 16th June 2021, accessed at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/6/299/html>

	'couldn't find anyone who would take that'
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Our previous report, **05. We Don't Need Another Hero...?** explores the influence of role models on middle stage professionals – a demographic that matches the 30-39 age bracket of our study, the predominance of middle leaders and TLR holders in this particular report, and the wider member base of The MTPT Project. This is a point at which employees begin to 'refine their self-concept' asking themselves what it is that they want from their lives more broadly, and how they are going to go about achieving this. As we will see in later reports, maternity leave can provide an extended period away from accepted routine, providing new mothers with the opportunity to interrogate their values, priorities and direction in both their personal and professional lives.

In Jenny's comments, we see this sense of looking to the future and what it might hold for her. Refining her self-concept involves the need for significant 'change', but she does not find this in the form of next steps or progression within teaching:

"My specific role hadn't changed much within six years and there was not the potential for it to change as significantly as I felt I needed." – *Jenny*

"I started to feel very stale in what I was doing because I had been doing it successfully for a number of years and felt I needed the change for my own professional development." – *Jenny*

Jenny's comments are at odds with the EHRC's finding that 17% of employers thought that 'pregnant women and new mothers are less interested in career progression and promotion'²³. The repeated use of 'needed' suggests that this 'professional development' or 'potential for... change' in her role is strongly linked to Jenny's sense of professional purpose and fulfilment. We also hear her frustration here, prompted by a lack of recognition in the form of career progression. Jenny says that she had been performing 'successfully for a number of years' and yet she did not see this rewarded by 'change', or even the promise of 'potential' change.

Both Jenny and Kay refer to the loss of status or lack of professional development as impacting their sense of job fulfilment, echoing the 2016 findings from the NFER, which found that professional development opportunities, a sense of being valued by leadership and management and being in a leadership role are all factors that contribute to teacher engagement, and therefore teacher retention.²⁴

"I really felt that I was missing out, and I was going to miss out on opportunities and you don't expect to stay still, but in terms of where I was as a Head of Department, I felt I was losing a lot of kudos, and a lot of respect, actually, in the eyes of the senior leadership team." – *Jenny*

²³ Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Pregnancy and Maternity-Related Discrimination and Disadvantage: Experience of Employers*, IFF Research on behalf of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015, accessed at: file:///Users/Emma/Downloads/employers_report_-_bis-16-147-pregnancy-and-maternity-related-discrimination-and-disadvantage-experiences-of-employers.pdf

²⁴ Lynch, S., Worth, J., Bamford, S., and Wespieser, K., *Engaging Teachers: NFER Analysis of Teacher Retention*, NFER, September 2016, accessed at: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/1925/1fsb01.pdf>

“It didn’t feel like there was time to improve my craft, which was really, well – at various times in my career – was very, very important to me. But because I wasn’t, I didn’t feel like I was able to pursue opportunities to improve, it felt like I wasn’t improving.” – Kay

We saw in **03. What Did We Find Out?** that, for female teachers aged 30-39, job satisfaction was the second most popular reason chosen by teachers who *stayed* in the classroom. Indeed, the NFER found that job satisfaction was ‘the most significant protective factor against considering leaving’²⁵ and Booth et al. remind us that ‘attrition from the profession can be predicted by... teachers’ satisfaction with their work environment’²⁶. Jenny’s comments suggest that her sense of job satisfaction is, in part, defined by three things:

- Professional reputation – ‘in the eyes of the senior leadership team’, ‘losing kudos, and a lot of respect’
- Forward movement – ‘opportunities’, ‘don’t expect to stay still’, ‘potential for it to change’, ‘needed the change’
- Inclusion – ‘missing out’, ‘miss out’, ‘in the eyes of the senior leadership team’

The NFER found that being part of a school community and appropriate provision for professional development were important to teacher engagement and retention, with some findings from their General Staff Survey implicitly alluding to the professional reputation so explicitly referred to in Jenny’s comments as important to her sense of job satisfaction. This emphasis on professional status and the recognition of experience is also seen in the comments of interview participants who have *stayed* in teaching and leadership, which will be expanded on in later reports.

In Jenny’s comments, professional reputation, forward movement and inclusion appear to be interrelated: her forward movement is reliant on the inclusion in a leadership network that she feels excluded from whilst on maternity leave; her ability to be accepted into this network reliant on a professional reputation built on fulfilling her role ‘successfully for a number of years’ but threatened by a loss of ‘kudos’ and ‘respect’ perceived to be linked to her pregnancy. Without a strong professional reputation, Jenny feels that she cannot move forwards in her career and so finds herself trapped under a middle leadership ceiling, struggling even to hold onto the status she feels she has previously earned in this role.

As a former secondary class teacher, Kay’s comments focus less on her leadership status, and more on a sense of pride in her expertise and ‘craft’. She describes improving on this craft as ‘very, very important’, defining a sense of job satisfaction based on the positive impact of professional development, rather than progression, as in Jenny’s case. However, the fact that there was no time to improve her practice impacts her sense of job satisfaction in the same way as Jenny’s perceived loss of status, and captures the same sense of missing out on something she needs to enjoy her job.

²⁵ Lynch, S., Worth, J., Bamford, S., and Wespieser, K., *Engaging Teachers: NFER Analysis of Teacher Retention*, NFER, September 2016, accessed at: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/1925/1fsb01.pdf>

²⁶ Booth, J., Coldwell, M., Müller, L., Perry, E., and Zuccollo, J., *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention*, Education Sciences, Volume 11, Issue 6, 10.3390/educi11060299, 16th June 2021, accessed at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/6/299/html>

Rather than the misconception that women are less motivated by their careers once they become mothers²⁷, Jenny and Kay already demonstrate that mothers remain committed to professional improvement and career progression. In fact, their comments show how it is factors beyond their control that force this career stagnation, some of which are common to the teaching profession more generally, others of which are specific to the experience of mothers in all industries:

- Periods of absence on maternity leave (Jenny)
- Leadership and management's perception of pregnant colleagues and working mothers (Jenny)
- Lack of leadership opportunity within existing organisational structures (Jenny)
- Time (Kay)

Why are mothers more 'trapped' than others?

Employment pathways and occupational change after childbirth tells us that whether returning to work full or part-time, women are far more likely to remain at the same employer over a period of three years, in comparison to men. However, remaining with the same employer increases women's likelihood of remaining in 'the same occupational group' – i.e. the same level of seniority – over this five-year period. We see a change in mobility trends five years after birth where more women change employers than men, and when women *do* change employers 32% of this group upgrade their status, and 21% downgrade. These figures are still unfavourable in comparison to men, with '40% of those moving employer upgrading and 23% downgrading five years after birth'²⁸.

The reason that so many women remain with the same employer in the first to three years following their return to work is likely to be multifaceted. Firstly, both statutory and occupational maternity pay are often reliant on conditions such as working for an employer for a specific period of time – often a year or more. This means that women may remain with the same employer when planning their first and subsequent children, or pass up opportunities with new employers, in order to accumulate the period of employment necessary to qualify for occupational maternity pay.

In teaching, we have the additional obligation to return to our employer for 13 weeks to avoid paying back the 12 weeks of half-pay that makes up our occupational maternity package. Mothers in families who cannot afford to forgo or pay back thousands of pounds, are incentivised to stay in the same school, with the research suggesting that 'for mothers, working in ... education, is linked with the ability to maintain the same occupational grade after childbirth but with lower chances of career progression.'²⁹ Indeed, an informal Twitter poll indicated that 63% of hopeful, expectant or mother teachers had stayed at a school they would rather have left or passed up an opportunity in another school in order to benefit from their enhanced maternity pay package when planning their first or subsequent babies.³⁰

²⁷ Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Pregnancy and Maternity-Related Discrimination and Disadvantage: Experience of Employers*, IFF Research on behalf of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015, accessed at: file:///Users/Emma/Downloads/employers_report_-_bis-16-147-pregnancy-and-maternity-related-discrimination-and-disadvantage-experiences-of-employers.pdf

²⁸ Harkness, S., Borkowska, M. and Pelikh, A., *Employment pathways and occupational change after childbirth*, Government Equalities Office, October 2019, accessed at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840062/Bristol_Final_Report_1610.pdf

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ @maternityCPD, The MTPT Project, Twitter, 25th May 2022, accessed at: https://twitter.com/maternityCPD/status/1529365338294562816?s=20&t=Q1zu11C14_Xerk5xAXZNEg

Multiple studies have revealed that motherhood also significantly impacts commuting time, with ‘the unequal distribution of household and childcare responsibilities within couple-relationships in which women assume the main responsibility for housework and childcare’ acting as ‘a major cause for these gender differences in commuting’³¹. Mothers who take on responsibility for drop off and pick up from childcare and school settings, are therefore less able to take advantage of job opportunities further afield. This means they’re more likely to remain (and stagnate) at the employer that enables them to juggle the logistics of commuting and childcare arrangements. In comparison, men are more likely to increase their commute to move employer and take advantage of upgraded roles in the process.³²

We saw the impact of these logistics within couples in **04. What’s Love Got to Do With It?** 6 of the 17 participants in this previous report stated that the logistics of their partner’s role – working away, working hours incompatible with childcare logistics, commuting times, and relocations tied to their employment – played a part in their decision to leave teaching. Indeed, comments from both Stacey and Rochelle appear in both this report and the ‘Logistics of the Male Partner’s Role’ section of **04. What’s Love Got to Do With It?** When partners’ professional lives are making greater demands, or offering more opportunities that benefit the family unit, it can be difficult for mothers to insist on pursuing career progression in new locations when this would add increased complication to their family lives.

However, when mothers stay put to benefit the family as a whole, and find they have ‘nowhere... to go’ (Stacey), ‘lack ... progression’ (Stacey) and experience discriminatory treatment from line managers (Rochelle) they become increasingly trapped: they cannot endanger their partners’ roles and income by seeking opportunities further afield with longer commuting times. They cannot risk a financial burden to the family by changing employers if they are planning to have more children. And now that their own professional lives have stagnated, organising themselves around the demands of their husbands’ role can become inevitable.

Sharon, whose partner has a ‘well-paid job’ that meant that she could afford to stop working if she wanted to, captures this conundrum precisely:

“I think most people get stuck in where they are and the effort to try and get a new job is just too much on top of what they’re trying to do as a teacher, so they get stuck there.” – Sharon

According to Booth et al., ‘rising levels of personal commitment means that the management of work/life tensions requires substantial amounts of energy, which in turn has the potential to affect professional motivation, commitment and effectiveness’³³ – an experience captured almost exactly in Sharon’s comments. The fact that there is ‘too much on top of what they’re trying to do’, and that even trying to find an escape route in the form of a new job is ‘an effort’, reflects two ongoing issues for teacher-mothers. The first is the unsustainable workload that plagues our education system, and came up as the number one reason that

³¹ Skora, T., Rüger, H. and Stawarz, N., *Community and the Motherhood Wage Gap: Evidence from Germany*, MDPI Sustainability, Volume 12: Issue 14, 10.3390/su1214569, 15th July 2020, accessed at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/14/5692>

³² Harkness, S., Borkowska, M. and Pelikh, A., *Employment pathways and occupational change after childbirth*, Government Equalities Office, October 2019, accessed at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840062/Bristol_Final_Report_1610.pdf

³³ Booth, J., Coldwell, M., Müller, L., Perry, E., and Zuccollo, J., *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention*, MDPI Education Sciences, Volume 11: Issue 6, 10.3390/educi11060299, 16th June 2021, accessed at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/6/299/html>

female teachers aged 30-39 leave. The second is that women still ‘carry out an overall average of 60% more unpaid work than men’, with ‘mothers on maternity leave’ doing the most unpaid work.³⁴ These two systemic issues can be added to the list started by Kay and Jenny of things outside of mother teachers’ control when trying to progress or develop professionally either in their own, or a new school.

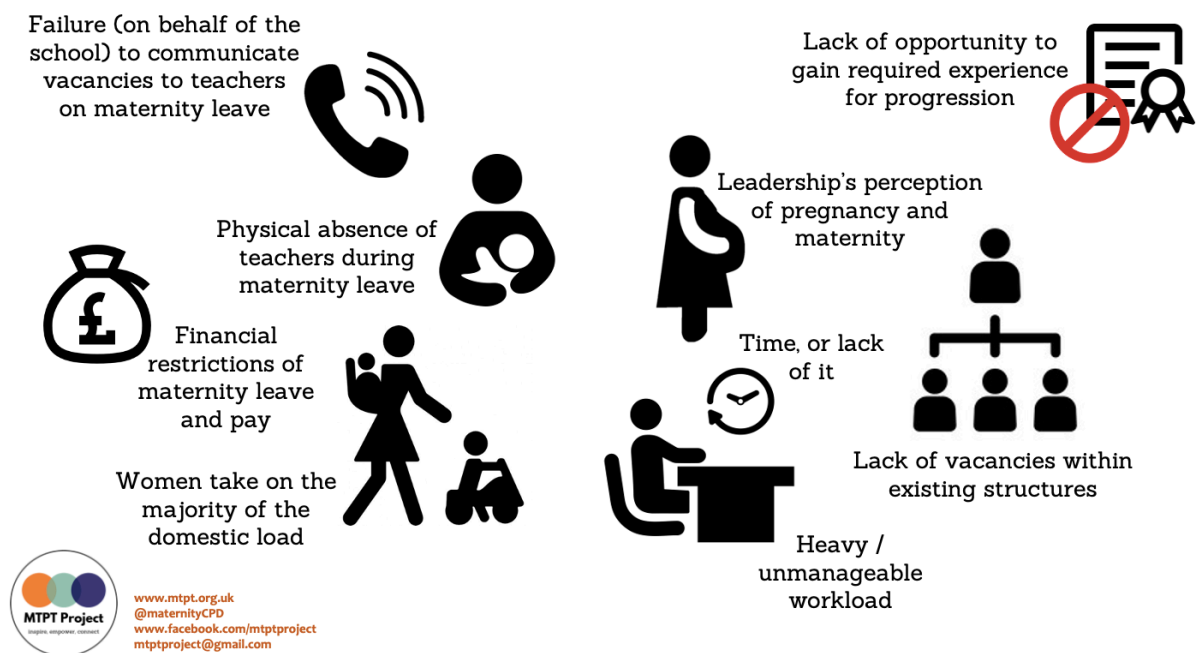


Figure 1: Factors outside of mother-teachers’ control that prevent them from accessing professional development or progression opportunities

Various reports corroborate the relationship between workload, mental health and wellbeing, and teacher attrition. The 2021 Teacher Wellbeing Index found that 54% of staff had considered leaving in the last two years, a figure that was higher for senior leaders, and higher for colleagues in secondary settings.³⁵ Likewise, the NEU found that 35% of respondents to their 2021 members’ survey were ‘confident that they would not be working in education in 2026’.³⁶ Lack of support and trust from leadership, government and the media, workload, accountability, pay and a reduced sense of purpose increase teachers’ desire to leave.

When they find themselves doing ‘just too much’, ‘stuck’ at a school where relationships with leadership may be damaged and a sense of purpose gained from investment in professional development or career progression lacking, teachers are more likely to leave. This is particularly true for those who entered the profession in the hope that teaching would fit with their family lives, but find themselves faced with unsustainable workloads. However, Jerrim et al. found that although teachers find themselves with higher levels of job satisfaction

³⁴ Office for National Statistics, *Women shoulder the responsibility of ‘unpaid work’*, 10 November 2016, accessed at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/womenshouldertetheresponsibilityofunpaidwork/2016-11-10>

³⁵ Scanlan, D., and Savill-Smith, C., *Teacher Wellbeing Index 2021*, Education Support, November 2021, accessed at: https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/media/uvvepqrj/twix_2021_4_staff_retention.pdf

³⁶ NEU, *The State of Education: Staff Workload, Wellbeing and Retention*, 8th April 2021, accessed at: <https://neu.org.uk/state-education-staff-workload-wellbeing-and-retention>

when they leave teaching, they do not necessarily experience an overall improvement in wellbeing or mental health.³⁷

Whose responsibility is it to ‘unstick’ mother-teachers?

When these mother-teachers ‘get stuck’, start to ‘feel very stale’, or find themselves unable to improve, due to factors outside of their control, whose responsibility therefore, is it to support their progression and forward movement?

In *Unleashing Great Teaching*, Clay and Weston emphasise the importance of school leaders dedicating and protecting time for professional development. In particular, they tell readers: ‘if you add in more professional learning time, you must remove the need to spend time on other things’, and provide a long list of ways to find and protect this time that does not include asking staff to work longer hours, or add professional development to their to-do lists.³⁸ School leaders keen to retain mother-teachers like Kay, Jenny and Sharon, would therefore do well to build in high quality CPD and coaching opportunities over which teachers have a good degree of autonomy, within the school day, addressing any displacement of other tasks to avoid increasing teacher workload.

When mother-teachers are able to respond more proactively to their desire for professional development and progression, it is possible for them to continue to pursue their career paths (see **Experiences of progression in their new careers** later in this report). However, Hanna’s experience demonstrates that even when there is a will, there isn’t always a way if mother-teachers are not supported and enabled:

“The third time, I applied for something, and I wasn’t getting it because I hadn’t had a TLR before and I thought, well you didn’t advertise the role. So this means I’ve got to wait for another year or until someone else who hasn’t done it before applies to something and then you can give it to me because I’ve got more years of teaching experience. It felt very slow to progress within the department. And I wasn’t interested in progressing in the pastoral route to be a Head of Year, even though that was offered to me.” – *Hanna*

“I worked in quite a large department and there were several TLR positions available to members of departments, that were specific to that English department. And, in my four years at the school, I didn’t manage to get any of them despite applying for a couple of them. I just felt my progress was very slow. The first time I applied to something, it was just given to someone else. Probably with more skills, that’s fine.” – *Hanna*

Despite pro-active attempts to improve, progress, or demonstrate competence – ‘The third time I applied for something’, ‘I’ve got more years of teaching experience’, ‘despite applying for a couple of them’ – Hanna finds that she is yet again up against barriers beyond her control, or that seem unjust:

³⁷ Jerrim, J., Sims, S. and Allen, R., *The mental health and wellbeing of teachers in England*, IOE Institute of Education, UCL, Nuffield Foundation, January 2021, accessed at: <http://repec.ioe.ac.uk/REPEC/pd/qsswp2101r.pdf>

³⁸ Clay, B. and Weston, D., *Unleashing Great Teaching*, 2018, Routledge, Abingdon

- Lack of prior experience and yet no opportunity to acquire the required experience ('I hadn't had a TLR before')
- Exclusive practice surrounding the advertising of opportunities ('well you didn't advertise the role')
- Lack of desirable opportunities ('I wasn't interested in progressing in the pastoral route')
- High levels of competition ('it was just given to someone else. Probably with more skills, that's fine')

The catch-22 of stagnating teacher-mothers

Because of this, Hanna finds herself in a catch-22 situation. Her progression is limited because she lacks experience, and yet no opportunity to gain experience is being offered. By failing to inform her of vacancies that arise whilst she is on maternity leave, Hanna's school are not acting in line with the legal guidance set out to avoid discrimination based on pregnancy and maternity. As we saw in Jenny's earlier comments, this exclusionary approach allows others to develop whilst Hanna's progress is 'very slow', and therefore create more competition in the future when new opportunities do arise. Once again, a mother-teacher is having to 'wait', apply to multiple opportunities, multiple times without reward in the form of career progression at a time when personal commitments are also demanding 'substantial amounts of energy'³⁹.

The language of Hanna's account reveals a sense of confusion, injustice and frustration, leaving her questioning why she has been unsuccessful in her applications. Hanna knows that she has 'more years of teaching experience' than some other candidates, has been at the school for 'four years', and has put herself forwards 'a couple' of times for the 'several' TLR positions available, but has received no clear feedback as to why she is not securing the roles. Even when she does concede that the candidate securing the promotion, 'probably' had 'more skills', the 'probably' renders this assertion debatable. This confusion breeds a tone of accusation in Hanna's comments – '**you** didn't advertise it', '**just** given to someone else' – stemming from a frustration of being overlooked or not listened to, as when she is offered the chance to progress as a pastoral leader, despite having no interest in this route.

Hanna's refusal to pursue this pastoral opportunity reminds us of the Donald E. Gibson's research into mid-stage professionals from our previous report, **05. We Don't Need Another Hero...?** Here, we learnt that our demographic of women aged 30-39 are seeking to 'refine their self-concept' when it comes to their professional identity, selecting the opportunities that contribute to this, rather than taking advantage of every opportunity in the name of amassing experience. Indeed, Booth et al. find that 'the lack of *relevant* professional development also appears to be a barrier to teachers' career progression' because it doesn't contribute to 'the next step' in teachers' career plans.⁴⁰ With limited time, past experiences to learn from, and more clarity about the direction they are heading, mid-stage professionals are unlikely to expend energy on pursuits that do not align with their vision.

³⁹ Booth, J, Coldwell, M., Müller, L., Petry, E., and Zuccollo, J., *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention*, Education Sciences, Volume 11, Issue 6, 10.3390/educ111060299, 16th June 2021, accessed at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/6/299/html>

⁴⁰ Ibid

Even in positive scenarios, the mother-teachers in this report demonstrate selectiveness in their career choices, as we see in Gauri's anecdote of deciding against applying for a promoted position in her new international school setting:

"I chose not to apply for the senior leadership position at that point in time, not because of the maternity leave or anything else, just because it was the position I wasn't very interested in." – *Gauri*

Gauri's wording – 'I chose not to' – emphasises the difference between teachers reviewing the options available to them, confident that they will not experience barriers in the future – 'not because of the maternity leave or anything' – and teachers who are limited to opportunities selected by their schools. In comparison to Gauri, Rebecca's attempt to pursue desirable career opportunities was met with, 'we'd like to give you this position, but you can't do it because you're an English teacher', and Hanna was offered 'the pastoral route to be a Head of Year' over 'progress within the department' even though her multiple applications to departmental TLRs clearly indicated that this was where her interests lay.

The fact, however, that Hanna applied for TLR or roles with increased responsibility three times within four years makes her ambition clear, and yet this ambition was not nurtured or rewarded effectively by her leadership team. Her experience reflects the findings of Booth et al.'s study, which indicated that 'experienced teachers may feel discouraged when their developmental needs are ignored'⁴¹. Providing honest and effective feedback, and reviewing the gaps that had prevented her from being successful would have been a positive way for school leaders to maximise on Hanna's motivation, especially if these had been followed up by the opportunity to gain experience through mentoring, informal responsibilities or CPD.

The lack of consideration and support (both general and specific) that Hanna's account reveals is also commented on by Sharon and Esther:

"I've already talked about the lack of progression... the fact that I was doing this job and I knew there was nowhere for me to go because I wasn't being supported in my department." – *Stacey*

"So for the last four years of teaching, I couldn't go on any outside courses or anything to professionally develop, so I felt stuck in that sort of way. And therefore, if you had an interview, or there were interviews for jobs at other schools, one of the things they asked for is obviously they want to see what training, what courses and stuff that you've done, and it was harder to progress because you weren't getting out there." – *Esther*

Stacey and Esther refer to the lack of 'contextual conditions' that *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention* reminds us are 'vital for professional development to be successful'. For Stacey, this means lack of support from her department, and for Esther, this is a frustration around the

⁴¹ Booth, J, Coldwell, M., Müller, L., Petry, E., and Zuccollo, J., *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention*, Education Sciences, Volume 11, Issue 6, 10.3390/educi11060299, 16th June 2021, accessed at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/6/299/html>

irrelevance of the professional development she *is* offered. Esther wants ‘outside courses’, ‘training’, ‘courses’ to support her at ‘interviews for other jobs’, vague examples of what she sees as the ‘relevant professional development opportunities’ that ‘encourage [teachers] to stay in the profession and help to keep them motivated and interested’⁴² and over which she has autonomy. However, because this autonomy is lacking – Sharon cannot control the culture of her department and Esther has no influence over what professional development opportunities she can access – like Hanna, Jenny and Kay, they find themselves ‘stuck’, with ‘nowhere ... to go’ because they have no control over the barriers to their progression.

⁴² Booth, J, Coldwell, M., Müller, L., Petry, E., and Zuccollo, J., *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention*, Education Sciences, Volume 11, Issue 6, 10.3390/educi11060299, 16th June 2021, accessed at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/6/299/html>

Progression Limited by Schools or Budgets

All but one of the six interview participants cited so far talk about schools acting as gatekeepers to career or professional development. Looking further into this theme, we find that this limitation is attributed to one or more of the following reasons:

- Stability of staffing / lack of opportunity at senior level
- Senior leadership teams that do not listen / understand teachers' needs
- Perception of how roles must be fulfilled to meet school priorities
- Gendered expectations of certain roles
- Lack of government funding for schools
- Lack of investment in professional development on behalf of the school

Jenny tells us more about the barriers she faced when pursuing her career progression ahead of leaving teaching:

“I wouldn't say there was a lack of progression opportunities per say across the teaching profession. I think if you're teaching within a mainstream school there is a route there, isn't there – whether that's class teacher on the main pay scale and then moving up through leadership if you wanted to.

I think, for me, a personal note, was that in the school, in the setting I was in, there was no room to move from where I was and I was, and still am, ambitious and wanted variety and change and this within that setting was very much side-stepping.

I taught in a special school that ranged from 2-19 and I was Head of Department for secondary – KS3 and 4 – and I had been for quite an amount of time – I think 6 years maybe – but there wasn't the opportunity to move within the setting into a different key stage area, for example – or hold a different position of responsibility, even though that was what I wanted and what I had articulated.

Also, the senior leadership, which would be the next step up the ladder, if you like, they were – and still are – young to their roles, so there was no possibility for anyone really moving on or seeking a different job within a good amount of time. I did become, and feel very constrained within that and I don't think the senior leadership quite got the level of importance that felt for me.” – *Jenny*

A number of factors lead to Jenny feeling as if 'there was no room to move':

- Lack of opportunity at senior leadership level resulting from a new leadership team with a forecast of low turnover
- Dissatisfaction with a role she had been doing for 'quite an amount of time'
- Dissatisfaction with 'side-stepping' as an antidote for a need for 'variety and change'
- A concept of 'variety and change' and ambition defined by a complete change of role or 'the next step up the ladder'

However, what appears to be the ultimatum for Jenny is the fact that her ‘developmental needs are ignored’⁴³ – ‘I don’t think the senior leadership quite got the level of importance that felt for me’ – despite her attempting to be heard through articulating her desires. Jenny says that she suggested different options: ‘hold a different position of responsibility’, ‘move... into a different key stage area’ and yet none of these were considered as an option. The restriction here seems to be either the stability of the school’s staffing at leadership level, or an unwillingness to listen to the needs of their colleagues.

Even in the positive instance that a school has stable middle and senior leadership team, it is possible that support in the ‘renewal / refreshment’ spoken about in *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention* – either to find a new interest within her current role, or to seek a new or promoted position elsewhere – could have been a way to retain Jenny within the wider teacher workforce. However, evidence previously discussed from *Employment Pathways and Occupational Change After Childbirth* shows us that this movement is far less likely to occur for mothers in the first three years of their return to work.

Rebecca and Kay’s comments demonstrate how schools’ perception of how roles must be fulfilled to meet school priorities, and gendered expectations of certain roles can also limit career progression:

“The English teachers were kind of told, “Your exam results are one of the most important things to the school and therefore all of your time has to be spent just on this and you’re no longer in a position to go forward for other things outside of the academic route.”” – *Rebecca*

“I felt I was always stronger in the pastoral role. I was an Assistant Head of House at the same time and I was also a Gifted and Talented Co-ordinator, when I ran a Debate Mate society where we travelled around different places in the UK, debating, and several times I would go for pastoral-based roles and be told, “You know, we’d like to give you this position, but you can’t do it because you’re an English teacher, and we need you to teach English and keep your focus just on that.” And I guess I just kind of felt that other colleagues of mine, they were teaching subjects that were possibly less demanding because they weren’t doing the extra sessions that we were, were able to take promotions and move forward in their careers and be paid more.” – *Rebecca*

“I’m a Physics teacher and as I’m sure you’re aware, and kind of everyone is aware, there are a lack of female Physics teachers and I think that has become a stereotype. The parents have an expectation that there’s going to be a male Physics teacher – they see males as more competent. I experienced this when my Head of Department, who was male, would send an identical email to myself. And I would be accused of not being supportive, and he would have absolutely no comeback. So it just seemed like there were very few opportunities for women in particular, in my particular subject, because of parental and societal expectation, that it is a male role.” – *Kay*

⁴³ Booth, J, Coldwell, M., Müller, L., Petry, E., and Zuccollo, J., *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention*, Education Sciences, Volume 11, Issue 6, 10.3390/educi11060299, 16th June 2021, accessed at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/6/299/html>

Like Jenny, Rebecca finds herself restricted by her school's agenda and how they deploy her to meet their current needs. Whilst it is important for school leaders to hold students' best interests at the heart of their decisions, later reports will demonstrate how an overt focus on 'exam results' can also be a push factor for female teachers who leave aged 30-39. Rebecca's comments indicate that she perceived this exam focus and her role as a teacher of a core subject as what stopped her from 'go[ing] forward' or 'tak[ing] promotions', 'mov[ing] forward' in her career or being 'paid more' like teachers of other subjects. In her comparison, we see the sense of frustration and injustice we have already noted in Jenny, Hanna and Esther's comments: 'colleagues of mine, they were teaching subjects that were possibly less demanding ... they weren't doing the extra sessions that we were'.

Although Kay cites that it was the wider school community – 'parents', 'parental and societal expectations' – that played a role in limiting her career progression, like Rebecca, she sees the stereotypes surrounding her subject as the core of this limitation: 'there were very few opportunities for women in particular, in my particular subject'. In the same way, Kay compares her situation with colleagues representing the positive opposite of the factor she feels is limiting her. For Kay, this is her subject of Physics combined with gender when she shares the anecdote of her male Head of Department. For Rebecca, this is the importance of exam results in her subject, as well as the additional workload that comes with the emphasis on English as a core subject, in comparison to subjects she feels have a lighter workload at her school.

Rebecca's account of her interests in pastoral roles – 'Assistant Head of House', 'Gifted and Talented Co-ordinator', 'I ran a Debate Mate society', 'I felt I was always stronger in the pastoral role' – and her 'several' applications for 'pastoral-based roles', which were denied, echoes the opposite to the scenario that Hanna has previously described. Rebecca is limited to a subject-based role when she would like to progress through a pastoral route, whereas Hanna is only offered pastoral roles when she would like to progress within her subject department. In both instances, these participants are being limited by the *school's* perception of their capacity and abilities. Even though both Rebecca and Hanna believe they have the potential and experience to do their desired roles well, the school doubt their capacity to do both what they feel is needed for students – 'all your time has to be spent just on this', 'we'd like to give you this position, but you can't do it because you're an English teacher' – *and* pursue their chosen career path.

Once again, we see the semantics used to describe this sense of restriction and lack of autonomy over progression echoing the stagnation identified in the first section of this report – 'constrained', 'no room to move', 'no longer in a position to go forward', 'you can't do it.'

Whilst Kay, Rebecca and Jenny point to attitudes from leadership and wider communities restricting their opportunities for *promotion*, money and time occur as the most-cited reasons for limitations around *professional development*. We've already seen in Kay's comments that lack of 'time to improve [her] craft' was a significant contributor to her feelings of stagnation. The issue of time is raised in five further comments from Kay, Sharon and Stacey:

“I had to go and seek out these opportunities myself and at the same time, I had to plan for cover. It felt like any CPD opportunities that I did take, I was further increasing my own workload.” – Kay

“In order to pursue additional training – CPD opportunities – it was very much expected that I pursued this off my own back. There was no time set aside for this.” – Kay

“I wasn’t allowed to go on any training. Only in-house training, which his very boring. And never gave us the time to actually sit with other people and learn new things.” – Sharon

“I’ve seen this course I want to do on Shakespeare but I know they’re not going to send me. Can I pay for it and do it in my own time?” – Stacey

“You want us to have up to date knowledge. You don’t want to pay for it, and you don’t want to give us time, fine.” – Stacey

What is clear from Kay’s first comment, implied in her second, and in both of Stacey’s is that completing professional development doesn’t just take up the time that is allocated to it, but generates additional activity that take up further time. Kay states this explicitly when she refers to the need to ‘go and seek out these opportunities for myself’, as well as ‘plan for cover’, both of which increase her workload. The similar comments across two separate interviews – ‘in my own time’, ‘pursued this off my own back’ – also hint at the time that will then be taken away from the ‘rising levels of personal commitment’⁴⁴ found to be typical of mid-career professionals in *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention*, which also have to be caught up with at some point.

For the time-poor demographic of mothers aged 30-39, the *type* of time and the *type* of activity that this time is dedicated to also appear to be important. According to Booth et al., teachers in their study, ‘often engaged in professional development outside working hours, at weekends or evenings, leading to conflicts with family and other commitments.’⁴⁵ Choosing or demanding that time outside of work is taken for professional development therefore inevitably contributes to disengagement or burnout. Sharon and Stacey’s comments indicate that the perceived quality of the professional development that therefore takes place has to be worth the time that is sacrificed. For Sharon, this is the chance to ‘sit with other people and learn new things’, and for Stacey, this is a sense of autonomy over the courses she is choosing to engage with: ‘I’ve seen this course I want to do on Shakespeare’. Where this autonomy is absent, it is yet another ‘reason why experienced teachers choose to leave the profession’.⁴⁶

Where time is not ‘set aside’ to complete professional development perceived to be valuable, we see from participants in this report, that mother-teachers become fed up and tired by

⁴⁴ Booth, J, Coldwell, M., Müller, L., Perry, E., and Zuccollo, J., *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention*, Education Sciences, Volume 11, Issue 6, 10.3390/educi11060299, 16th June 2021, accessed at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/6/299/html>

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Ibid

both fighting for what they want, and the unreasonable expectations of the reality they encounter. The tone and semantics in ‘fine’, ‘wasn’t allowed’, ‘it was very much expected’, ‘you want us to... you don’t want to... you don’t want to...’ reveal an increasing frustration with the professional development opportunities inflicted upon, or denied to Kay, Stacey and Sharon. As found by Booth et al., this lack of ‘motivation, autonomy, self-efficacy’ leads to disengagement, reduced job satisfaction, and contributes to mid-career teachers’ decision to leave the profession.⁴⁷

This disillusionment is articulated by Stacey as she continues her comments:

“It just got to the point it was a joke. It was, like, well, you know, I’ve seen this course I want to do on Shakespeare but I know they’re not going to send me. Can I pay for it and do it in my own time? And because I, you know, and it shouldn’t be like that because what you should want and they didn’t want to let any of us go because of the exam classes, and it’s just like, you want us to be professional. You want us to be good at what we do. You want us to have up to date knowledge. You don’t want to pay for it, and you don’t want to give us time, fine. And so, it just got frustrating you know. I wanted to go on so many things, and the only thing they would let us go for would be moderation and exam board stuff, but that was only if the Head of Department couldn’t go. By the time, when I first started I was sent on everything. And then by the end, it was like, “No, you can’t go on anything”.” – Stacey

Stacey echoes Rebecca’s dissatisfaction with the overemphasis on ‘exam classes’, revealing a values clash with her school. She challenges the purported values that do not seem to be followed through, pointing out the expectation that teachers are ‘professional’, ‘good at what we do’, and have ‘up to date knowledge’, quoting almost exactly as she does so, the DfE’s *Standard for teachers’ professional development*. Yet the lack of time and budget assigned to supporting teachers to meet these expected standards reveals that these values are just for show. In fact, Stacey’s implication is that the school are demanding things of their teachers based on an attractive set of values without giving them the tools (money, time, choice) to achieve precisely because these are not really the school’s values.

As a mid-career teacher with potentially 8-18 years in the profession (‘when I first started... by the end...’) her length of service enables Stacey to call out this mismatch or deception as ‘a joke’. The fact that she thinks ‘it shouldn’t be like that’ – schools that focus on ‘exam classes’ over ‘Shakespeare’, being ‘professional’, ‘good at what we do’ and having ‘up to date knowledge’ – presents a conflict in values that Stacey cannot overcome, which contributes to her decision to leave teaching.

Jenny, Hanna and Rebecca have already demonstrated that perceptions around mothers’ reduced interest in progression opportunities are misguided, and in both Stacey and Kay’s comments, we see the same strong motivation to complete professional development. Stacey says, ‘I wanted to go on so many things’, and Kay talks about having to ‘seek these opportunities out’ herself. Stacey even asks, ‘Can I pay for it...?’ at a time in her life when we

⁴⁷ Booth, J, Coldwell, M., Müller, L., Petry, E., and Zuccollo, J., *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention*, Education Sciences, Volume 11, Issue 6, 10.3390/educi11060299, 16th June 2021, accessed at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/6/299/html>

know that finances are restricted for parent-teachers, and also contribute to women aged 30-39 leaving the profession.⁴⁸

Indeed, budget was referenced in four further comments as a limiting factor to mother-teachers' professional development or career progression:

"I'm used to – this government – having to pay if I wanted to do anything, to learn anything new or better myself." – *Sharon*

"They were kind of trying to do everything they could to stop people from progressing in their careers in order to save money." – *Rebecca*

"Within the school I was in, due to budget again, because basically, we weren't allowed to do any sort of CPD courses outside the school, and there wasn't that much opportunity for progression." – *Esther*

"I was at an Assistant Head level, but it was difficult to get any further or get much training. Maybe it might have only been within the academy chain I was in, but with a lack of good leadership above you, there weren't so many opportunities offered to me. And also internal CPD basically stopped due to budget restraints." – *Esther*

These comments once again raise the question of responsibility when it comes to professional development: is it the government, the school or the individual's responsibility to ensure that professional development is, and can be completed, or that teachers' career progression – particularly teachers from protected groups – is supported? Within Sharon, Rebecca and Esther's comments are accusations against 'this government', 'they' (school), 'the academy chain I was in', whoever is responsible for 'budget restraints' with a sense of conflicting values that we have seen previously. The implication here is that were the school, academy or government truly committed to their stated values of having 'professional' teachers who have 'up to date knowledge' and are therefore 'good at what [they] do', then the budget to enable this, would follow.

In *Unleashing Great Teaching*, however, Clay and Weston explore the fact that the responsibility for professional development is more multifaceted than this. School leaders, they emphasise, are responsible for prioritising professional learning and ensuring that it is implemented effectively according to the school's context, as well as creating school cultures that engender trust, mutual respect, and protect staff wellbeing. However, teachers must be committed to building and maintaining this trust, honest and open communication, and a commitment to student achievement. They must avoid defensiveness when receiving feedback or discussing professional learning, and work collaboratively with colleagues.

Clay and Weston refer to the 'leadership, systems and resources' central to ensuring that professional development has a positive impact on students at the 'organisational edge'⁴⁹, but whether school leaders or government are responsible for these 'resources' will depend on each school's context. Leaders may decide at school level how budget and time will be

⁴⁸ See later reports in this series

⁴⁹ Clay, B. and Weston, D., *Unleashing Great Teaching*, 2018, Routledge, Abingdon



allocated to professional learning, and be responsible for the design of school policies and the investment in other resources such as external speakers. However, these decisions may happen higher up at Trust, or local authority level, or at government level in terms of policy-making and national provision, as we saw with the introduction of Flexible Working Ambassador Schools in 2021, and the new TSHs and suite of NPQs.

Demotion

Despite the high levels of career stagnation that mothers face in the 1-5 years following their return from maternity leave, the *Employment Pathways and Occupational Change After Childbirth* report found that they are less likely to downgrade their occupational status if they remained with the same employer.⁵⁰ However, comments from three participants in this report referred to formal, or hinted at informal demotions resulting from their news status as mothers. For Kallie, Jenny and Rochelle, the risk, or reality of being part of the 7.2% of women who downgrade their status when remaining with the same employer up to three years following childbirth.⁵¹

Previous comments from Jenny reveal her feeling that maternity leave would lead to ‘missing out... on opportunities’ and a loss of ‘kudos and... respect... in the eyes of the senior leadership team’ and further comments from Kallie explore the anticipation of demotion experienced by teachers when they become mothers:

“I was Head of Department and I wanted to go back but I’d started to reflect on the fact that I actually liked being Head of Department and that was the part of the job that job that was interesting and engaging to me now – as well as classroom teaching – but I really enjoyed that role and I was reflecting on the fact that if I wanted to go to part time or flexible working I’d have to lose the responsibility in the role, or reduce it dramatically, and I’d kind of been working my way up, so I knew what it was to work my way back down and it wasn’t very appealing to me.” – *Kallie*

Kallie was on her second maternity leave at the time of interview with no intention to return to her Head of Department role, and Jenny had moved into private early years education. Both were middle leaders, and whilst neither formally took a demotion before they left, their understanding of the discrimination they would potentially face as working mothers is tangible in their comments. For Jenny, this is the consequences of being physically absent from school during her maternity leave, and for Kallie, this is the likelihood that she would have to ‘lose the responsibility in the role, or reduce it dramatically’ in order to return to work part time.

Jenny and Kallie are perfect examples of the middle leadership ceiling that we have noticed amongst The MTPT Project community. Our 2021 membership survey indicated that 35% of our community base are middle leaders, with a further 15% holding a TLR position. Of the 60 leavers invited to take part in a qualitative interview, 24% were middle leaders, and 10% were TLR holders, and in this report, 6 of the 11 participants (55%) are middle leaders. In each case, middle leaders are the largest position represented. This middle leadership ceiling contributes to the gender disparity we see in school leadership, with male teachers likelihood of progression from classroom teacher to ‘other leadership’ to headteacher level increasing at the same rate that women’s chances decrease:

⁵⁰ Government Equalities Office, Understanding Society and Bristol University, *Employment Pathways and Occupational Change After Childbirth: Infographics*, Workplace and Gender Equality Research Programme, October 2019, accessed at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840848/Bristol_Summary_Report.pdf

⁵¹ Harkness, S., Borkowska, M. and Pelikh, A., *Employment pathways and occupational change after childbirth*, Government Equalities Office, October 2019, accessed at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840062/Bristol_Final_Report_1610.pdf

	Classroom teacher		Other leadership		Headteachers	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Primary	87%	13%	82%	18%	74%	26%
Secondary	66%	34%	54%	46%	40%	60%
Special or PRU	76%	24%	71%	29%	62%	38%

Figure 2: Analysis of the proportion of men and women in each phase and job role in 2020/21, in state-funded schools⁵²

It is undeniable that the motherhood penalty contributes to the gender inequality in school leadership and our gender pay gap, which increases significantly aged 35-39.⁵³ Just as women are getting going in their careers, the logistics of motherhood and the barriers this creates within the structures of our current education system, force their careers to stall, or threaten them with a lowered status. For those who refuse to ‘work [their] way back down’, and who are in a position to do so, leaving teaching, or seeking opportunities elsewhere, enables them to avoid a forced demotion.

Not only is this an example of the discrimination that mother-teachers face, it also represents a significant loss to what Ronfeldt et al. term, ‘institutional memory’ that is ‘critical for supporting all student learning’. High teacher turnover amongst any demographic results in ‘reduced student learning and achievement’, and ‘inequitable access to high-quality teachers’⁵⁴. Where teachers are experienced mid-career professionals, their loss also impacts pastoral outcomes, and the support available to trainee teachers, since we know that ‘the more experienced that teachers get, the more effective they are at encouraging attendance’, and ‘we can help our most inexperienced teachers improve simply by ensuring that they are working loosely alongside more experienced colleagues’.⁵⁵

For Rochelle, the decision to step away from her middle leadership role was a one that was shared by her teacher-husband. They had the same aim in mind – to spend more time with their young children:

“My husband’s gone from a middle management position to a teaching position so that he can spend more time with our children.” – *Rochelle*

“I was a secondary school teacher and I went back to start teaching last September as an ordinary teacher of History. Before that I was the Head of History. Obviously, and I decided to go back to teaching History because I knew the workload would be less.” – *Rochelle*

Rochelle’s comments remind us that it is not just mothers who experience the conflicting pressures of a teacher workload and the demands and desires of parenting. However, Rochelle is not reducing her status because she is no longer capable of doing the role as a mother, but in order to secure a reduced workload. Whilst we will not be reporting on the

⁵²ASCL, NAHT, NGA and WomenEd, *Closing the gender pay gap in education: a leadership imperative*, November 2021, accessed at: <https://www.ascl.org.uk/ASCL/media/ASCL/Our%20view/Campaigns/Closing-the-gender-pay-gap-in-Education-a-leadership-imperative.pdf>

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Ronfeldt, M., Loeb, S., and Wyckoff J., *How Teacher Turnover Harms Student Achievement*, CALDER, January 2012, accessed at: <https://caldercenter.org/sites/default/files/Ronfeldt-et-al.pdf>

⁵⁵ Weston, D, *Getting Better Teaching: Part 1 – Teacher Experience*, Teacher Development Trust, 2nd March 2019, accessed at: <https://tdtrust.org/2019/03/02/getting-better-teaching-part-1-teacher-experience/>



impact of workload on female teachers' decision to leave teaching aged 30-39 in this series, **0.3 What did we find out?** shows us that it was the most significant push factor chosen by the 498 participants in our initial "Leavers" survey. Poignantly for Rochelle, choosing this demotion did not work out as she hoped: even as 'an ordinary teacher of History', the marking and planning load, along with insufficient PPA time, high staff absence and additional pastoral expectations for KS5 students meant that her workload was still untenable, resulting in her resignation.

Flexible Working

5 of the 11 participants in this report (45%) worked part-time at the time of leaving the profession. This is a higher proportion than the percentage of female part-time workers in education in general (28%), reflecting the NFER's findings that part-time working is 'most prevalent' amongst women with 'childcare responsibilities'⁵⁶. 13% of assistant head teachers work part-time, and the overall percentage of senior leaders working part-time stood at 11% in 2020.⁵⁷ One of our 5 participants (Esther) was once included in this figure, and whilst we might celebrate her role-modelling in this area, her comments reveal that flexible working can be a double-edged sword when it comes to career progression:

"The problem therefore being, is it was not possible to get to another school because no other schools would look at me wanting to do four days a week in a leadership role. I couldn't find anyone who would take that." – *Esther*

"I felt so trapped with my school, because I was there on four days. I couldn't get four days elsewhere." – *Esther*

Indeed, in 2021, TimeWise found that only 23% of roles within education were advertised as part-time or flexible⁵⁸ and at the time of writing (14.06.22) only 57 of the 812 (7%) middle leadership positions, and 7 of the 283 (2%) senior leadership roles on the TES were advertised as part-time. Esther's assumption that to continue her progression in another schools 'was not possible', and that she 'couldn't get four days elsewhere' may therefore not be entirely unfounded.

Within teachers' current settings, previous comments from Kallie indicate the ingrained assumption – potentially due to what teachers have seen role-modelled to them ahead of their own decisions around flexible working – is that flexible or part-time working and leadership roles are incompatible:

"I was Head of Department and I wanted to go back but ... I was reflecting on the fact that if I wanted to go to part time or flexible working I'd have to lose the responsibility in the role, or reduce it dramatically." – *Kallie*

This assumption was also seen in Rochelle's decision to reduce her role from Head of History to teacher of History and indeed, in their 2019 report, the NFER warned that 'restricting leadership to those willing and able to work full-time limits the pool of leadership talent' whereas 'part-time and flexible working patterns for middle or senior leaders can encourage a more distributed model of leadership and help to provide effective succession planning'⁵⁹. Even more relevant to our focus on mothers aged 30-39, Booth et al. found that 'a lack of flexibility in middle and senior leadership roles (such as opportunities for part-time working

⁵⁶ Sharp, C., Smith, R., Worth, J., and Van den Brande, J., *Part-time Teaching and Flexible Working in Secondary Schools*, NFER, June 2019, accessed at: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/3476/part-time-teaching-and-flexible-working-in-secondary-schools.pdf>

⁵⁷ DfE, *School Leadership in England 2010 to 2020: characteristics and trends*, April 2022, accessed at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1071794/School_Leadership_in_England_2010_to_2020_characteristics_and_trends_report.pdf

⁵⁸ TimeWise, *The TimeWise Flexible Jobs Index 2021*, accessed at: <https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/TimeWise-Flexible-Jobs-Index-2021.pdf>

⁵⁹ Sharp, C., Smith, R., Worth, J., and Van den Brande, J., *Part-time Teaching and Flexible Working in Secondary Schools*, NFER, June 2019, accessed at: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/3476/part-time-teaching-and-flexible-working-in-secondary-schools.pdf>

and/or job sharing) could hinder teachers with caring responsibilities to progress in their careers.’⁶⁰

As well as assumptions around level of seniority and flexible working, Stacey’s comments indicate that teachers’ ability to progress is depending on the school’s approach to flexible working. As an experienced teacher, Stacey is also able to comment on how this approach changed, to the detriment of part-time workers, as a result of the appointment of a new head teacher:

“When I started at the school in 2007, it was actually alright because there were job shares and you could progress.” – *Stacey*

“I had a Head, a female Head, who did not give any opportunities for part time staff to progress within teaching. You were seen as a classroom teacher, and nothing more. I even by the end was losing form – I didn’t have a form anymore.” – *Stacey*

“There’s nowhere for me to go with progression because you will not, if we apply for things part time, as part timers, you’re telling us we can’t have it because we’re part time.” – *Stacey*

In both Stacey and Esther’s comments, we see once again the catch-22 situation that faces mothers in education, which leads to the sense of stagnation found in *Employment Pathways and Occupational Change After Childbirth*. In accessing the provision they feel necessary to their parenting identity (periods of maternity leave, flexible working, remaining in a workplace that enables commuting for childcare purposes), mother-teachers find themselves excluded from progression opportunities with little ability to change their situation. Stacey’s experience is definitely not an isolated one: according to the DfE, even in 2020, three years after Stacey left, ‘part-time teachers were 45% less likely than full-time teachers to be promoted to headteacher, 43% less likely to be promoted to senior leader and 51% less likely to be promoted to middle leader.’⁶¹

According to Stacey, the ‘vicious cycle’ of this situation also extends to professional development opportunities for part-time teachers:

“If you were part time, you were less likely to be approved to go on anything. And because what was the point because you weren’t going to progress? So why would we send you on a course? Why would we let you do, I mean – even my first day of training lacked because I wasn’t eligible to have it redone because I was part time and I wasn’t going on a trip anytime soon. I wasn’t going to be going on a trip anytime soon, because I was part time. So it was a vicious cycle. And it just got to the point it was a joke.” – *Stacey*

The result of this exclusion is that teachers become deskilled, as reflected in Stacey’s language – ‘did not give any opportunities’, ‘nothing more’, ‘losing’, ‘nowhere for me to go’. This

⁶⁰ Booth, J, Coldwell, M., Müller, L., Perry, E., and Zuccollo, J., *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention*, Education Sciences, Volume 11, Issue 6, 10.3390/educi11060299, 16th June 2021, accessed at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/6/299/html>

⁶¹ DfE, *School Leadership in England 2010 to 2020: characteristics and trends*, April 2022, accessed at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1071794/School_leadership_in_England_2010_to_2020_characteristics_and_trends_-_report.pdf

perception of career regression is not limited to the education sector. Indeed, a 2018 report from TimeWise found that '59% feel their skills and knowledge have fallen behind those of their full-time colleagues' and '68% are willing to compromise on their careers in order to work part-time.'⁶² Prejudices associated with part-time workers being seen as 'less committed', 'less deserving of career advancement', 'less visible' with 'less time for development and mentoring' and 'more likely to miss out on high-profile assignments and critical responsibilities, all of which are essential to career advancement', plague almost every industry.⁶³

As we have already seen in Esther's comments, this prejudice, combined with the resulting tangible lack of experience or evidence of professional development, means that the option to escape a limiting school environment through 'interviews for jobs at other schools' becomes much 'harder'. With 'school culture' being the fifth most popular reason that women aged 30-39 left teaching, without an escape route from a toxic school environment, teachers choose to leave the profession entirely.

Stacey's frustration and eventual disillusionment in the face of the enforced deskilling she experienced is evident: 'less likely', 'what was the point', 'why would we', 'wasn't eligible', 'vicious cycle', 'it was a joke'. This frustration has already been seen in comments from Jenny, Hanna, Esther, Rebecca, Kay and Sharon, an emotion that becomes thematic of the interviews included in this report, and which becomes a barrier in itself. When staff are convinced that they will not be considered for progression or development opportunities, they stop putting themselves forwards. Whether assumptions like Kallie's that reducing to part-time hours or requesting another form of flexibility, means losing responsibility, are accurate or not, if they are deeply embedded within the individual, then they further contribute to their feelings of entrapment and stagnation.

In Stacey's account, this assumption is compounded by a sense that the blame was placed on *her* for missing out on developmental opportunities – 'why would we send you...?' 'why would we let you...?'. Rather than being considered a valuable member of the workforce, worthy of investment, 'training and development isn't prioritised for part-time workers'⁶⁴. As a result, we hear from Stacey and Kay the requirement to adapt, take on more, and independently find solutions without support from their schools, a requirement that leads to burnout, reduced confidence and a reduced sense of value to the school.

Stacey's comments almost exactly reflect the broader findings in *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention* about the restrictions that mother-teachers face:

"For those with caring responsibilities outside school and those who work part-time, the need for and access to professional development tailored to career stage may be particularly pertinent, and this may disproportionately affect women. Brown highlighted inconsistencies in terms of access to paid professional development amongst women who worked part-time in England. In this study, an inconsistent

⁶² TimeWise, *Part-Time Work: The Exclusion Zone*, September 2018, accessed at: https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Part-Time_Work_Exclusion_Zone.pdf

⁶³ Van Osch, Y., and Schaveling, J., *The Effects of Part-Time Employment and Gender on Organizational Career Growth*, 1st September, 2017, accessed at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0894845317728359>

⁶⁴ TimeWise, *Part-Time Work: The Exclusion Zone*, September 2018, accessed at: https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Part-Time_Work_Exclusion_Zone.pdf

approach was identified in terms of remuneration for women to attend professional development on days when they were not normally working; this included inconsistency in schools funding childcare whilst women were attending non-paid professional development.”

Stacey specifically identifies the attitude of her ‘Head, a female Head’ as the gatekeeper to the progression of part-time members of staff and the frustrations from part-time interview participants in this report so far, have largely been directed at a specific or vague reference to school leadership. Indeed, Flexible Teacher Talent tell us that ‘the biggest factor affecting whether a school accepts flexible working practices is the viewpoint of the headteacher’. It is the headteacher who creates ‘a culture which promotes’ flexible working practices, who is responsible for ‘granting and encouraging flexible working requests’ and adapting the subsequent logistics of ‘meetings, parents’ evenings, open evenings, performances, information events... marking and planning’ around the needs of part-time and flexible members of staff.⁶⁵

However, attitudes towards flexible working in schools *are* changing. The introduction of the Gender Pay Gap Regulations in 2017 acted as pivotal point for approaches to part-time and flexible working, revealing a pressing need to improve equality in the workplace. In response, Prime Minister Theresa May said ‘firms should strive to make flexible working a reality for all staff by advertising jobs as flexible “from day one” unless there were “solid business reasons” not to’⁶⁶. Following this announcement, Education Secretary and Minister for Women and Equalities, Justine Greening hosted the Flexible Working in Schools Summit⁶⁷ that led to the DfE’s 2017 *Flexible Working in Schools* non-statutory guidance document, further reports and toolkits in 2019, and the Flexible Working Ambassador Schools, which were introduced in 2021. Ongoing work during this period from organisations such as WomenEd, Flexible Teacher Talent, champions of flexible working at school and Trust level, and amongst some ITT providers, have supported the implementation of DfE guidance on the ground in schools.

The 5 participants included in this report who worked part-time at the point of leaving the profession, however, all left between 2016 and 2018. With the emphasis on part-time and flexible working opportunities for teachers still in comparative infancy, and currently competing with other large concerns such as the recovery from the 2020-22 global pandemic, only time will tell if these changing attitudes to part-time and flexible working will retain and empower the career progression of teachers and leaders like Esther, Stacey, Rebecca, Hannah and Sharon.

⁶⁵ Patience, L. and Rose, L., *Flex Education: A Guide for Flexible Working in Schools*, Corwin, SAGE Publications Ltd., London, 2022

⁶⁶ BBC Business, *Theresa May in renewed effort to close gender pay gap*, 27th October 2017, accessed at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-41783188>

⁶⁷ DfE, *New support for flexible working in schools pledged at summit*, 30th October 2017, accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-support-for-flexible-working-in-schools-pledged-at-summit>

Discrimination

Part of the issue of part-time working acting, or being used as a barrier to progression or professional development opportunities, is that because the majority of part-time workers (in all industries) are women, refusal to offer opportunities to part-time colleagues or adapt systems to the logistics of their working hours, has a detrimental impact on women – particularly mothers – in a way that it does not harm men. There is therefore often evidence of discrimination on the grounds of sex or – depending on the female employee’s status, pregnancy and maternity – when professional development, training, progression or other opportunities are denied to employees working flexibly, or where inadequate attempts are made to remove barriers that present themselves.

Within the comments of the 11 interview participants referenced in this report, we see different and complex examples of discrimination preventing progression, or access to professional development opportunities:

- Pregnancy
- Gender stereotypes associated with subjects
- Part-time working hours
- Emergency childcare needs

Sometimes these examples of sex / pregnancy and maternity discrimination are direct and obvious. In other cases, they are indirect, or a result of a poorly-designed system, simple lack of consideration, or school leader failing to pro-actively address barriers, or follow guidance that would ensure adherence to the 2010 Equality Act.

We have already seen in two of Stacey’s comments, that part-time working can be used as an excuse to discriminate on the grounds of sex, as the majority of part-time positions are held by women in their thirties and forties⁶⁸:

“I had a Head, a female Head, who did not give any opportunities for part time staff to progress within teaching. You were seen as a classroom teacher, and nothing more. I even by the end was losing form – I didn’t have a form anymore.” – Stacey

“There’s nowhere for me to go with progression because you will not, if we apply for things part time, as part timers, you’re telling us we can’t have it because we’re part time.” – Stacey

Stacey’s account reflects the findings of the *Employment Pathways and Occupational Change After Childbirth*, and the deterioration of her status and responsibility within her role is evident. From being consigned to ‘a classroom teacher, and nothing more’ to ‘even losing form’, Stacey’s disappointment at her career being limited simply because she is part-time is clear. When she does express interest in ‘opportunities’ or ‘progression’, Stacey found herself in a similar catch-22 situation to Hanna and Esther – ‘we can’t have it because we’re part time’ – but as a mother with caring responsibilities, the decision to work part-time is not one that

⁶⁸ Sharp, C., Smith, R., Worth, J., and Van den Brande, J., *Part-time Teaching and Flexible Working in Secondary Schools*, NFER, June 2019, accessed at: <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/3476/part-time-teaching-and-flexible-working-in-secondary-schools.pdf>

she will, or is able to sacrifice. Working part-time is a way for parents to manage the logistics and costs of childcare, to extend time spent with their child in their early lives in a financially balanced way, and to manage the domestic load that still falls predominantly on women, and is increased with parenthood.

In Stacey's comment, it is her head teacher who establishes the practice of excluding part-time teachers from applying for progression opportunities. The frustration in response to this unfair gate-keeping is revealed in the accusatory nature of Stacey's tone – 'you will not', 'you're telling us' – and has already been seen in Hanna's comments about similar frustrations – 'well, you didn't advertise the role'. Similarly, Rochelle shares an example of how individual school leaders can use policies and procedures to discriminate against working mothers:

"I did have to take time off when my children were sick and whenever I did it felt like I was being punished... My head of department was not very supportive across the board to me and to other members of staff and some of the things that they (staff members) did, they (line manager) always used it as part of performance management – you weren't doing a good job, you wouldn't be able to move up because you had children." – *Rochelle*

Here, Rochelle cites a specific discriminatory attitude of her 'head of department' who 'was not very supportive', demonstrating again the way that line managers and senior leaders can act as gatekeepers to mother-teachers' progression. Rochelle's feelings of being 'punished' and having the logistics of parenthood used 'as part of performance management' to deny her pay and progression, is an example of direct discrimination on the grounds of sex. However, this discrimination is a result of a punitive absence policy that enables – according to the structures of the school – her head of department and other line managers to justify their judgement that working mothers 'weren't doing a good job'. The discriminatory attitudes on behalf of the individual line manager therefore go unchallenged because the absence policy or definition of 'a good job' that encourages presenteeism, does not take into account the practicalities and flexibility that working parents may need. Even though Rochelle explains, 'I would do my best to arrange with my husband ...to manage the childcare between us if one of them was off sick', women are still more likely to take on the majority of unpaid domestic labour, including childcare⁶⁹, and so inflexible absence policies that punish, or enable punitive action in this way, will overwhelmingly impact female employees.

In comments from Jenny, Hanna and Esther, we see examples (or assumptions) of discrimination based on the protected characteristic of pregnancy and maternity:

"It was all going very well until towards the end in June when I was just about to come back and heard that someone had got this job that I was thinking of going for. So that was obviously disappointing. I was very angry. There was a new Head of Department who had previously been Head of KS4 so she knew the policies and everything. And what they've done is just thought, who do we think would like to go for this job? And

⁶⁹ Office for National Statistics, *Women shoulder the responsibility of 'unpaid work'*, 10 November 2016, accessed at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/womenshouldtheresponsibilityofunpaidwork/2016-11-10>

they could only think of one person so just offered it to her without thinking of asking me, or, as school policy, advertising the position internally.” – *Hanna*

“In the build-up to going on maternity leave I wasn’t involved in as many conversations – my opinion wasn’t sought on things that I had the experience of.” – *Jenny*

“With my first child, I didn’t know how long I was going to take off because I was concerned at first that it might harm my professional development, because at that time I was an Advanced Skills teacher who was just on the cusp of leadership at my school.” – *Esther*

Hanna’s anecdote is the clearest example of pregnancy and maternity discrimination, as her school’s failure to contact her about the Head of Department role contravenes the need for employers to contact employees on leave about ‘any promotion or other job opportunities, explaining what she needs to do to apply’.⁷⁰ The reason that this legality exists is specifically to ensure that employees on leave are not forgotten about, and a temporary period of physical absence from the workplace does not disadvantage them in the long term by limiting their opportunities for progression. The fact that the necessary communication did not occur and – according to Hanna – ‘what they’ve done is just thought, who do we think would like to go for this job?’, ‘they... just offered it to her without thinking of asking me or... advertising the position internally’ – means that the school have failed to act in adherence with the 2010 Equality Act and have therefore discriminated against Hanna as an employee on maternity leave.

The fact that Hanna had been ‘thinking of going for’ the Head of Department role demonstrates once again that many women maintain their ambition whilst on leave and when returning to work as new mothers, despite the EHRC’s finding that 17% of employers thought that ‘pregnant women and new mothers are less interested in career progression and promotion’⁷¹. When this ambition is thwarted by her school preventing her from applying, and potentially securing a promotion, Hanna’s experience of maternity leave is also negatively impacted. She describes that her leave, ‘was all going very well until’ this discrimination occurred, which left her feeling ‘angry’ and disappointed.

In Jenny and Esther’s case, the pregnancy and maternity discrimination is more difficult to evidence, showing how subtle the grains of sand that create the motherhood penalty can be. Anticipating her absence, Jenny claims that her ‘opinion wasn’t sought on things’ and she ‘wasn’t involved in as many conversations’. Such exclusion means that even before Jenny is physically absent on leave, not only does she feel devalued and unfulfilled, she is also less able to demonstrate impact as a middle leader – something she has already explained that she wanted in order to redirect her career and take on new challenges. Her voice is erased, and therefore her professional influence, status and the respect she can garner from colleagues is reduced. Rather than the 4-12 months that a woman’s career might be paused over her maternity leave, therefore, instances of discrimination like this mean that women’s input can be ignored for much longer. Meanwhile, colleagues who are not mothers are being

⁷⁰ Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Managing Maternity Leave: Contact*, May 2016, accessed at: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/faqs-employers/managing-maternity-leave-contact>

⁷¹ Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Pregnancy and Maternity-Related Discrimination and Disadvantage: Experience of Employers*, IFF Research on behalf of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015, accessed at: file:///Users/Emma/Downloads/employers_report_-_bis-16-147-pregnancy-and-maternity-related-discrimination-and-disadvantage-experiences-of-employers.pdf

credited, gaining acknowledgment and building up an evidence bank of their impact to support their success when applying for future progression opportunities.

Although Esther's comment does not cite an actual instance of discrimination, the fact that she assumed that taking time out on maternity leave would 'harm [her] professional development' suggests that she has perceived discriminatory attitudes either in her immediate environment, or in wider society. This ingrained assumption that pregnant women is echoed in comments from Gauri:

"I think we're all aware but when women are pregnant, and seeking promotion or aspiration, there is the unheard conversation about the leave that will be taken afterwards, and also the level of commitment." - *Gauri*

The assumption that working mothers will inevitably experience discrimination or career stagnation removes Esther's sense of ownership over her maternity leave experience: she is unsure of 'how long' to take off, 'concerned' of the 'harm' it might do to her career. Mother-teachers are therefore potentially sacrificing time with their new babies in order to return to work earlier than they would have liked in order to save careers they perceive to be at risk.

That Esther was an 'Advanced Skills Teacher... on the cusp of leadership' at the time of her first leave emphasises once again the prevalence of the middle leadership ceiling that we have seen in data sets from this study, and The MTPT Project's 2021 membership survey (CITE). Like Esther, Kallie, Jenny, Sharon, Abigail, Gauri and Rochelle, the 24% of middle leaders responding to our initial 'leavers' survey, the decision to start a family coincides with the period at which they are just beginning to get into their stride as professionals. The middle leadership ceiling that we are seeing suggests that where women are not already senior leaders before they become mothers, it is much harder to progress into assistant head positions, or beyond. In fact, this is when they are the most vulnerable to the stagnation or career digression we have seen in the Booth et al. report, and we see this trend in both the data sets of women who have left teaching *and* stayed aged 30-39 (**03. What did we find out?**)

Beyond motherhood, Kay's anecdote reveals discriminatory attitudes based on sex from the wider community, which she feels influences her ability to progress within her school setting:

"I'm a Physics teacher and as I'm sure you're aware, and kind of everyone is aware, there are a lack of female Physics teachers and I think that has become a stereotype. The parents have an expectation that there's going to be a male Physics teacher – they see males as more competent. I experienced this when my Head of Department, who was male, would send an identical email to myself. And I would be accused of not being supportive, and he would have absolutely no comeback. So it just seemed like there were very few opportunities for women in particular, in my particular subject, because of parental and societal expectation, that it is a male role." – *Kay*

Kay's anecdote is an example of how sex-based discrimination can act as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, because female teachers in some subjects are so rare, some schools

and communities may positively discriminate against them in order to increase success and uptake at A Level amongst girls, using these female teachers as role models and a pathway into an underrepresented subject. However, Kay falls victim to sexist attitudes from the wider community who do not consider her competent because she is a woman. Where schools share, or are keen to meet 'parental and societal expectation[s]' based on gender stereotypes like this, women's progression will be limited regardless of their actual competence in comparison to male colleagues.

Gauri, who moved from the state sector to an international school expands on how acknowledging pregnancy and maternity discrimination – being honest and candid about its existence and the way it can harm mothers' careers – can in fact act as a pro-active step in empowering women:

"I think we're all aware, but when women are pregnant, and seeking promotion or aspiration, there is the unheard conversation about the leave that will be taken afterwards, and also the level of commitment. And everyone's very careful not to make this into an issue, obviously, because of legal issues. But the lack of legal issues in the international sector made it a lot more open as an issue. So 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."" – *Gauri*

The existence of pregnancy and maternity discrimination despite its status as a protected characteristic, is a very real part of the lived experiences of teachers in our wider study. The fact that these are often 'unheard conversation[s]', but that 'we're all aware of them' emphasises how easy it can be to deny someone a role, progression or professional development opportunity based on prejudices around a woman's 'level of commitment' that do not even have to be articulated. If these prejudices are 'unheard' and unspoken, it is also therefore very difficult to prove that discrimination has occurred or hold decision-makers to account. Especially when school leaders are fully versed in discrimination law, they can be very careful to avoid saying anything that will invite accusation, and there are a multitude of reasons that they can use to justify awarding a role to a candidate who is not pregnant, of child-bearing age, or already a mother.

Because of the legalities surrounding the protected characteristic of pregnancy and maternity, including health and safety law, employee wellbeing, and the fact that employers cannot harass pregnant women, or pressure those on leave, to work, even the most well-meaning school leaders may avoid engaging in conversations like the one Gauri describes because of assumptions around women's shifting priorities and the belief that they will no longer be interested in career progression over the maternity period. The frank conversation that Gauri's head teacher initiated, therefore, was both brave, but also demonstrated a commitment to equal opportunities, transparency and potentially a positive and close working relationship with Gauri. This transparency definitely left an impression on Gauri:

"I was treated as if I was an equal applicant to any other and I was a successful applicant and my maternity leave features nowhere in the conversation. I was granted

extended maternity leave in that instance. I came back and took the role on and was very happy in it.” – *Gauri*

Not only did the acknowledgement of the potential consequences of pregnancy and maternity discrimination – ‘I don’t want you not to apply because you’re pregnant’ – ensure that Gauri knew the role was open to her to apply for if she so wished, it also challenged the ingrained assumptions that we have seen from Esther and Gauri, that many women may hold when embarking on their journey to motherhood. Although Gauri’s story ends positively, the fact that she emphasises that she ‘was treated as... an equal applicant’ suggests that this access to equal opportunity is still an exception, or something special, in her mind. After all, why shouldn’t she be treated as an ‘equal applicant’ if she were qualified to apply for the role? Whether Gauri needed it or not, this headteacher challenged assumptions around the impact of pregnancy and maternity on career progression, and gave her permission to take action based on the law, not on the social discrimination she has (consciously or subconsciously) internalised.

Gauri talks plainly about the fact that an upcoming period of leave does require logistical consideration, particularly around the ‘leave that will be taken’. In acknowledging that discrimination based on such points as start dates, staffing needs or length of absence, exists, school leaders like Gauri’s can ensure that the interview process takes place free from discrimination, focusing simply on the merit of the candidate – ‘treated as if I was an equal applicant to any other’, ‘maternity leave features nowhere in the conversation’ – but that subsequent solutions can be found to practical details if a pregnant colleague is appointed. In Gauri’s case, this involved taking ‘extended maternity leave’ and taking on her new role when she returned.

Gauri’s account is an example of how school leaders can balance the need to adhere to the legalities protecting women, whilst also avoiding discrimination in order to champion their progression. What is evident is that pregnancy and maternity cannot be treated as a professional blocker, but it also cannot be the elephant in the room. Rather, a woman’s pregnancy or status as a mother must be recognised free from the prejudice or stereotyping that leads to discriminatory behaviour. The fact that Gauri returned and was ‘very happy’ in her promoted position demonstrates that when mothers are treated equally, it can be of long-term benefit to the school who retain a fulfilled and experienced colleague.

Aspirations and ambitions as parent-teachers

Despite the barriers to progression and professional development opportunities that they encountered when teaching in the state sector, the teachers in this report emphasise that motherhood did not dampen their professional ambitions:

“I also recognise that for me to feel fulfilled in my work, I want more than classroom teaching.” – *Kallie*

“Before I went back on maternity leave and in the first month after going back after maternity leave, I was really looking forward to going back and quite ambitious about what I wanted to achieve in teaching: getting a promotion, that kind of thing.” – *Hanna*

“I was driven with ambition within the sector.” – *Gauri*

“The second time I was about to go on maternity leave there was a vacancy which I was interested in. No-one had to nudge me to apply for this one.” – *Gauri*

“There was still a drive to be in the education sector and the drive for promotion. And I felt that the drive for promotion within the school arena required a real commitment in time and it wasn’t something that I could take on lightly.” – *Gauri*

“I maintain my aspirations for leadership as a teacher.” – *Gauri*

Kallie, Hanna and Gauri’s comments are packed with semantics of ambition – ‘more than just’, ‘really looking forward to going back’, ‘quite ambitious’, ‘what I wanted to achieve’, ‘promotion’, ‘driven with ambition’, ‘no-one had to nudge me to apply’, ‘drive’, ‘drive for promotion’, ‘commitment’, ‘aspirations for leadership’. Indeed, given that teachers are likely to step into their first leadership position within 8-9 years of qualifying⁷² (so, around their late twenties or early thirties if they began their teaching careers as recent graduates), the point at which they may be feeling most ambitious may also be the point at which they become mothers, and are subject to the limitations of the motherhood penalty explored in this report.

This ambition and enthusiasm – lost to the education system when these teachers left - – completely contradicts the 17% of employers in the EHRC’s research who thought that ‘pregnant women and new mothers are less interested in career progression and promotion’⁷³. However, these prejudices surrounding mothers’ commitment to their professional lives, form part of the reason that, despite their ambition, they can feel ‘trapped’ at work, and eventually choose to leave. Although Hanna’s reference to ‘a promotion, that kind of thing’ is vague, her previous descriptions of applying three times for TLRs, and Gauri’s comments about school leadership requiring ‘a real commitment in time’ and not something that she ‘could take on lightly’ demonstrates that they understand the reality and practicalities of pursuing these ambitions. However, because of the barriers that they have

⁷² Department for Education, *School Leadership in England 2010 to 2016: characteristics and trends*, April 2018, revised July 201, accessed at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/725118/Leadership_Analysis_2018.pdf

⁷³ Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Pregnancy and Maternity-Related Discrimination and Disadvantage: Experience of Employers*, IFF Research on behalf of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015, accessed at: file:///Users/Emma/Downloads/employers_report_-_bis-16-147-pregnancy-and-maternity-related-discrimination-and-disadvantage-experiences-of-employers.pdf

faced, their 'drive' to take on these challenges within the education sector alongside their roles as parents, has been lost. For Hanna, this was within 'the first month after going back after maternity' because of the setbacks and lack of support she encountered.

In Kay and Jenny's case, the potential to have the ambitions previously denied to them fulfilled on their terms, may even encourage them to return to teaching:

"The chance to renew my enthusiasm independently for my subject might eventually tempt me back." – *Kay*

"I still feel I have that potential. I really want to be an inspirational leader and be a head teacher in a school, whether that's special needs or mainstream primary, something like that where I can implement the kind of culture and workload and the ethos I feel I haven't experienced and I don't know if that's a vain hope." – *Jenny*

As a reminder: Kay's previous comments focused on wanting to improve her craft, but finding there was no time to do so. Jenny found herself feeling 'stale' in her current role and denied leadership opportunities within her school setting. Even having left the profession, both interview participants are still considering a return, and speak positively about their 'enthusiasm' for their subject, their 'potential' and desire 'to be an inspirational leader'. However, there is doubt in both of these comments – 'might eventually', 'I don't know if that's a vain hope' – with a sense that in order for their ambitions to be fulfilled, Kay and Jenny would have to return to a different, or separate system to the one they left – 'independently', 'where I can implement the kind of culture... and the ethos I feel I haven't experienced'.

Progression in new career

4 of the 11 participants in this report shared that where their ambitions for development or progression were not met as teachers, they had been subsequently met in their new careers:

“... which is brilliant for me and exactly what I needed. A fresh change, a fresh challenge. It’s very different but I feel I can use what I have learnt previously. I don’t feel like I’m starting afresh. It’s exactly what I needed. If I could have done that in the original setting within certain parameters that would have been ideal, but no. I think staying too long in one setting as well when the conditions aren’t right can be quite damaging in terms of confidence and how you view yourself.” – *Jenny*

“Getting out there and trying new things and being able to put your skills to the test in different settings, it shows you what you can do and you see new challenges and new ways to face it, and I just feel more vibrant really, as a professional, as someone who’s loved teaching and spent a long time at it.” – *Jenny*

“Conversely, I’ve actually booked myself on four courses within the next three months at my new job. Because I can, and I’m determined to make the best of it.” – *Stacey*

“I have got potential for the future. They seem to be good at investing in staff. So even though it’s not a very exciting role at the moment, I think there probably is the potential to be supported in developing and progressing and getting promoted in the future.” – *Abigail*

“Actually, the job I’m in now, which is completely not teaching, there are those progression opportunities for me as a part time worker.” – *Stacey*

The vibrancy of the language in these comments presents a stark contrast to the semantics of stagnation that began this report or the ‘damaging’ conditions that Jenny reflects on. Instead of ‘stale’, ‘stuck’ and ‘trapped’, these mothers use ‘brilliant’, ‘fresh’, ‘challenge’, ‘exactly what I needed’, ‘trying new things’, ‘it shows you what you can do’, ‘vibrant’, ‘professional’, ‘someone who’s loved teaching’, ‘determined’, ‘make the best of it’, ‘potential for the future’, ‘good at investing in staff’, ‘developing and progressing and getting promoted’, ‘progression opportunities’. For these participants who have found new roles, instead of choosing to stay at home with their children, the impact of a simple change is evident – something that they sought out, but could not find in their teaching roles.

In some cases, the barriers to progression or development that caused such frustration to these former teachers, have been completely removed in their new roles. Stacey is now able to work part-time *and* enjoy ‘progression opportunities’, and book herself onto courses paid for and valued by her new employer. Jenny has the ‘change’, the ‘fresh challenge’ that she hankered after in her school setting even when remaining in a private nursery, describing herself as ‘someone who’s loved teaching’. Even though Abigail admits that her current role is ‘not very exciting at the moment’, her satisfaction at having ‘potential for the future’, working with leaders who ‘seem to be good at investing in staff’ provide a counterpoint to the sense of having nowhere to go that has typified so many of the comments so far. It also

demonstrates a positive relationship with, and trust in leadership that has been absent from previous comments from the participants in this report.

The fact that professional development is associated with a sense of professional fulfilment is also seen in these comments. Participants are empowered by learning new things about themselves and their working environments – ‘getting out there’ ‘trying new things’, ‘putting your skills to the test’, ‘shows you what you can do’, ‘new challenges’, ‘new ways to face it’ – and Gauri describes how she was supported by her new school to do so when pregnant, and on maternity leave:

“The second time I was about to go on maternity leave there was a vacancy which I was interested in. No-one had to nudge me to apply for this one.” – *Gauri*

“I conducted the interview when I was seven months pregnant and I was due to go on maternity leave soon. In fact, the post was supposed to begin when I would be on maternity leave and I’m really glad I was successful. I was offered the role and accepted the role. I was even paid for the role while I was on maternity leave – something that perhaps wouldn’t have happened if I was in the state system.” – *Gauri*

“I was treated as if I was an equal applicant to any other and I was a successful applicant and my maternity leave features nowhere in the conversation. I was granted extended maternity leave in that instance. I came back and took the role on and was very happy in it.” – *Gauri*

“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.” – *Gauri*

Gauri refers to six ways that her progression and professional development was supported in her international setting:

- Through a culture that established trust in a set of modelled values – ‘no one had to nudge me to apply’
- Financial support to mitigate reduced earnings whilst on maternity leave – ‘I was even paid for the role whilst I was on maternity leave’
- Adherence to the 2010 Equality Act during the interview process – ‘I was treated as if I was an equal’, ‘my maternity leave features nowhere in the conversation’
- Transparency over the practical logistics of time and start dates impacted by a period of maternity leave – ‘the post was supposed to begin when I would be on maternity leave’, ‘I was granted extended maternity leave’, ‘I came back and took the role on’
- Effective communication that follows the mother’s lead whilst on maternity leave – ‘I asked to go’
- An open culture to support with childcare needs – ‘I took my children with me’

Gauri highlights that such support ‘perhaps wouldn’t have happened... in the state system’, and indeed, we have seen from this report that there are instances where mothers are actively discouraged, overlooked or blocked from progressing in their careers. However,



there is nothing to stop UK schools offering their teachers the same opportunities as Gauri other than the attitudes of leaders, and the school cultures they create. When these opportunities are present, we see in Gauri's anecdote increased confidence, steps towards tackling the gender pay gap, positive staff wellbeing and the courage to trailblaze and role model for others. Schools benefit in terms of retention and internal recruitment, as well as creating systems that are creative and adaptable, increasing staff loyalty and developing teaching, learning and leadership for their students.

Suggestions for Schools and Individuals

Supporting mother-teachers to avoid stagnation through professional development and progression opportunities is a nuanced, and sometimes complex process for school leaders. Getting it right is highly dependent on an individual and school's context, and as we have seen in this report, what engages and motivates one mother-teacher will not necessarily engage or motivate another. The most important recommendation from this report for both schools and individuals is to **communicate** with clarity and transparency.

Where schools understand and respond to the professional development needs and ambitions of mother-teachers, they are more likely to retain them within either their own school setting or within the wider education system. The barriers to progression or development raised by the 11 participants in this report are almost exclusively attitudinal, rooted in prejudice, discriminatory practice or an entrenched refusal to find creative or new ways of doing things.

In general terms, the responses from these 11 participants have indicated that schools can take the following actions to provide mother-teachers aged 30-39 with the professional development or progression opportunities that may make the difference between them leaving, or staying in the profession:

Professional Development

- Leaders responsible for professional development: understand that mid-career teachers, particularly mother-teachers, are vulnerable to career stagnation and should be identified as a priority for CPD as a retention tool
- Make professional development a priority and follow recommendations from the Teacher Development Trust to ensure time and budget is invested into doing it well (reading recommendation: *Unleashing Great Teaching*, Clay and Weston)
- Ensure that professional development opportunities are accessible to colleagues working part-time
- Listen to mother-teacher colleagues and ensure that the professional development and progression opportunities offered to them are relevant and match the interests they have articulated
- Where necessary, offer childcare solutions to ensure mother-teachers can access professional development opportunities – e.g. conference creches, welcoming babies and children to training events, offering contributions to childcare costs in the same way that travel expenses might be covered

The Maternity Period

- Avoid prejudice based on assumptions around what teachers may or may not want or be able to do when pregnant, on maternity leave, as working mothers or as part time / flexible employees
- Communicate with mother-teachers regarding their professional development needs or ambitions at key points over the early parenting period:
 - During their expectancy

- When vacancies, training or promoted positions arise during their maternity leave
- Within the first two terms of their return to work
- On an annual basis, as part of the school's performance review process
- Change maternity leave policies at school / Trust level so that women are not financially penalised over the pregnancy and maternity period when seeking opportunities for progression at new schools:
 - Offer occupational maternity pay from day one, rather than having a qualifying period of employment
 - Waiver the policy that obliges mothers to return for 13 weeks to avoid paying back their occupational maternity pay
 - Don't believe this can be done? Case study: [Greenwood Academies Trust](#)
- Ensure pregnant colleagues have a voice and input all the way up to their leave date, even when they will be absent for the future activity being planned
- Clarify how much communication colleagues would like during maternity leave, what format this will take, and on what topic *before* staff begin their leave

Career Progression

- When opportunities are *not* available within your setting, commit to the retention of mother-colleagues within the wider education sector by supporting their progression elsewhere
- When mother-teachers apply for new or promoted positions but are not yet ready for this role, support with a review of their skillset and signposting or provision (e.g. shadowing or informal leadership opportunities) for relevant professional development
- Something new or different may be as attractive to colleagues as a promoted position – consider where mother-teachers' energy, curiosity, skills and experience may be put to good use to benefit your school
- Interrogate and challenge stereotypes based on gender that may be present in your staff base or wider school communities (i.e. students and parents) that act as a barrier to the progression of mother-teachers
- Query decisions to take demotions following maternity leave and, where appropriate, explore ways to support mother-teachers to retain their leadership position in a balanced and sustainable way
- Share school and trust action plans in response to the annual gender pay gap reporting, and identify ways to reduce the gap in your school setting
- Provide training to middle leaders and line managers on discrimination based on the protected characteristic of sex, pregnancy and maternity
- Ensure that absence policies do not unfairly punish mothers or primary caregivers, particularly if attendance is used as a measure for pay and progression

Recruitment and Retention

- Find a balance between school priorities and individual desires to invest in medium- to long-term teacher retention
- Advertise roles, including leadership roles, flexibly as part of a school or trust policy

- Ensure that the quality of CPD provision is high, with an appropriate balance between whole-school focus, staff buy-in and teacher autonomy
- Create safe opportunities for staff feedback so that frustrations or grievances can be raised in a productive and appropriate forum

For individuals who have read this report feeling that they are in the same or similar position to our 11 participants, but are not yet ready to leave teaching, there are some ways to secure the professional development and progression opportunities that you want:

Professional Development

- Explore the new suite of NPQ options – they are varied and fully-funded, and can be completed with an external provider with limited confirmation, time-commitment or involvement from your school
- Use social media and networks such as The MTPT Project to source recommended flexible professional development opportunities that suit the way you need to manage your time
- Use KIT days and professional networking and development available through The MTPT Project to remain included in professional circles, if you so choose

Career Progression

- Use coaching opportunities to reflect on your strengths, gaps in your experience and skills, and potential opportunities within your school to develop and advance – a change can be just as stimulating as a formally promoted position
- Where opportunities are not available within your current setting, use coaching and supportive networks to seek progression in other schools
- Try not to let financial barriers limit your occupational mobility: if there is a role in another school you are interested in, seek advice to review your long-term finances and negotiate with both schools involved if you are offered the job
- If commuting time presents a barrier to career progression:
 - Share your CV and a cover letter identifying the opportunities you would be interested in with local schools within your desired commuting distance
 - Where a role that would require an increased commuting time is advertised, don't rule it out straight away. Instead, discuss childcare and domestic logistics with your partner, support system and childcare provider to see where possible solutions can be found
- Offer flexible and part-time working at leadership level

Home Life

- Explore the option of taking shared parental leave so that fathers can understand and share the domestic and childcare duties as early as possible

Want to find out more?

If you have any further questions about this report or our findings about the part that professional development or progression opportunities (or lack of them) 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.

More information about the MTPT Project's own coaching programmes for teachers on parental leave, returning to work, or balancing teaching / leadership with young families can be found at www.mtpt.org.uk/coaching

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)