

UNIVERSITY OF BUCKINGHAM

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The Maternity Transition and Its Influence on Career Trajectory: A
Study of Women Teachers in Secondary Education

SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
Strategic Leadership

MBA
Academic Year: 2025 - 2026

Supervisor: Sandra Krisberga-Sinigoi
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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of MBA Strategic Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Teaching is a profession in which women are in the majority, yet leadership remains disproportionately male. Maternity leave and the transition back to work are frequently identified as a critical juncture at which this gap emerges, yet the decisions underlying it remain poorly understood. This dissertation explores how the experience of maternity transition shapes the career progression decisions of women teachers in secondary schools. It does this through sub-questions concerning the influence of line managers and the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), and the perceived relationship between leadership and motherhood. The research aims to address a gap in the literature between statistical evidence of the underrepresentation of mother-teachers, the high attrition rates and the significant levels of dissatisfaction with maternity transition support. The research explores the individual decision-making processes underlying these patterns within a specific multi-academy trust (MAT).

Adopting an interpretivist philosophy and an inductive approach, the research used a single case study design. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 15 women secondary school teachers who had returned from maternity leave within the previous four years. Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, structured by the coding progression outlined by Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2013), generating four final themes.

The findings show that organisational and line management support, rather than formal trust policy, was the most consistent and variable influence on participants' experiences. Professional identity was often renegotiated on return, not always due to organisational failure. The compatibility of leadership and motherhood was seen as conditional rather than fixed, significantly shaped by the visibility of mothers on SLT. Career ambition was temporarily reordered rather than abandoned, along with a notable pattern of self-limitation shaped by an absence of organisational reassurance rather than an explicit barrier.

The study provides evidence of the theories in the literature on gendered organisations and career theory. Its key contributions are identifying the

importance of visible mothers on senior leadership, and indirect self-limitation as under researched factors. It concludes with practical recommendations for trust and school leaders, including standardised return-to-work processes, mandatory line manager training, and proactive career conversations, alongside recommendations for future research across multiple trusts, over a longer time period, and among women facing additional, compounding forms of disadvantage.

Keywords:

maternity leave, career progression, secondary school teachers, gendered organisations, professional identity, leadership, Kaleidoscope Career Model

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I would like to thank the trust for supporting me in undertaking this research, and I look forward to working with them to create meaningful change for the many capable women within it who go on maternity leave and put their leadership ambitions on hold.

My sincere thanks go to my supervisor whose guidance, patience, and support have been invaluable throughout this process.

I am especially grateful to the fifteen women who gave up their time to be interviewed for this study. Their willingness to share their personal experiences with candour and generosity has been the foundation of this research, and I hope this dissertation does justice to what they entrusted me with.

Finally, to my husband and children: thank you for your endless patience, encouragement and cups of tea throughout this journey. This would not have been possible without you.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SLT	Senior Leadership Team
DfE	Department for Education
KCM	Kaleidoscope Career Model
MAT	Multi-Academy Trust
HR	Human Resources
TA	Thematic Analysis
MTPT	Maternity Teacher Paternity Teacher
TLR	Teaching and Learning Responsibility

1 CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Teaching is a profession built on vocational commitment, however for a significant and growing number of women, that vocational commitment is under strain from the structural and institutional forces that remain under researched. In England women make up approximately 65% of secondary school teachers yet are significantly underrepresented in senior leadership positions. Men hold a disproportionately higher share of headship and deputy headship roles (DfE, 2024).

This disparity has attracted increasing interest and affected recent government policy decisions, however the specific experiences and decisions that lead women to stop seeking career progression have attracted comparatively less research and scrutiny.

The data on women exiting the profession suggests a key point that needs further critical examination. Women aged 30 to 39 are consistently the largest group leaving the teaching profession each year, with over 9,000 exiting in 2022/23 alone (The New Britain Project and The MTPT Project, 2024).

This is precisely the age group most likely to be navigating maternity leave and early parenthood. The NFER (2024) reports that over three-quarters of female teachers become mothers by the age of 39, and the research by The New Britain Project and The MTPT Project (2024) found that 40% of teachers leave the profession within four years of returning from maternity leave. 38% of those who stayed reported being satisfied with the maternity leave and transition support provided by their school, compared to 27% of those who left.

Along with the women leaving, there are likely others who remain in teaching but with permanently reduced ambitions, many of whom prior to maternity leave may have been planning to pursue promotion. It is the women who stay in teaching, but with a reduced career trajectory who have attracted the least research interest and who will be the focus of this study. The decision not to pursue promotion following maternity leave is not sufficiently explained through personal preference

or reassessment of priorities. The role and attitude of line managers and senior leaders, organisational culture, the quality of support received, the structural constraints in secondary schools, and the critical changes in professional identity following motherhood all play a part (Franzoi et al., 2024, Felix et al., 2025, Cahusac and Janjuha-Jivraj, 2014). Understanding why this is a key point in women's career trajectory and how schools shape it is critical in understanding how to challenge the fact that as seniority in secondary schools rises, representation of women falls (Greany et al., 2026).

1.2 Rationale and Significance

The justification for this study rests on three distinct needs. For the teaching profession, the post-maternity leave attrition of women represents a significant loss of experienced, skilled teachers at the point in their career when their leadership potential should be realised in schools. For individual schools and trusts, the failure to support and develop women through the maternity and post-maternity period is contributing directly to the persistent gender leadership gap. Finally, for mother-teachers who are reducing their career ambition following maternity leave, insight is needed into whether this reflects hidden structural conditions that make career progression feel impossible, rather than a genuine reordering of priorities.

1.3 Aims, Research Questions, and Objectives

The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of mother-teachers in secondary schools in the four years following maternity leave. It aims to identify how those experiences have shaped career progression decisions relating to the pursuit of promotion and leadership roles.

The aim is expressed through the following overarching research question:

How does the maternity transition shape the career progression decisions of women teachers in secondary schools?

This overarching question is explored through two sub-questions:

SQ1 – In what ways, if any, do the attitudes and behaviours of line managers and SLT during and after maternity leave shape the career progression decisions of mother-teachers in secondary schools?

SQ2 – How do secondary school mother-teachers experience the relationship between leadership and motherhood following maternity leave, and how does that influence their career progression decisions?

The focus of both sub questions is informed by existing literature, where the quality of line management and organisational support are found to be significant predictors of whether mother-teachers continue to pursue career progression after maternity leave (Houston and Marks, 2003; Cahusac and Janjuha-Jivraj, 2014; The New Britain Project and The MTPT Project, 2024). Alongside the maternity transition, Coleman (2007), Moreau, Osgood and Halsall (2007), and Mainiero and Sullivan (2006) highlight the perceived relationship between leadership and motherhood as a recurring theme in women's decisions to pursue promotion in education.

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Critically review the existing literature on career theory, gendered organisations, professional identity, and gender in secondary school leadership to establish a theoretical framework for the study.
2. Explore the personal experiences of mother-teachers in secondary school during and after maternity leave, with a particular focus on the internal processes of identity readjustment and career realignment
3. Examine the role of line managers and SLT in shaping the career decisions of returning mother-teachers, looking at both the explicit support provided and the implicit organisational messaging
4. Investigate how secondary school mother-teachers perceive the compatibility of leadership roles with motherhood, and how those perceptions influence their career ambitions
5. Generate insights that school and trust leaders can apply to improve support for mother-teachers on return from maternity leave

The overall scope of the study is restricted to mother-teachers in secondary schools in one multi-academy trust (MAT) in England who have taken one or more periods of maternity leave in the last four years. This ensures the findings are based on one organisational context and directly actionable for the trust and school leaders.

1.4 Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organised into six chapters:

- Chapter 1 establishes the background context to the study, justifies its significance, and outlines the research aim, questions and objectives
- Chapter 2 critically reviews the relevant literature, examining career theory, feminist organisational theory, professional identity theory, and education specific research on gender, leadership and maternity leave. The specific research gap the study aims to address is clearly outlined.
- Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, including the philosophy, qualitative research design, sampling strategy, data collection approach and method of data analysis.
- Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study
- Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to the existing literature, critically analysing where the findings support or oppose previous research.
- Chapter 6 draws conclusions from the study, identifies the limitations, sets out practical recommendations for school and trust leaders, and finally offers recommendations for future research.

2 CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review aims to explore the current research underpinning an investigation into how the maternity transition shapes the career progression of mother-teachers in secondary schools. It examines four distinct areas of study: career theory on women's career trajectories, gendered organisations and disadvantage, women's professional identity as they navigate motherhood and their professional lives, and educational research on gender, leadership development and retention of female teachers. The review concludes with the identification of the gap in existing knowledge that this study aims to address.

2.2 Career Theory: Frameworks for Women's Career Trajectories

The key career development frameworks that have dominated the last fifty years share the assumption that careers develop in a largely linear, upward trajectory through clear stages. Super's (1980) Life-Span, Life-Space Theory proposed that workers move through the phases of growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and disengagement in a consecutive process. Whilst influential, this model was formed following research with male, white-collar workers and assumes continuous uninterrupted engagement with work. Maternity leave is ignored as a normal stage of many women's working lives and is instead treated as an unusual deviation from a normal career path. This renders the model inadequate in explaining why women's career trajectories differ from men's at both the point of maternity leave, and in the years that follow. This is a fundamental failing of the model, in that a theory constructed around a norm that excludes 50% of the subjects cannot provide a reliable framework for explaining women's careers.

O'Neil and Bilimoria (2005), in their empirical study of women's career progression, proposed a different three-phase model, identifying idealistic achievement in early career, pragmatic endurance during mid-career, and reinventive contribution in late career. This model is explicitly centred on

women's experiences and recognises the adaptation and realignment that takes place mid-career, but it does not adequately address the influences that move women through the three stages, nor does it specifically identify maternity leave as a catalyst for career realignment. The model identifies these changes without sufficiently explaining how or why they occur, limiting its value in understanding the precise decision-making processes that take place at the point of maternity leave.

Mainiero and Sullivan (2005; 2006) developed the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM), one of the most widely cited theoretical frameworks for understanding women's career trajectories, having received a Gold Citation of Excellence from Elsevier in 2006 as one of the top fifty articles published across all management journals. The KCM proposes that women's career choices are shaped by three key principles that shift in importance at different points during a lifetime – authenticity, balance, and challenge (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). They theorised that early career is dominated by challenge, in mid-career when pregnancy and motherhood feature, balance dominates, and in later-career, authenticity moves to becoming the primary concern (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). The model's critical value is in its reframing of career decisions as non-linear, identifying the decision to prioritise family, go part-time, or avoid promotion opportunities as the rational reorganising of priorities rather than a lack of ambition. The KCM provides valuable understanding of the career priority reordering that women report following maternity leave.

However, the KCM has its limitations. Cabrera (2007) argues that despite its feminist intentions, the model risks normalising the belief that women in mid-career will prioritise balance over challenge or authenticity. This risks offering justification for reducing investment in women's development during childbearing years and could support institutional discrimination. The pressure for organisations to evaluate and improve their practices is reduced if the shift towards balance is seen as an inherent phase of a women's career rather than as a response to inadequate structural support. The separation of authentic and constrained choice is an issue the KCM is unable to resolve. In their analysis of

opt-out rates in high-education career paths, Leber Herr and Wolfram (2009) recognise this concern. Their study suggests that the work environment, rather than personal choice, is the main driver of women leaving careers at the point of motherhood (Leber Herr and Wolfram, 2009). Sabelis and Schilling (2013) through their concept of 'frayed careers' support this by arguing that women's career journeys are better understood as frequently disrupted rather than simply non-linear. This consideration of the timing of disruptions to women's careers is directly relevant to the focus on the post-maternity leave window, during which research shows that fewer than 4 in 10 women in teaching were satisfied with their maternity support (The New Britain Project and The MTPT Project, 2024).

Hewlett and Luce's (2005) theory of 'off-ramps and on-ramps' provides another angle to understand career disruption. Their large-scale survey of highly qualified women found that the majority who stepped back from careers were pushed by inadequate organisational support rather than authentic choice. Hewlett and Luce (2005) argue that the 'off-ramp' viewpoint directly challenges the narrative that women's career decisions are freely made and instead reframes them as responses to inadequate workplace support and structural conditions. Tomlinson, Olsen and Purdam (2009), in their research of women career returners in the UK, emphasise this further through highlighting that women who interrupt their careers for caring responsibilities face significant structural barriers in returning to equivalent roles. Tomlinson, Olsen and Purdam (2009) specifically found that part-time working was associated with occupational downgrading for women returners, with those working reduced hours more likely to re-enter employment at a lower grade than they had previously held. Arthur and Rousseau (1996) with their boundaryless career concept and Hall's (1996) protean career model, present a contrasting view that individual agency is the main driver of career trajectory. Tomlinson, Baird, Berg, and Cooper (2018) argue that this position risks overstating the level of agency available to workers in highly institutionally restrictive organisations such as secondary schools. The constrictions of timetabling, limited resources, line management attitudes and school culture significantly shape the options available (Tomlinson, Baird, Berg, and Cooper, 2018).

2.3 Gendered Organisations and Structural Disadvantage

Alongside the literature on career theory, there has developed feminist research on gendered career disadvantage produced through organisational structures. Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organisations provides the foundation for thinking in this area of research. Acker (1990), argued that organisations are fundamentally gendered and are built on the implicit norm of the 'ideal worker' who is male, unburdened by caring responsibilities, constantly available, and prioritises work foremost in their life. This norm is visible in job descriptions, performance targets, promotion processes, and expectations of leaders in organisations. Workers who sit outside of this norm, such as women who take maternity leave, are structurally disadvantaged. This is not through direct discrimination but through the invisibility of their circumstances within systems not designed to accommodate them (Acker, 1990).

Cahusac and Janjuha-Jivraj (2014), in their qualitative study of how gendered organisational cultures push mothers out, provide strong support for Acker's framework. Their research highlights that women do not simply choose to step back from their career following motherhood but are consistently excluded by a series of individual organisational decisions (Cahusac and Janjuha-Jivraj, 2014). These decisions around changed responsibilities, less developmental opportunities, and altered relationships with leaders slowly and cumulatively reinforce to mothers that the organisation has reassessed their career trajectory for them (Cahusac and Janjuha-Jivraj, 2014). Cahusac and Janjuha-Jivraj (2014) argue that this process of organisations 'giving up' on mothers sits underneath the threshold for formal discrimination and therefore is difficult for women to recognise or challenge. They also argued that its cumulative effect over time erodes women's views of their own professional capability and damages their professional identity (Cahusac and Janjuha-Jivraj, 2014). McIntosh et al. (2012), in their study of motherhood's impact on career progression, support this view, highlighting how women's career capital gained through visibility, professional development and sponsorship is reduced during and after maternity leave in ways that accumulate over time and are rarely reversed.

Acker's framework is particularly relevant to secondary schools as despite being environments that are majority-female they have persistent gender leadership gaps (DfE, 2024). Fitzgerald (2014) applies feminist organisational theory to school leadership showing how leadership cultures in schools are shaped by masculine norms of decisiveness, availability and competitive ambition. These are norms that, as Cahusac and Janjuha-Jivraj (2014) and Houston and Marks (2003) highlighted, returning mothers frequently find themselves misaligned with, not through lack of capability but through changed circumstances that the institution does not accommodate. In Fuller's (2014) study of gendered educational leadership she identifies the 'monoglossic façade' of gender equality in schools. Fuller suggests that the appearance of gender quality on the surface is hiding deeply entrenched gender assumptions that disadvantage women at the exact point when leadership career decisions are made. These findings align with Quickfall's (2024) research showing that part-time teachers in secondary schools are consistently less likely to access development opportunities and the occasions of visibility through which promotion decisions are shaped (Quickfall, 2024).

At the level of individual workplace interactions, Williams, Manvell, and Bornstein (2006) identify the 'maternal wall' as a specific form of bias that appears when you become a mother. They found that the assumptions that women have reduced commitment and competence sit entirely separately from their actual performance. Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick (2004) identify experimental evidence for the warmth/competence trade-off mothers face, and Correll, Benard and Paik (2007) demonstrate through audit studies that mothers are less likely to be recommended for hire and are offered lower starting salaries than non-mothers with equivalent qualifications (Correll, Benard and Paik, 2007). Kmec (2011), when comparing the professional work behaviours of mothers, fathers and non-parents, found that mothers do not show reduced work commitment relative to other groups. Kmec (2011) found that mothers do however continue to be perceived as less committed, confirming that the maternal wall is a function of bias rather than actual performance difference. This has significant implications for how school leaders evaluate and invest in returning mothers. Budig and

England (2001) and Gangl and Ziefle (2009) both document the accumulated career penalties due to motherhood across multiple contexts. In addition to this the TUC's (2016) analysis of the motherhood pay penalty shows UK specific evidence of the career disadvantages faced by mothers. Halford and Leonard (2001) suggest an alternative to Acker's deterministic approach by arguing that structural norms are powerful, but not permanent, constraints that shape individual outcomes.

2.4 Professional Identity as a Mother-Teacher

The career theory and gendered organisational frameworks cover the structural situation at the point of maternity leave for a woman's career, but do not consider the internal perspective. It is important to explore the subjective processes that women go through to identify who they are, what they want, and what they see as possible. This section considers this internal element through the lens of professional identity theory. This provides the most critically important framework for understanding the career choices of mother-teachers following maternity leave. The choice to not seek promotion is not just a result of structural biases but a personal decision shaped by a changing view of professional identity, relationship dynamics and the significance women place on their careers as they become mothers.

Professional identity is a well-established and contested construct in teacher education research (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop, 2004). Day, Kington, Stobart and Sammons (2006) confirm that teacher identity is a built achievement that is continually adjusted in response to school culture, policy changes, professional relationships and personal life events. Solari and Martin Ortega (2022) consider the sociocultural perspective by arguing that professional identity is formed through engagement in communities of practice and through the understandings from social interactions. This argument is particularly relevant when considering the implications of maternity which disconnects women from the professional communities that uphold and reinforce their identity. It can therefore be argued that maternity leave represents not just a career interruption but an identity interruption, with the disconnection from professional communities requiring

considerable rebuilding on return (Solari and Martín Ortega, 2022; Pillay, Goddard and Wilss, 2005). Pillay, Goddard, and Wilss (2005) note the return from maternity leave as a point of significant vulnerability in professional identity due to patterns in reduced professional confidence, competing role demands, and uncertainty about career direction that represent many women's experience of return to work.

The concept of identity conflict is key to understanding the mother-teacher experience. Coser's (1974) concept of 'greedy institutions' that seek exclusive and undivided loyalty from workers by demanding work is superior to other commitments, provides a foundational framework. Both teaching and motherhood can be seen as greedy institutions with Egger and Campo (2013) arguing that the greedy institution concept has grown with the increase of digital connectivity. The expectation in many roles, including teachers, is of constant professional availability that has blurred the boundaries between work life and personal life considerably. For the mother-teacher this implicit expectation of constant availability represents a significant burden. Dean, Churchill, and Ruppanner (2022) extend this analysis with the consideration of 'mental load'. They argue that the cognitive and emotional labour of planning, anticipating and managing home and professional responsibilities simultaneously falls disproportionately on mothers. This leads to a significant but invisible reduction in the time and resources needed for professional investment that facilitates career advancement. When schools fail to acknowledge or plan for this additional burden for mother-teachers they are leaving them to compete for promotion on unequal terms with embedded disadvantage.

Noon and van Nieuwerburgh (2020), in their qualitative study of career decisions of first-time mothers offer a number of insights into the internal processes that determine career decisions in the post-maternity period. Their research found that career decisions at this point are rarely made entirely consciously nor are they straightforward, instead emerging from a process of ongoing interpretation of organisational signals alongside weighing up competing commitments (Noon and van Nieuwerburgh, 2020). Through this mothers arrive at positions that may

be significantly different from their pre-maternity career goals. Critically, Noon and van Nieuwerburgh found that the quality of support for women, including access to coaching and mentoring, significantly adjusts the direction and permanence of career adjustments. Noon and van Nieuwerburgh (2020) therefore suggest that organisational support at the point of maternity return has the potential to alter outcomes that might otherwise appear to be purely individual choices. Grady and McCarthy (2008), in their research of mid-career professional working mothers similarly highlight that the perceived work-life relationship is not a fixed state, but an evolving balance shaped by workplace culture, managements support, and the worker's sense of professional possibility.

Felix, Galon and Amaro (2025) identify integration, segmentation, and prioritisation as the three dominant patterns of role negotiation in the post maternity-leave period. They found the approach adopted was determined more by the organisation's flexibility and support than by the mother's personal preferences. Franzoi, Sauta, de Luca, and Granieri's (2024) systematic review highlights both working mother guilt and absent worker guilt as common themes across the post-maternity literature. They argued that guilt functions as a mechanism through which women internalise structural disadvantage as personal failure. Meglich, Mihelič, and Zupan (2016), in their model of work-based support for mothers, show that perceived organisational support is amongst the strongest predictors of a mother's intention to continue in her career. Taken together, these findings suggest that the internal experience of career decision-making following maternity leave cannot be separated from the external conditions provided by the organisation (Felix, Galon and Amaro, 2025; Franzoi et al., 2024; Meglich, Mihelič and Zupan, 2016). Cohen, Duberley and Musson's (2009) reflection on the home-work relationship highlights the ongoing cognitive and emotional labour of navigating a career as a mother-teacher. They argued that there is a significant drain on professional investment that advancing your career demands when constantly balancing this invisible labour.

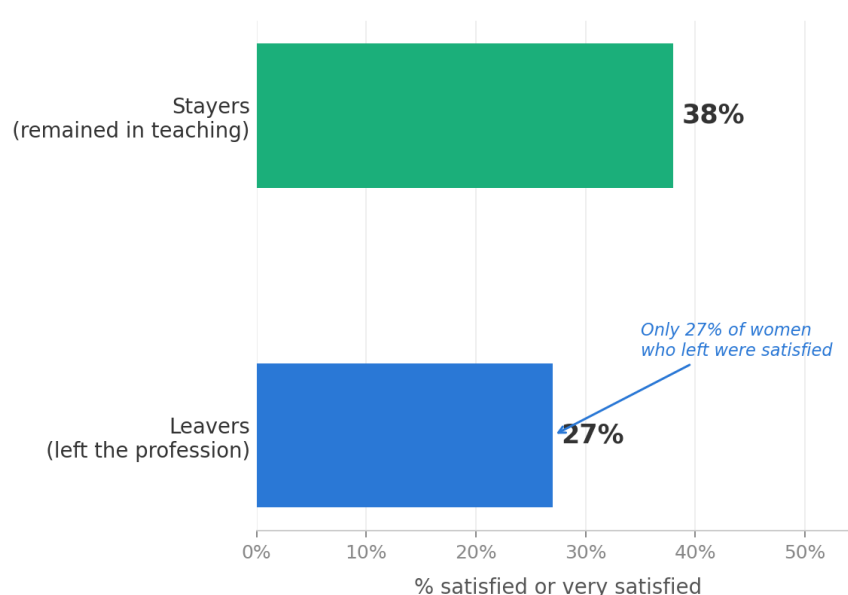
It is important to recognise that there is research to support a less deficit-focused approach to the impact of maternity leave on professional identity. Johnston and

Swanson (2007) found that being a mother can enrich professional identity by deepening the ability to sympathise and developing more clarified values. This is an important counterbalance that highlights the variety of experiences, individual circumstances, quality of organisation support and level to which women can accommodate their personal and professional identities following maternity leave. Exploring this variety of experience is one of the key justifications for the qualitative approach of this study.

2.5 Gender, Leadership, and Maternity Leave in Secondary Schools

Education specific literature is necessary in providing essential context for understanding the theoretical frameworks discussed. The leadership gender gap in UK secondary schools is persistent and widely recognised. Women make up 63% of secondary school teachers in England but are significantly underrepresented in senior leadership roles (DfE, 2024). In secondary schools, men are 2.3 times more likely to become headteachers than women.

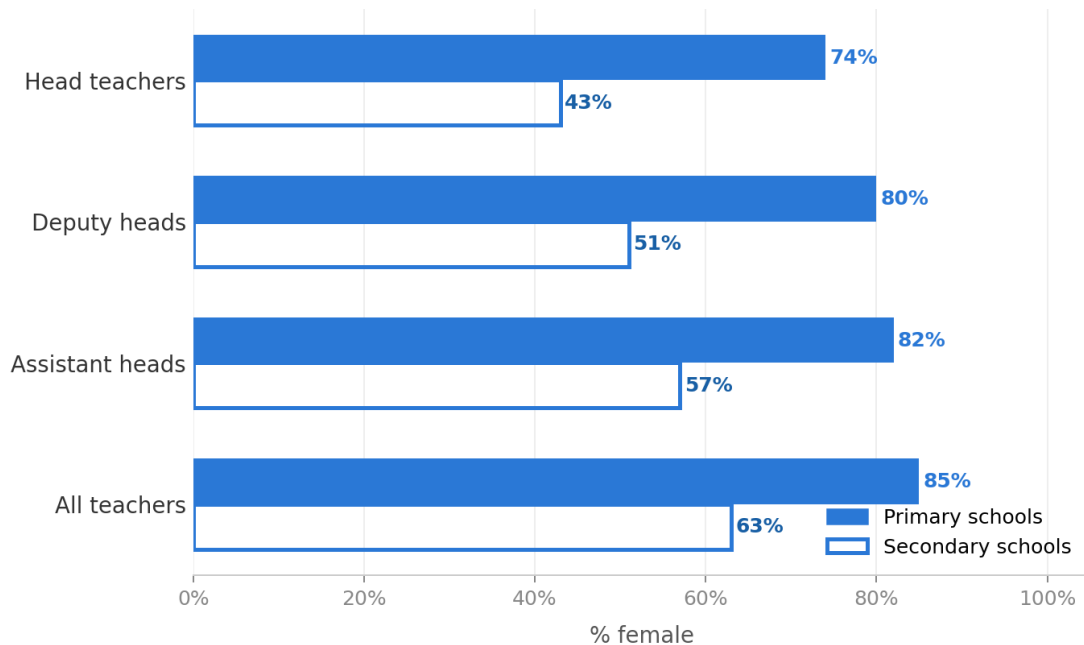
Figure 1 - Satisfaction with maternity leave and transition support provided by school (The New Britain Project and The MTPT Project (2024) Missing Mothers: Breaking the Cycle of Teacher Attrition. London: The New Britain Project.)



The NFER (2024) report highlighted that over three-quarters of female teachers become mothers by the age of 39, making maternity leave and career decisions a common experience in women's professional lives at this stage.

The MTPT Project's research provides the most detailed education-specific evidence of women's experiences. Their 2021 report 'Doing the Washing Up Badly' records mother-teachers experiences of navigating maternity leave within a profession that both promotes teaching as a vocation and fails to support with the caring responsibilities that disproportionately fall to women. The teachers in their research report a widespread sense that their professional value is recalculated by their schools during their maternity leave, often without any explicit communication. Cahusac and Janjuha-Jivraj's (2014) concept of organisations 'giving up' resonates strongly with The MTPT Project's findings. In MTPT's (2022) follow up study they identified a collection of organisational practices that were the main drivers of a decision to withdraw from the career post maternity leave. These included poor keeping-in-touch arrangements, inadequate return-to-work conversations, the absence of any career mentoring, and unsupportive leadership. Their research reinforces the argument that outcomes are institutionally created rather than simply personal choice. The Missing Mothers Report (The New Britain Project and The MTPT Project, 2024) found that women were dissatisfied with the maternity leave experience and transition support provided by their school, with only 27% of leavers and 38% of stayers reporting being satisfied or very satisfied.

Figure 2 Female representation across teaching and leadership roles in English state schools 2023/24 (Department for Education (DfE) (2024). School Workforce in England. DfE)



Houston and Marks' (2003) British study of planning and workplace support in returning to work from maternity leave provides key longitudinal evidence on the role of organisational preparation in influencing outcomes. They found that women who received substantial pre-return support, along with clarity on their role, workload and career options, were much more likely to return to equivalent level positions and maintain their career trajectory than those who had little or no preparation for return. This is particularly relevant to the secondary school context, where the quality of line management support at the point of return has been identified as a significant determinant of career continuation (Coleman, 2007; Moreau, Osgood and Halsall, 2007). Coleman (2007) concludes that the period of motherhood is among the most significant career interruption points for women with ambitions of leadership, a finding supported by Moreau, Osgood and Halsall (2007) whose survey of 800 women teachers found that experiences during and after maternity leave were among the most commonly cited factors in decisions not to pursue promotion.

Quickfall's (2024) research on part-time working and the mother-teacher is one of the most directly relevant recent contributions to the literature. The research found that flexible working in secondary schools acts as a professional ceiling rather than a scaffold. The Teaching Commission's (2025) report on the future of teaching identifies workforce sustainability as among the most pressing challenges facing the teaching profession. In the report the retention of women teachers through their childbearing years is identified as critical and calls for systemic reforms in how schools support career continuity for returning mothers. Nwoko et al. (2025) explores the teaching profession from a public health perspective and identifies the cumulative pressures of teaching existing along with the demands of early parenthood as a particular risk for professional disengagement post-maternity leave. The EHRC's (2016) report on the experiences of mothers demonstrates the significant gap between mothers' statutory entitlement and lived experience.

2.6 The Research Gap

The literature reviewed has established there is a substantial but incomplete body of knowledge. Career theory has evolved from linear stage male-centred models towards more contextually aware frameworks. However, the frameworks continue to risk normalising career withdrawal as an inevitable effect of motherhood. They are inadequate in considering how the structural conditions and organisational approaches shape women's career choices following maternity leave. Feminist organisational theory provides the structural context through Acker's gendered organisations framework and the studies of Cahusac and Janjuha-Jivraj (2014), Fuller (2014), and Quickfall (2024). However, they need adaptations to account for the evidence that structural norms are not absolute. The professional identity literature from Felix et al. (2025), Franzoi et al. (2024), Dean et al. (2022) and Noon and van Nieuwerburgh (2020) provides the most analytically helpful lens for this study's focus on the internal experiences of mother-teachers. The study will highlight the identity disruption, role conflict, mental load, guilt and internal processes that make maternity leave a career decision crossroad.

The education specific literature, underpinned by the MTPT Project's programme of research and Quickfall's (2024) study on part-time working, highlight the gender leadership gap, the extent of post maternity attrition, and the structural challenges of secondary schools. What is missing from the research is qualitative granular level school-specific research that captures women's perspectives on the individual processes through which the maternity transition influenced their career decisions. Existing research shows with increasing consistency that many women secondary school teachers do not seek promotion following maternity leave but it tells us very little of how individual women arrive at that decision, nor does it explore how professional identity readjustment interacts with organisational culture and management decisions.

This study aims to contribute to the literature by generating precisely this evidence within the specific organisational context of a multi-academy trust in England. The KCM will be drawn on and applied critically, along with Acker's theory of gendered organisations, to place individual mother-teacher's experience within the organisational structure of secondary schools. By exploring both the internal experience and the institutional context the study aims to produce more complete and practically useful research than either strand of literature has so far provided alone. In doing this it responds directly to recommendations from Moreau, Osgood and Halsall (2007), Coleman (2007), and Quickfall (2024) for contextually grounded, qualitative research whose findings can be translated into actions for school leaders best placed to address the persistent gender leadership gap in secondary schools. Addressing this gap matters not only theoretically but practically: without this evidence, schools and trusts lack the insight needed to design interventions capable of changing outcomes for mother-teachers at this critical career juncture.

3 CHAPTER 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the methodology for this study, justifying each decision with reference to established research theory, before providing a detailed account of how the data was gathered and analysed. The chapter is organised using Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill's (2023) Research Onion, moving from research philosophy through to data analysis, before setting out the ethical considerations and limitations.

3.2 Research Philosophy

This study adopts an interpretivist philosophy. The research is concerned with how mother-teachers subjectively experience and make sense of the maternity transition, a process that is contextually grounded and can not be captured through measurement (Saunders et al., 2023). An interpretivist position is the most appropriate lens through which to address the research questions.

3.3 Research Approach

An inductive approach was followed as there are no established theoretical frameworks to predict how women teachers in this specific MAT experience the maternity transition and arrive at career decisions (Saunders et al., 2023). This allows patterns and insights to emerge from the data itself (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The Kaleidoscope Career Model (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006) and Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organisations informed the analysis rather than determined it. This position is consistent with the modified abductive position outlined by Blaikie and Priest (2019).

3.4 Research Strategy

A case study strategy was adopted, focused on one MAT in England (Yin, 2018). This is the most suitable approach as the career decisions of mother-teachers cannot be understood in isolation from the specific organisational context in which they are made. Situating the research within a single MAT ensures participants

share broadly similar leadership structures and organisational culture, making the findings directly relevant for trust leadership.

3.5 Methodological Choice and Time Horizon

This study adopted a mono-method qualitative approach, appropriate for research concerned with subjective decision-making processes that are not suited to numerical measurement (Mason, 2002). The research is cross-sectional, gathering participants' perspectives at one point in time (Saunders et al., 2023), within a four-year post-maternity window identified as the critical period for career decision-making (The New Britain Project and the MTPT Project, 2024).

3.6 Sampling

Sampling was purposeful, targeting information-rich cases able to illuminate the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2022; Mason, 2002). Sample size was determined by theoretical saturation with data collection continuing until new interviews ceased to produce new themes (Coburn and Adams, 2020), typically reached between 12 and 20 interviews. No substantially new themes were identified across the final three interviews, supporting the judgement that saturation had been reached at a sample of 15. Recruitment was managed through the trust's HR team to mitigate the ethical concerns linked to the researcher's own employment within the trust.

The final sample comprised of 15 women secondary school teachers employed within one MAT who had returned from at least one period of maternity leave within the previous four years. The sample captured a deliberately broad range of seniority and working patterns. Nine participants held a leadership responsibility (TLR, middle or senior leadership) at the time of interview, whilst six held classroom-only roles. Working patterns ranged from full-time to part-time, and the number of maternity leaves taken within the trust ranged from one to four. To protect participant anonymity within a single-trust sample, role titles and years of teaching experiences are presented as broad bands rather than in

precise detail in the table below, since specific job titles along with exact working years could otherwise make participants identifiable to colleagues within the trust.

Table 1 - Participant profiles

Participant	Years Teaching	Seniority	Working Pattern	No. of Leaves (in trust)	Pursued Promotion Since Return?
P1	0-5 years	Classroom teacher	Part-time	1	No
P2	6-10 years	Middle leader (TLR)	Full-time	1	Yes - promoted on return
P3	11-15 years	Middle leader (TLR)	Part-time	4	Applied twice, unsuccessful
P4	6-10 years	Classroom teacher	Part-time	3	No - mentoring only
P5	16+ years	Classroom teacher	Part-time	1	No - stepped back from TLR
P6	6-10 years	Middle leader (TLR)	Full-time	2	No
P7	6-10 years	Middle leader (TLR)	Full-time (moving part-time)	1	No further promotion sought since return
P8	11-15 years	Classroom teacher / additional responsibility	Part-time	1	Yes - additional responsibility taken on
P9	11-15 years	Senior leader (SLT)	Full-time	2	No - not sponsored for a more senior vacancy
P10	6-10 years	Senior leader (SLT)	Part-time	1	No further progression sought; retained existing role part-time
P11	11-15 years	Classroom teacher	Full-time	2	No - actively discouraged
P12	6-10 years	Middle leader (TLR, reduced)	Part-time	2	Interviewed for a more senior role, pending
P13	6-10 years	Middle leader (TLR)	Part-time	2	Discussions held re: further promotion
P14	6-10 years	Middle leader (Head of Faculty)	Full-time	2	Applied for a more senior role, unsuccessful
P15	16+ years	Classroom teacher, no TLR	Full-time	1	No - deliberately paused

3.7 Data Collection

Semi-structured one-to-one interviews were selected as the data collection method, combining the structural consistency needed for cross-participant comparability with the flexibility to pursue individual experiences in depth (Kvale, 2007). Semi-structured interviews were judged the most appropriate method for exploring experiences expected to vary considerably between participants.

A guide was developed (Appendix B), structured around the two sub-questions and organised into four sections of context and pre-maternity career identity, the maternity transition and return, line manager, SLT and school culture, and career decisions and aspirations. The guide was piloted with two participants prior to

the main interviews, allowing refinement to question wording and timing. All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams to maximise accessibility within the school day and ensure consistency of format. With participants' informed consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed before the recordings were deleted.

Interviews ranged in length from approximately 14 to 49 minutes, with an average length of 25 minutes, reflecting variation in the depth and detail participants chose to share. Following transcription, each transcript was reviewed and cleaned to remove filler speech and to ensure no identifying details remained, in line with the participant information sheet (Appendix A) and consent form (Appendix C).

3.8 Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke, 2022) informed by the structured coding progression described by Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013). This combination was deliberate, with reflexive TA providing the overarching analytic philosophy and Gioia's terminology of 1st-order codes, 2nd-order emerging themes, and aggregate final dimensions providing a clear structure for describing how the analysis moved from raw data to final themes. No pre-existing thematic categories were identified prior to coding. Instead, codes were generated inductively from the transcripts, and later grouped upwards into broader themes. Coding was conducted manually in a structured Excel workbook rather than using qualitative data analysis software. This workbook, and the coding decisions and revisions recorded within it, provide a clear audit trail of the coding process.

The analysis was carried out over four stages, with firstly each transcript reviewed in full and 101 data extracts judged relevant to the research question identified. The extracts were recorded verbatim, along with the participant number and a descriptive 1st-order code assigned to each. The codes were then each given a written definition to reduced definitional drift as coding progressed. The codes were then grouped inductively into ten 2nd-order emerging themes on the basis of shared meaning, with the rationale for the grouping recorded. A theme matrix cross-checking the emerging themes against all 15 participants was used to

ensure no theme rested on only one or two individuals before being retained. Finally, the ten emerging themes were consolidated into four final aggregate themes, retaining their internal sub-themes to preserve distinctions that would be obscured with a fully flattened structure. The table below summarises this progression from final theme to sub-theme to emerging theme.

Table 2 – Progression of themes

Final Aggregate Themes	Sub-Themes	2nd-Order Emerging Themes
1. Organisational and Leadership Support Determines the Experience	1a. Quality of line management	A. Quality of Line Management
	1b. Explicit bias and poor treatment	B. Explicit Bias and Poor Treatment
	1c. Institutional systems and structural barriers	C. School Systems, Policy, and Structural Barriers
	1d. Career progression driven by necessity; emerging disengagement	I. Career Progression Driven by School Need J. Emerging Disengagement
2. Professional Identity Renegotiation on Return	2a. Confidence and identity disruption	D. Professional Identity Disruption and Reconstruction
	2b. Feeling professionally redundant	
3. Compatibility of Leadership and Motherhood is Conditional, Not Fixed	3a. Conditional on child's age, seniority, or self-management	E. Perceived Compatibility of Leadership and Motherhood
	3b. Visibility of senior mothers	H. Visibility of Senior Mothers as Role Models
4. Ambition Reordered, Not Abandoned	4a. Deliberate, bounded reordering	F. Deliberate Reordering of Career Priorities
	4b. Self-limitation without explicit block	G. Self-Limitation Through Internalised Assumption

3.9 Ethical Considerations

A significant ethical consideration is the potential power imbalance between the researcher (a Vice Principal) and the participants employed in the same Trust (Saunders et al., 2023). To mitigate this, recruitment was conducted through the trust's HR team and the participant information sheet explicitly stated that participation was voluntary and would carry no professional consequence. A second consideration is the researcher's own positionality, having personally taken four periods of maternity leave within the same trust and pursued promotion throughout. Finlay (2002) argues that reflexivity is an epistemological, not only ethical, obligation in interpretivist research. This was addressed through the documenting of coding decisions throughout analysis.

All participants provided written and verbal consent prior to their interviews, having been informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw, and the arrangements for anonymisation and data storage. Recordings were transcribed, anonymised, and deleted once transcription was complete, with data stored securely and accessible only to the researcher. This research was designed in compliance with BERA (2018) ethical guidelines, and ethical approval was obtained from the University of Buckingham prior to data collection.

3.10 Limitations of the Research

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are used to consider this study's limitations. Credibility is supported by the use of semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis, though the researcher's own position in the trust may have subtly shaped the questions asked and themes identified. Piloting the interview guide sought to mitigate this. The sample of 15 women within one MAT limits transferability beyond the research context, though the findings do not claim to be representative of all secondary school teachers in England, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concept of 'fittingness' allows readers to assess the relevance of the findings to their own contexts.

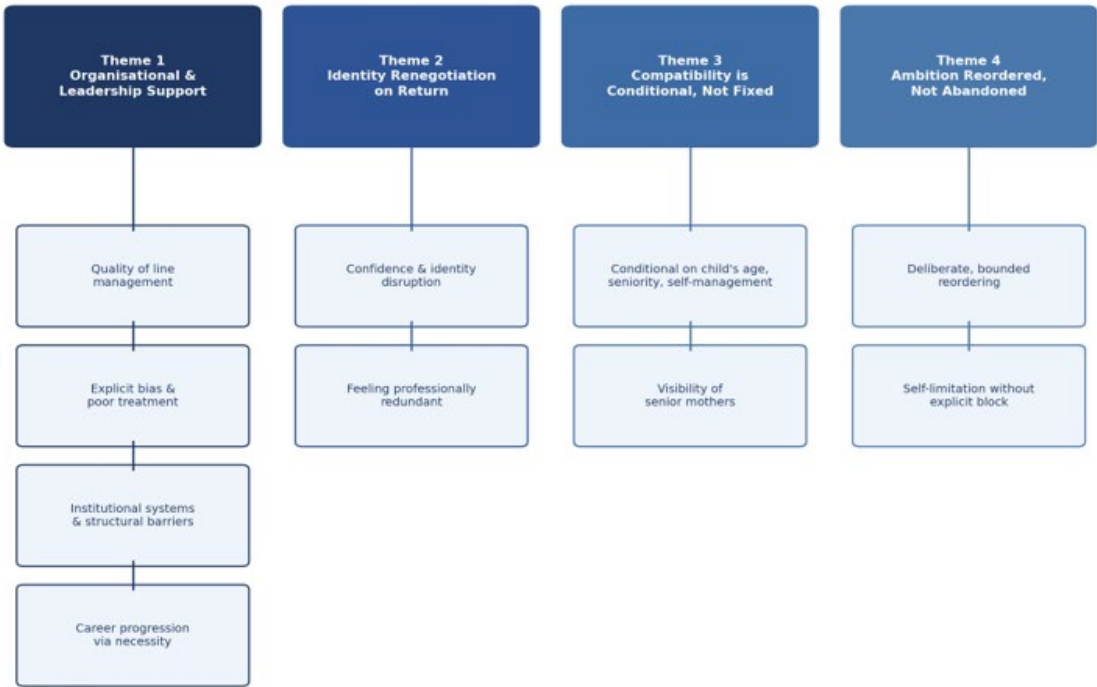
Dependability is supported by the audit trail maintained through the coding process. The potential for interviewer effect cannot be fully eliminated, given the researcher's own experience of the maternity transition (Kvale, 2007). The reliance on retrospective accounts also creates the possibility of memory bias. Finally, the sample only captures women still employed in the trust, which may exclude those with the most significant experiences affecting their careers, meaning the data may not fully represent the range of experiences of women at this time.

4 CHAPTER 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter reports the findings of the thematic analysis of 15 semi-structured interviews with women secondary school teachers in a single MAT who had returned from at least one period of maternity leave within the previous four years. The findings are reported by theme, covering the four final themes generated from the coding process explained in section 3.8. The themes are 1) Organisational and Leadership Support Determines the Experience, 2) Professional Identity Renegotiation on Return, 3) Compatibility of Leadership and Motherhood is Conditional, Not Fixed, and 4) Ambition Reordered, Not Abandoned. Participants are referred to by number only, P1-P15 to maintain anonymity. Where participants own words are quoted, they are given in italics.

Table 3 – Overview of final themes and sub-themes



4.2 Theme 1 – Organisational and Leadership Support Determines the Experience

This was the strongest and most widely evidenced theme across the participant interviews, which predominately relates to sub-question 1.

4.2.1 Contact during leave

The majority of participants reported that contact with their school during maternity leave was initiated by them rather than the school. P1 reported

‘zero contact from school during leave’

beyond her own KIT day booking, and P3 described very limited communication, finding out

‘via a staff briefing that someone had been given my job, and that I’d be moving to a different role, without have told me’.

A small number of participants described proactive contact instead with P8’s Headteacher holding three meetings with her during her leave, and P7 consulted on her timetable preferences ahead of her return.

4.2.2 Return-to-work process

Many participants described the absence of a phased or structured return from maternity leave. P2 stated she

‘could really have done with just 2 or 3 days to get up to speed’

rather than teaching a full timetable from day one. P15 was given a full timetable immediately despite having requested a phased return and having been hospitalised in late pregnancy linked to excessive workload expectations. P9 was expected to

‘deliver whole-school staff training on the day I came back – with no resources prepared for me...I ended up in tears at the end of the first day’.

Support was sometimes provided, but only once difficulties became visible, P15 was given a daily free period for her first week and a half back

'once struggle became visible'

and P6 experienced postnatal depression after her first leave, with no one at school checking in on her wellbeing, stating this was

'not because of any individual, just because the systems weren't there'.

4.2.3 Bias and welfare failures

A smaller number of participants described explicit bias and welfare failures in how they were treated. P11's line manager told her

'I'm just giving you all the rubbish because you're going to have another baby in a couple of months anyway'

when discussing her timetable on return. P14 was required to raise a formal grievance to receive full pay for her TLR whilst working 0.8 FTE and carried out gestational diabetes blood tests during lessons due to absence of a risk assessment. P15 described being 36 weeks pregnant and

'given five days to mark my mock exams'

for 3 classes whilst doing a full timetable, leading to hospitalisation. P7 explained the emphasis on her to self-advocate in the absence of policy,

I don't like feeling like a nuisance.... if it had just been considered automatically rather than having to come back and make the case for why I shouldn't, for example, be standing on a hot field for five hours at 8 months pregnant'.

4.2.4 Career progression and disengagement

Where career progression occurred it generally arose from school need rather than planned career development. P14 became Head of Faculty due to

'urgent staffing crisis, not a considered conversation'.

P3 applied twice for promotion, but found

'the feedback has not been what I'd call productive in terms of supporting my career progression, which has been frustrating'.

For P11 the ongoing effect of poor support has led to early consideration of leaving the profession, stating

'I genuinely don't know if the job is sustainable for me long-term anymore'.

4.3 Theme 2 – Professional Identity Renegotiation on Return

A smaller number of participants described this theme in their responses, which relates to both sub-questions and captures a change in professional identity and confidence upon returning to work.

4.3.1 Confidence and identity disruption

For some participants, the return to work brought a direct loss of professional confidence rather than a change in circumstances alone. P12 described feeling she had

'lost a bit of who I was as a teacher...can I even teach anymore?'

and P13 reported reduced confidence that was made worse by policy processes she found difficult to understand.

4.3.2 Feeling professionally redundant or displaced

For others, identity disruption took the form of feeling replaced or surplus to requirements rather than simply less confident. P14 describes an

'overwhelming sense that I didn't matter'

after discovering her department had adapted in her absence to function without her. P9 reported that her pre-planning completed before her maternity leave was not followed in her absence, with no explanation given, stating

'I'm the one carrying the consequences of that'.

Not all identity changes were linked to treatment in school, P8 described stepping down from a TLR role within her first week back due to an unexpected emotional response to leaving her baby, despite having returned intending to continue the role.

4.4 Theme 3 – Compatibility of Leadership and Motherhood is Conditional, Not Fixed

This theme was evident across a large number of the participant interviews and relates to sub-question 2.

4.4.1 Compatibility is conditional

Participants described compatibility of leadership and motherhood as dependent on specific conditions rather than as a fixed viewpoint. P1 stated leadership and motherhood were not compatible

‘at least not at the age my daughter is now’

linking her view to her child’s pre-school age. P5 linked incompatibility with the seniority of the role, saying

‘at a certain level of responsibility, it can become incompatible’.

P6 linked the incompatibility to the need for total availability, saying

‘if you’re a leader, you’re expected to give 100%, and if you’re a mother, you don’t always have 100% to give’.

Some participants held a more positive, but still conditional viewpoint with P7 stating that compatibility would

‘come down to work-life balance and setting boundaries’.

Others described a tension between their beliefs and personal experience with P8 framing it as

‘the feminist in me wants to say it would have no impact, but I know from experience that it does’.

4.4.2 Visibility of mothers on SLT

Participants consistently linked their views on compatibility with whether they had seen women on SLT with young children. P3 described her school’s SLT, which had only two women with grown children, as a

'boys club'

and P14 stated she had

'never seen anyone on SLT with primary or nursery-age children in 10 years'.

In contrast, other participants described having visible SLT mothers as enabling, with P6 highlighting that a female member of SLT who was a mother

'made her feel able to ask for accommodations she'd never asked for before'.

P13 saw visible part-time mothers on SLT as a

'positive signal'

for her own career progression.

4.5 Theme 4 – Ambition Reordered, Not Abandoned

This theme was evident across a range of participants and is most closely related to the main research question.

4.5.1 Deliberate, limited reordering

The dominant response under this theme was a deliberate pause in ambition limited to a specific point in the future, rather than total abandonment. P1 described her ambition to become a SENCO as

'on hold'

until her daughter is older, and P6 stated

'I put the brakes on myself'

adding she would not apply for promotion until her youngest child starts school, wanting to model being a working mother to her daughters. P5 highlighted a specific emotional moment that led to her decision to reorder, describing crying after her son commented

'Oh, mummy, you're working again'

on a Sunday leading to her resigning from her TLR role, whilst still keeping progression in mind once he

‘starts school – so another three years or so’.

P2 described a more permanent shift saying

‘I’ve always been an aspirational person – until I had a baby, and now I’m actually just really happy’.

Some participants deliberately resisted stepping back from responsibility, or reducing ambition when reducing working days. P10 stated she

‘deliberately did not give up’

her TLR when reducing her hours, and P3, despite experiencing some of the most challenges of the participants, said

‘I still have ambition. I still want to be part of the leadership team’.

4.5.2 Self-limitation without an explicit block

A few participants did not pursue opportunities or promotion because they assumed, without anyone saying, that they would not be considered for the roles, or they would not cope with them. P4 stated she did not know

‘if I can’ take on a TLR role *‘whilst I’ve got such young children’*

and separately assumed she would not be considered for a Head of Department role due to her part-time status, without this being said by the school. P12 described a similar anxiety, saying

‘It’s hard being a mum and progressing into SLT...the fear of not fulfilling responsibilities’.

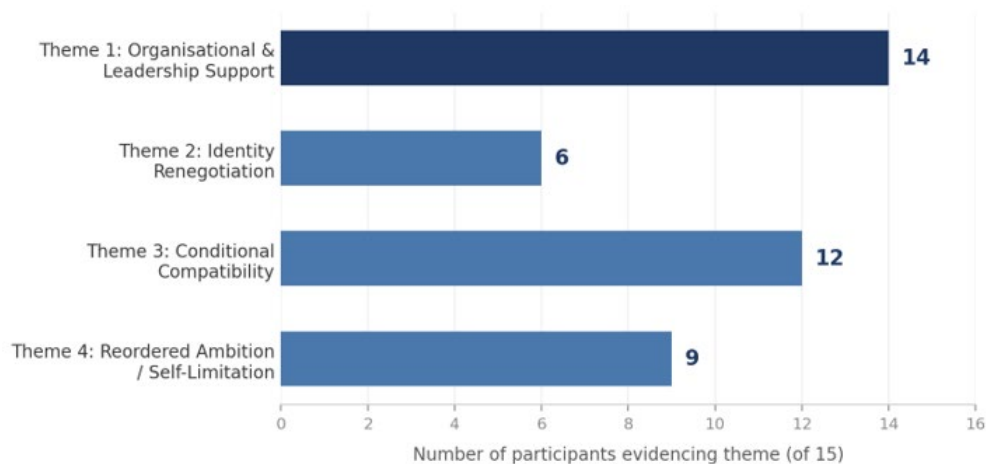
She chose to retain her TLR at 50% following her second maternity leave as a compromise she considered

‘workable’.

4.6 Summary

Across the participant interviews, Theme 1, the behaviour and actions of line managers and SLT, rather than any formal trust policy, emerged as the most consistent influence on participants' experience of maternity leave and return. A smaller number of participants described Theme 2, a change in their professional identity or reduction in confidence following maternity leave. Most participants highlighted Theme 3, the compatibility of leadership and motherhood as being conditional on factors such as their child's age, the seniority of the role, or the visibility of mothers with young children on SLT in their school. Finally, a notable number of participants explained Theme 4, with their deliberate reordering of their career ambitions linked to a specific future point, with a smaller number reporting they had not pursued promotions or other opportunities due to an assumption they would not be considered rather than an explicit block from their school.

Table 4 – Participant coverage across final themes



5 CHAPTER 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings in relation to the literature reviewed and considers the extent to which the research questions have been addressed, outlining the practical and managerial implications of the findings. The discussion is organised by themes identified from the findings, before drawing the themes together to address the research question and proposing recommendations for school SLT and trust leaders.

5.2 Discussion of Theme 1 – Organisational and Leadership Support Determines the Experience

The scope and strength of this theme provides strong support for Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organisations. Acker's key suggestion was that the needs of workers who depart from the ideal worker norm become invisible within systems not designed to accommodate them (Acker, 1990). This is directly related to participants' experiences of returning to a full timetable with no phased transition, and of requests for accommodations being granted only when requested rather than offered as standard. The finding that support was frequently reactive, arriving once struggle became visible rather than proactively, shows exactly the mechanism Acker described. The institution does not act with hostile intent, but nor does it anticipate or plan for the returning mother's circumstances until a problem forces it to do so (Acker, 1990).

These findings also align with the broader statistics outlined in The Missing Mothers report (The New Britain Project and The MTPT Project, 2024). They found that less than four in ten teachers who remained in the profession were satisfied with their maternity and transition support (The New Britain Project and The MTPT Project, 2024), which is matched with the inconsistency of support described throughout this theme. Where this research study adds to the quantitative figures is in specifically identifying the mechanisms that contribute to it. Not through a single failing, but through a combination of absent contact,

unstructured return processes, and in a minority of cases, active bias, each of which was experienced by different participants within the same trust.

The findings also align closely with Cahusac and Janjuha-Jivraj's (2014) account of organisations giving up on mothers through a series of small, cumulative decisions rather than any single act of exclusion. This was seen most in the finding that career progression largely arose from school need rather than through considered career development planning, and in the informal, or no, communication of role changes. However, the research extends Cahusac and Janjuha-Jivraj's (2014) account through the experience of several participants that found the erosion to be linked to one poorly managed moment rather than an accumulation over time. Abrupt erosions came in the form of being asked to deliver whole-staff training with no preparation on the first day of return or returning to a full timetable despite asking for a reduction. This suggests that organisational 'giving up' may happen through an acute incident as well as through slow accumulation over time, a distinction the existing literature does not clearly separate.

Another key area of contrast is with the degree of variation of experience found within the same trust. Fitzgerald's (2014) account of masculine leadership norms and Fuller's (2014) concept of the 'monoglossic façade' characterises gendered organisational culture as a largely stable, organisational wide phenomenon. The findings counter that view as within the same trust participants described very wide-ranging experiences. Some participants experienced very proactive personalised support, such as the headteacher holding multiple meetings during the participant's leave. Conversely, other participants experienced explicit bias, such as a line manager's comment linking poor treatment directly to the participant's likelihood of having another child. This range of experience within a single set of trust-wide policies, indicates that Halford and Leonard's (2001) critique of Acker is particularly relevant in this context. Their theory that gendered organisational norms appear to function as a powerful backdrop against which individual line managers exercise considerable, largely unchecked discretion, rather than as a uniformly applied structural condition (Halford and Leonard,

2001) is evident in the findings. This is consistent with Houston and Marks (2003) findings that the quality of pre-return planning and support is a strong predictor of whether women return to equivalent roles. The findings extend this view further by evidencing that this variation is not just between schools, but between line managers within the same school.

The cases of explicit bias identified under this theme provide specific, but limited support for the 'maternal wall' described by Williams, Manvell, and Bornstein (2006), and for the audit-study findings of Correll, Benard, and Paik (2007) around assumptions of reduced commitment. The existing literature in this area comes predominately from recruitment and pay contexts, however, this study's findings suggest that related assumptions occur in the allocation of workload and treatment of existing staff. This is an extension of the maternal wall concept into staff with an existing employment relationship rather than just at the point of entry into a role.

5.3 Discussion of Theme 2 – Professional Identity Renegotiation on Return

The identity disruption reported by several participants is consistent with Pillay, Goddard, and Wilss' (2005) identification of the return from maternity leave as a point of significant professional vulnerability, and with Solari and Martin Ortega's (2022) argument that professional identity depends on continued participation in communities of practice. The experience one participant had of her pre-leave planning being disregarded in her absence, with no explanation offered, provides a specific and clear example of what the literature describes as disconnection from professional community. In this example it manifested not simply as an absence from colleagues, but as the active undoing of the participant's prior professional contribution.

This theme also directly confirms Johnston and Swanson's (2007) alternative argument that motherhood can enrich rather than only disrupt professional identity. One participant's experience of stepping down from a TLR role due to the unexpected emotional response to leaving her child, despite fully intending to continue in the role, shows that identity renegotiation is not always linked to

organisational failure. This finding highlights the qualitative, non-deficit methodology of this research study, as a purely structural account could potentially lead to misclassifying an authentic personal career reprioritisation as caused through an imposed constraint through the organisation.

The theme offers some limited evidence of Coser's (1974) concept of greedy institutions and Egger and Campo's (2013) extension of it to digital-era availability. The exploitative use of KIT days is consistent with a blurring of the boundary between leave and continued work. The research evidence does not provide strong evidence of the constant digital availability that Egger and Campo theorise. This suggests that either this was less of an issue for this set of participants, or that it requires further research through more targeted questions around their experience in this regard.

5.4 Discussion of Theme 3 – Compatibility of Leadership and Motherhood is Conditional, Not Fixed

The finding that the majority of participants framed compatibility as conditional, rather than as a fixed yes or no, extends Mainiero and Sullivan's (2006) Kaleidoscope Career Model. The KCM describes the rise in importance of balance during the child-rearing years as a shift in largely abstract terms, the participants in this study identified the specific conditions around this shift. Participants judged compatibility to fail due to key conditions such as the age of their child, the seniority of the role, and the expectation of total availability. This last condition was described by one participant as leadership requiring 100%, whilst motherhood cannot always give 100%, fits precisely with Acker's (1990) 'ideal worker' norm, demonstrating clearly the link between the career theory and gendered organisations literature.

The tension some participants have experienced between an abstract, values-based belief of compatibility and their lived experience that finds otherwise directly reflects Fuller's (2014) 'monoglossic façade' in which a surface commitment to gender equality exists alongside entrenched practices that undermine it. This finding is important as it demonstrated that the façade Fuller

describes is not only visible to a researcher but is recognised consciously and reported by the women experiencing it.

The sub-theme concerning the visibility of mothers on SLT is not specifically considered within the frameworks reviewed in the literature review, and highlights one of the key findings of this research. Whilst Coleman (2007) and Moreau, Osgood, and Halsall (2007) both identify the underrepresentation of women in secondary school leadership as a structural problem, neither explores in detail the mechanism by which the presence, or not, of mothers on SLT shapes the career thinking of women earlier in their careers. The findings of this research study suggest that visible mothers on SLT function as a distinct separate mechanism in its own right. Participants who could identify a part-time or flexible senior leader who was a mother described feeling able to ask for accommodations, or to view career progression as achievable, in ways that participants without did not.

5.5 Discussion of Theme 4 – Ambition Reordered, Not Abandoned

This theme provides the clearest support for the Kaleidoscope Career Model in this research study, whilst simultaneously addressing the specific limitation identified in the critical review of the KCM in the literature review. Cabrera (2007) warned that the KCM risks normalising the belief that women will simply prioritise balance during the child-rearing years, potentially giving organisations justification for reduced investment in women's development (Cabrera, 2007). This study's findings oppose that view, with the dominant pattern not an open-ended shift towards balance, but a deliberate time-limited pause tied to a specific future point such as a child starting school. Participants who described stepping down consistently retained their ambition rather than abandoning it, which suggests that the KCM's account of reordering is better seen as a logical and temporary adjustment than a permanent change in the prioritisation of leadership.

This finding also aligns with Leber Herr and Wolfram's (2009) argument that the work environment, rather than personal choice, is the primary driver of women's career decisions at the point of motherhood. It is also consistent with Sabelis and

Schilling's (2013) concept of 'frayed careers', which frames disruption as shaped by organisational response rather than simply by caring responsibilities themselves. Several participants described a specific emotional moment that prompted a step back that they saw as temporary, showing the 'frayed' rather than simple linear or non-linear pattern that Sabelis and Schilling describe.

The sub-theme regarding self-limitation without an explicit organisational block is, along with the visibility of SLT mothers, one of the more important contributions of this research study. It described directly the tension identified, and not resolved, between structurally focused experiences of career disadvantage (Acker, 1990 and Cahusac and Janjuha-Jivraj, 2014), and agency focused experiences such as the boundaryless and protean career models (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996 and Hall, 1996). It is also important to note the caution of Tomlinson, Baird, Berg and Cooper (2018) that we risk overstating the agency available to workers in institutionally restrictive settings such as secondary schools. The participants in this sub-theme did not report being told they would not be considered for a role, instead they assumed this to be the case in the absence of any confirmation. This pattern does not sit completely in either camp as it is not entirely structural as no explicit barrier was imposed, but nor is it entirely a matter of individual agency. The assumption appears to have been shaped by an organisational culture that did not proactively signal otherwise nor encourage their applications. This suggests that self-limitation of this type may be best understood as an indirect but linked product of the same organisational invisibility that Acker (1990) describes, happening through the absence of reassurance rather than through an explicit block.

It is important to note that the findings from this research study do not support a single dominant reason for why women reduce or defer their pursuit of leadership following maternity leave. The four themes suggest a layered explanation in which structural neglect, identity change, conditional belief, and self-limitation interact and support one another for different participants in different combinations. This layered explanation is a key finding of this research study, which warns against a single-cause narrative, whether seen as organisational

failure or personal choice, that both career theory and gendered organisation literature can imply.

5.6 Addressing the Research Questions

The main research question asked how the experiences of maternity leave shape the career progression decisions of women teachers in secondary schools. The findings from the research indicate that the shaping occurs through at least three interacting mechanisms – 1) the quality and consistency of organisational and line management support covered in theme 1, 2) a renegotiation of professional identity and confidence that is not always linked to organisational failure covered in theme 2, and 3) a conditional, rather than fixed, personal assessment of whether leadership and motherhood can be combined, shaped significantly by the visibility of mothers on SLT covered in theme 3. Career progression decisions overall were found to reflect a deliberate, time-limited reordering of ambition rather than an abandonment of it. A complicated pattern of self-limitation appears to be indirectly shaping this decision which was covered in theme 4. Together, these findings suggest that the main research questions has been addressed, finding that maternity leave functions as a career-shaping juncture not through one single cause, but through the interaction of organisational practice, personal identity, and conditional beliefs about compatibility.

Sub-question 1, concerning the influence of line managers and SLT, is the most directly addressed by theme 1, which found this influence to be the most consistent factor differentiating participants' experiences. It shows considerable variation within one trust and even within individual schools. Sub-question 2, concerning the perceived relationship between leadership and motherhood, is most directly addressed by theme 3. It found the relationship to be experienced as conditional and heavily shaped by the visibility of mothers on SLT in participant's own schools. Both sub-questions are also informed by theme 4 which shows how organisational factors and perception lead to deliberate career decisions, and theme 2 which shows the role of internal identity on the decisions made.

5.7 Practical and Managerial Implications

The findings from this research study led to several specific implications for school and trust leaders seeking to improve the retention and progression of mother-teachers. Some of these are consistent with recommendations made elsewhere in the literature reviewed. These recommendations are provided at the level of the trust and individual school, rather than considering national changes as the case study design of this research means it is best positioned to recommend action within the specific context researched. It does, however, remain relevant to other multi-academy trusts or secondary schools facing similar challenges.

First, the consistent finding that support depended heavily on the individual line manager, rather than any formal trust process, suggests that trusts should formalise and enforce a standardised maternity return-to-work process, including an entitlement to a phased return. This would be instead of relying on ad-hoc arrangements that must be individually negotiated or self-advocated. This recommendation is consistent with Houston and Marks' (2003) finding that structured pre-return planning is strongly associated with successful return to an equivalent role. It also aligns with many participants' own explicit request for a clearer, written process.

Second, given the evidence of the range of both highly proactive and explicitly biased line management within the same trust, there is a clear case for mandatory line manager training on supporting women through pregnancy to maternity leave return. This training should include guidance on carrying out risk assessments, proactive welfare accommodations available, appropriate language, and the discriminatory aspect of recording assumptions about career intentions. This would directly address the pattern found in theme 1 of adjustments made only when requested, or unavoidable, rather than being offered as standard.

Third, the finding that career conversations were either absent, or occurred only as a result of school need rather than to support career planning, suggests that trusts should build structured, proactive career conversations into the maternity leave and return process. They should be built into the timeline at defined points

rather than being left to the returning member of staff to initiate. This is consistent with Noon and van Nieuwerburgh's (2020) finding that access to coaching and mentoring meaningfully alters the direction and permanence of post-maternity leave decisions (Noon and van Nieuwerburgh, 2020).

Fourth, the strength of the visibility of part-time, flexible SLT mothers in school suggest that trusts should actively consider how the presence of these SLT are made more visible to more junior staff. This could be through mentoring schemes, informal networks, or coaching programmes, rather than leaving this visibility to chance. Linked to this is the request for flexible and shared versions of TLR and senior roles that was declined by some schools and provided by others in the same trust. The trust would benefit from reviewing how SLT and TLR roles can be structurally designed to accommodate sharing and flexible work, learning from where it is currently working successfully. Sharing experiences with headteachers and trust leaders to remove the assumption that such roles are unsuitable for anything other than full-time single person arrangements.

Finally, the self-limitation pattern identified in theme 4 suggests that the absence of an explicit barrier is not sufficient to ensure equitable access to progression opportunities. Trusts should consider proactively and explicitly reassuring maternity returners that reduced hours or a period of reduced visibility does not restrict access to future progression. This proactive approach would reduce assumptions that were found with participants assuming they were ineligible without the school ever confirming that to be the case.

5.8 Summary

This chapter discussed the study's findings in relation to the theoretical frameworks and existing literature, identifying significant consistency with existing views of gendered organisations, identity disruption, and the Kaleidoscope Career Model, whilst also highlighting aspects in which the findings extend or complicate the literature. This was evident with the degree to which the school leaders varied in their support, the time-limited rather than open-ended view of ambition reordering, and the previously under recognised influence of SLT

mothers' visibility. The chapter has argued that the study's research questions have been addressed and has set out five practical recommendations from the findings.

6 CHAPTER 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This research set out to answer the main research question of how does the experience of maternity transition shape the career progression decisions of women teachers in secondary schools? This was explored through two sub-questions exploring the influence of line managers and SLT on career decisions, and the way mother-teachers experience the relationship between leadership and motherhood. This chapter summarises the key findings, confirms the research questions have been addressed, and sets out the implications for practitioners along with recommendations for future research.

6.2 Summary of Key Findings

The study found that maternity transition shapes career progression decisions through the interaction of four themes rather than one single cause. Theme 1 established that the behaviour of individual line managers and SLT, rather than a formal trust policy, was the most consistent influence on participants' experiences. The support ranged from very proactive to explicitly biased within the same trust. Theme 2 found that returning to work frequently involved a renegotiation of professional identity and confidence, that was not always linked to organisational failure. Theme 3 found that participants saw the compatibility of leadership and motherhood as conditional, rather than fixed, shaped by factors such as the age of their child, levels of seniority, and importantly, the visibility of mothers on SLT. Theme 4 found that the dominant pattern was a deliberate, time-limited reordering of ambition rather than its abandonment, alongside a notable pattern of self-limitation in which participants assumed they were ineligible for roles without this ever being confirmed.

The research has met its aims with the main research question answered. The findings show that maternity transition is a key moment for career-shaping due to the interaction of organisational practice, professional identity and beliefs about compatibility. Sub-question 1 has been addressed through theme 1, which found line manager and SLT behaviour to be the most consistent, but variable, influence

on participants' career decisions. Sub-question 2 has been addressed through theme 3, which found the relationship between leadership and motherhood to be experienced as conditional and significantly shaped by the visibility of mothers on SLT. Together, this study has fulfilled its aims of generating qualitative, contextually rooted evidence of the decision-making processes underlying the well-documented gender leadership gap in secondary education.

6.3 Contribution to Knowledge

The research contributes to the existing literature in three key ways. Firstly, it provides qualitative trust-specific evidence of the mechanisms underlying the career-decisions post maternity leave, extending the statistical findings from The Missing Mothers Report (The New Britain Project and The MTPT Project, 2024) by identifying the specific school behaviours that cause dissatisfaction with maternity support. Secondly, it identifies the visibility of mothers on SLT as an independent mechanism shaping career decisions, a factor not directly covered in the literature reviewed. Finally, it identifies a pattern of self-limitation, produced through an absence of organisational reassurance rather than an explicit barrier, which sits between the structurally focused and agency focused views of career disadvantages in the existing literature. It therefore offers a more detailed explanation of how organisational culture shapes individual decisions without any direct intervention.

6.4 Implications and Recommendations for Practitioners and Future Research

The findings deliver direct and specific actions for trust and school leaders. The research recommends that trusts formalise a standard maternity return-to-work process, with an automatic entitlement to a phased return, rather than individually negotiated inconsistent arrangements. Mandatory line manager training on support women through pregnancy, maternity leave, and return should be introduced covering risk assessments, proactive welfare accommodations, and risk of recording assumptions about career intentions. Structured, proactive career conversations should be built into the maternity leave and return processes at defined points, rather than left to the women to initiate. Trusts

should actively increase the visibility of part-time and flexible senior leaders who are mothers, and review whether SLT and TLR roles can be structurally redesigned to accommodate flexible and shared arrangements. Finally, trusts should proactively and explicitly reassure returning staff that reduced hours does not exclude them from future career progression to directly address the self-limitation identified in the research, rather than assuming the absence of a barrier is sufficient.

The study's single MAT case study design means its findings are not intended to be generalisable, and there are several recommendations for future research that would extend and test its findings on a wider scale. A multi-trust study would help establish whether the patterns identified here, particularly the extent of within-trust variation, is common across the education sector. A longitudinal study, following participants over a longer period would provide a further insight into whether the deliberate time-limited reordering of ambition leads to renewed pursuit of leadership as the participants expect, or whether deferring their ambition becomes a permanent state. Future research could also explore fathers' and partners' experiences of shared parental leave, to confirm whether these mechanisms are specific to maternity leave or part of a broader pattern of parenting leave. Further research is also recommended into how other factors such as ethnicity, disability, and single parent status shape the experiences covered in this study. This is an area this study was not designed to address but which would likely reveal additional sources of understanding around disadvantage in this context. Finally, given the limited findings around digital availability and KIT days, future research using questions targeted to these areas specifically could reveal more on the boundaries between maternity leave and continued professional expectation.

This research has successfully met its aim of exploring how the experience of maternity transition shapes the career progression decisions of women teachers in secondary schools. Both the sub-questions and main question have been addressed through a rigorous, ethically designed qualitative study, generating findings that are grounded in participants' experiences and situated within

existing theory and literature, whilst extending the research. The study shows that the decision not to pursue leadership following maternity leave is neither simply an organisational failure nor an individual personal choice, but the result of an interaction between organisational practice, identity, and belief that school leaders have the capacity to influence.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Participant Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

What is this research about?

You are being invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Samantha Rasmussen, a Vice Principal within this trust and a student on the MBA in Strategic Leadership programme at the University of Buckingham. The study is titled 'The Maternity Transition and Its influence on Career Trajectory: A Study of Women Teachers in Secondary Education'.

The research aims to understand how the experience of maternity leave shapes the career progression decisions of women secondary school teachers — in particular, how it influences decisions about whether to pursue promotion or leadership. It is hoped that the findings will provide practical insights for school and trust leaders and will contribute to reducing the gender leadership gap in secondary education.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited because you are a woman currently employed as a teacher within this multi-academy trust and you have returned from at least one period of maternity leave within the past four years. Your experience places you in a unique position to contribute valuable insight to this research.

Participation is entirely voluntary. Whether or not you choose to take part will have absolutely no impact on your employment, your professional relationships, or any decisions made about your career within the trust. You have been contacted through the trust's HR team, not directly by the researcher, specifically to ensure that no pressure is placed upon you.

What will taking part involve?

If you agree to take part, you will be invited to a one-to-one interview with the researcher, conducted via TEAMS at a time that is convenient for you. The interview will last approximately one hour and will be semi-structured in format, meaning that there are prepared questions, but the conversation will be flexible and responsive to what you share.

Topics covered will include your experience of maternity leave and returning to school, the support you received from your line manager and senior leadership team, and your thoughts and feelings about career progression following maternity leave. There are no right or wrong answers — the research is interested in your personal experience and perspective.

The interview will be recorded via TEAMS. The recording will be used solely for the purpose of transcription and will not be shared with anyone outside the research process.

What are the potential benefits of taking part?

By sharing your experience, you will be contributing directly to research that aims to improve the support available to women teachers at a critical point in their careers. The findings will be shared with trust leadership and are intended to inform practical changes to policy and practice. Participants will be offered a summary of the key findings once the research is complete, if they wish to receive one.

Some participants also find the interview itself to be a valuable opportunity to reflect on their career journey in a confidential and supportive space.

Are there any risks to taking part?

The topics covered in this interview — maternity leave, career decisions, and workplace experiences — may touch on memories or experiences that are emotionally significant. You are not obliged to answer any question you find uncomfortable, and you may pause or stop the interview at any time. If you find any aspect of the interview distressing, please let the researcher know and the session will be paused.

The researcher is a Vice Principal within the same trust. Whilst every effort has been made to ensure that participation is entirely free from professional pressure — including recruiting through HR rather than directly — you should feel fully confident that your decision about whether to participate, and everything you share if you do, will have no bearing whatsoever on your professional standing within the trust.

How will my information be kept confidential?

Your privacy and confidentiality are of the utmost importance to this research. The following measures are in place:

- All interview recordings will be transcribed and anonymised. Your name and any identifying details will be replaced with a participant number before analysis.
- The anonymised transcripts will be stored securely in a password-protected location accessible only to the researcher.
- No individual will be identifiable in the final dissertation or in any publications arising from the research.
- Interview recordings will be permanently deleted once transcription is complete.
- All data will be handled in accordance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the University of Buckingham's data protection policies.

Please note that confidentiality cannot be maintained in the exceptional circumstance that information disclosed during the interview suggests a serious risk of harm to yourself or others. In such cases, the researcher would be obliged to follow safeguarding procedures.

What are my rights as a participant?

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You have the right to:

- Decline to answer any question without giving a reason
- Withdraw from the interview at any time without consequence
- Withdraw your data from the research at any point up until the data analysis phase begins, by contacting the researcher
- Request a copy of your anonymised transcript once it has been produced
- Receive a summary of the key research findings once the study is complete

Who can I contact if I have questions?

If you have any questions about the research before, during, or after your interview, please contact the researcher: Samantha Rasmussen, MBA Student, University of Buckingham, Email: 2512911@buckingham.ac.uk

Appendix B Interview Stages and Questions

Interview Stages and Questions

Pre-Interview:

- Explain purpose of the research and how their data will be used
- Confirm they understand it is voluntary and they can withdraw at any point
- Confirm they understand it will be recorded for transcription and then anonymised
- Clarify there are no right or wrong answers – only their experience
- Start recording and get verbal confirmation of consent before starting the interview

Section A: Context and Pre-Maternity Career Identity

Q1. Can you tell me about your teaching career to date – How long have you been teaching, what role/s have you had?

Prompts:

- How long have you been in your current school and/or within the trust?
- Are you full-time or part-time?
- Have you taken on any leadership roles?

Q2. Before having children how would you have described your approach to your career and your thoughts on how it might develop?

Prompts:

- Did you have leadership or promotion goals?
- How did you feel about teaching as a long-term career?
- Were there any steps you had taken, or were considering, relating to developing your career?

Section B: Maternity Leave and Returning

Q3. From a work perspective can you describe your maternity leave experience and what happened when you returned to work?

Prompts:

- What contact, if any did you have with your line manager or school whilst on maternity leave, and what was it like?
- Was there a formal return-to-work conversation or plan for your return?
- Did you return to the same role and responsibilities?
- Did you complete KIT days and what was your experience of them?

Q4. How did returning to work feel in terms of your sense of self as a teacher (your professional identity)?

Prompts:

- Did you feel like the same professional/teacher as you were before maternity leave?
- Were there any ways in which things felt different for you?

Q5. During your maternity leave what were your thoughts about your career and job role?

Prompts:

- Were there aspects of your career or role that you found yourself thinking about differently? In what way?
- Were there any particular moments that influenced your thoughts about your future career in teaching?

Section C: Line Manager, SLT and School Culture

Q6. How would you describe your experience of your line manager and SLT in relation to both your maternity leave and your return to work?

Prompts:

- What support, if any, was available to you from your line manager or SLT during maternity leave and on your return?
- Were training, promotions, or career plans discussed at any point during your leave or when you returned?
- To what extent did you feel included in meetings, decisions and opportunities during maternity leave and when you returned?

Q7. What conversations have you had in school about your career and your future since returning from maternity leave?

Prompts:

- Were your career plans or ambitions something that was discussed when you returned?
- Have you considered any promotions or leadership opportunities since returning?

Q8. How would you describe the culture in your school in relation to women who are mothers?

Prompts:

- Were there women in leadership or senior roles who were also mothers, and what, if anything, did you take from that?
- How would you describe the expectations that go with being a leader in your school, and how do those feel to you as a mother?

Section D: Career Decisions and Aspirations

Q9. Thinking about your career in the future – How do you feel about your future in teaching and the relationship between school leadership and being a mother?

Prompts:

- Have you reached a decision about your career direction or is it still something you are considering?
- Have your thoughts changed on combining leadership and motherhood?
- Do you feel the opportunities available to mothers and fathers are comparable?

Q10. Looking back, what would be the one thing you think would make the biggest difference to mother-teachers in your school/trust?

Prompts:

- Was there a specific moment or situation that could have been better?

Closing Question: Is there anything else about your experience that you want to add that I have not asked about?

Post Interview:

- Remind them their responses will be anonymised and the recording deleted once transcription is completed
- Remind them they can still withdraw from the research study if they wish to
- Ask them if they have any questions and whether they would like access to the findings
- Stop the recording and thank them

Appendix C Participant Consent Form

Informed consent form

Title of the project:	The Maternity Transition and It's influence on Career Trajectory: A Study of Women Teachers in Secondary Education
Name of the researcher:	Samantha Rasmussen
Researcher's email:	2512911@buckingham.ac.uk
Participant number:	
Date:	

Consent for the interview/participation in focus group

- I confirm that I have been informed about this research project and I agree to take part.
- I understand that all personal information I provide will be treated with confidence and my name will not be used in any report, publication or presentation.
- I have been provided with a participant number as shown above. The researcher(s) will record data against my participant number instead of recording my name. The file linking my name to my participant number will be accessible only to the main researcher(s) and will be securely destroyed after the research is complete.
- I understand that I can withdraw from this project at any stage by informing a member of the research team, for whom contact details have been provided. I also understand that I can withdraw my data for a period of up to two weeks from today, as after this time it will not be possible to identify my individual data from the aggregated results as explained in the above point.

Consent for videos/audios of participants:

- Interviews will be recorded and securely stored on the laptop of the researcher as a video/audio file. These files will be securely deleted as soon as they are no longer required.
- The videos/audios will be analysed to aggregate findings such as timings, positions, etc. Any analysis will attempt to remove any personal descriptors but where this is not possible further permission(s) will be sought.

I understand that the final analysis will be published in support of the research findings.

I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided on this form and give my consent to taking part in this research.

Participant's signature:		Date:	
Researcher's signature:	<i>S. Rasmussen</i>	Date:	

If a hard copy is used, one copy of this form must be given to the participant and one copy held by the researcher.

Appendix D Ethical Approval Form



Business School Ethical Approval Form

This form should be completed for every research project that involves human participants. It can also be used to identify whether a full application for ethics approval needs to be submitted. The researcher or, where the researcher is a student, the supervisor, is responsible for exercising appropriate professional judgement in this review. This form must be completed and confirmed **before** potential participants are approached to take part in any research.

Section 1 - Research Checklist

1.1	Does the study involve holding personal information (names, attributable information or personal identifiers of any form) on a database?	YES/NO
1.2	Does the study involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give free and informed consent (children, people with learning disabilities, students in academically dependent relationships)?	YES/NO
1.3	Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their full knowledge and explicit consent (perhaps through covert observation)?	YES/NO
1.4	Will the study involve discussion of sensitive topics (political or religious views, illegal activities, sexual activity, drug use and so forth) that could be uncomfortable to participants or harmful if divulged to others?	YES/NO
1.5	Will the study involve potentially harmful procedures of any kind or be conducted in a hazardous environment that could expose the researchers or participants to higher risk than is encountered in normal life?	YES/NO
1.6	Will financial inducements (cash, vouchers or a prize draws) be offered to participants?	YES/NO
1.7	Will the study involve patients or patient data in the NHS?	YES/NO

Safeguarding Approval for Research in Schools

If you are working in a school or school trust and answered 'YES' to Question 1.2, you must obtain approval from your school's safeguarding representative before proceeding.

Please ensure the section that applies to your research type is completed:

For Quantitative Research (e.g., surveys):

I, _____, the safeguarding representative at _____ (name of institution), confirm that I have reviewed a summary of the research and the survey questions being presented to students. From a safeguarding perspective, I do not see any risk of harm or danger to students completing this survey.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

For Qualitative Research (e.g., interviews, observations, focus groups):

I, _____, the safeguarding representative at _____ (name of institution), confirm that I have reviewed a summary of the research and the questions being presented to students. From a safeguarding perspective, I do not see any risk of harm or danger to students participating in this research. I also confirm that I will be present at all interviews, observations, and/or focus groups.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

In all cases if you have answered "YES" to any of the questions in section 1 you will need to complete Ethical Approval part 2 as well. Please download this from the Moodle page.

Section 2 Project Details

Module name and number	MBA Project in Strategic Leadership BPFPRSL
Supervisor's or Module Leader's name	Sandra Krisberga-Sinigo
Student's Email address	2512911@buckingham.ac.uk
Start and Estimated End Date of Project:	January 2026 – September 2026
Title of project:	MBA Strategic Leadership -The Maternity Transition and It's Influence on Career Trajectory: A Study of Women Teachers in Secondary Education

Section 3 Project Design

Briefly describe the study design to be applied in the project including methods of data collection, data storage and data analysis
Interpretivist and inductive approach. Semi-structured one-to-one interviews with women secondary teachers within four years of returning from maternity leave in one multi-academy trust. The interviews will be done through TEAMS and take approx. 1 hour. They will be asked 10-12 questions and will be recorded for transcription. Once transcribed the recording will be deleted. All recordings will be stored in a password protected file. All interviewees will consent to the storage and collection prior to interviews taking place.

Section 4 Declaration

I hereby agree that I have read the Buckingham Business School's Ethics Code of Practice and taken reasonable steps to ensure the independence and transparency of this research project. There are no significant conflicts of interest or partiality that may impact on the findings and outputs of my research activities.

I confirm that all participants will be recruited on the basis of informed consent.

I confirm that I have included a copy of the consent form(s) designed for the purpose of this research

Signed:	<i>S. Rasmussen</i>
Name:	Samantha Rasmussen
Date:	26/05/26

Section 5 Approval by supervisor

I have read this Ethics Form and discussed it with the student named above.

I have approved the basis on which the study can go-ahead.

Signed:	
Name:	
Date:	

Appendix E Initial Coding

Code Number	Participant	Data Extract (paraphrased/condensed from transcript)	Code	Research Question
1	P1	Wanted to become a SENCO before having her daughter; now says career is 'on hold' until daughter is older	Deliberate pause in ambition	SQ2
2	P1	Zero contact from school during leave beyond initiating her own KIT day booking	Absent/reactive line management contact	SQ1
3	P1	No training or promotion raised at any point during leave or return window	Absence of career conversation	SQ1
4	P1	'If I'm being honest, no - I don't think it's compatible, at least not at the age my daughter is now'	Perceived incompatibility based on child's age	SQ2
5	P1	'There are definitely more opportunities for fathers compared to mothers... I haven't yet seen a mother come back full-time'	Observed gender difference in return-to-work opportunities	SQ2
6	P1	Weaned herself off breastfeeding early after learning a colleague only had a cupboard to pump in	Inadequate facilities affecting personal choices	SQ1
7	P1	Wants clearer written guidance on what happens on return, not just on leave entitlement calculations	Desire for documented return-to-work policy	SQ1
8	P2	I don't think it would have progressed as quickly as it did before children' - promoted to Head of Department shortly after return	Unexpected career progression post-return	SQ2
9	P2	I could really have done with just 2 or 3 days to get up to speed rather than day one, boom, five lessons off you go'	Absence of phased return	SQ1
10	P2	Immediately offered Head of Department progression on return, phased in 'when it's right for me'	Proactive promotion offer from leadership	SQ1
11	P2	Line manager without children 'wasn't quite so understanding' of late pregnancy discomfort	Line manager empathy gap due to own experience	SQ1
12	P2	Adjustments in late pregnancy for safety 'only happened because I asked for it'	Adjustments only with self-advocacy	SQ1
13	P2	Doing '100% of the role in 80% of the time, for 80% of the pay' before returning full-time	TLR/pay workload balance while part-time	SQ1
14	P2	'I've always been an aspirational person - until I had a baby. And now I'm actually just really happy'	Reprioritisation of career post-motherhood	SQ2
15	P2	Trusted to manage own hours outside the school day; leaves at 3:30 and works evenings instead	Autonomy and flexibility enabling balance of leadership and motherhood	SQ2
16	P2	No clear policy for attending child's events like sports days; 'sort it out yourself within your department'	Absence of formal event attendance policy	SQ1
17	P3	Approached about new roles while still pregnant/on leave each time ('would you like a new adventure?')	Career redirected via employer offer rather than pursued through choice	SQ1
18	P3	'A lot of people have leapfrogged over me... support hasn't been as good as I'd hoped'	Perceived career stagnation relative to peers	SQ2
19	P3	Found out from a staff briefing that someone else had been given her intended role	Poor communication of role changes during leave	SQ1
20	P3	Applied for promotion twice unsuccessfully. Feedback 'not productive' and told to go back to a role she'd already done	Blocked promotion with unconstructive feedback	SQ1
21	P3	'I don't know anymore. I feel like I don't fit in the puzzle. I feel cast aside'	Sense of professional exclusion or disconnection	SQ2

Code Number	Participant	Data Extract (paraphrased/condensed from transcript)	Code	Research Question
22	P3	Line manager commented 'you've got four kids, so obviously you take more time off' despite excellent attendance	Biased assumption about reliability	SQ1
23	P3	Only two women on SLT, both with grown children. Referred to as a 'boys' club'	Absence of mother role models on SLT	SQ2
24	P3	'I still have ambition. I still want to be part of the leadership team'	Sustained ambition despite structural challenges	SQ2
25	P3	What would make the biggest difference is 'still feeling part of the team. That people still know you, value you and your part of something'	Desire for connection whilst on maternity leave	SQ1
26	P3	'The nine-to-five model just doesn't fit working mothers - or working parents in general'	Structural mismatch between school hours and parenting	SQ2
27	P4	Comments made about TLR role but 'I don't know if I can while I've got such young children'	Self-limiting due to perceived incapacity without an explicit block	SQ2
28	P4	No career progression conversation in 6 years since first child	Absence of career conversation	SQ1
29	P4	Assumed she wouldn't be considered for Head of Department due to part-time status and time away	Internalised assumption of not being eligible for TLR role	SQ2
30	P4	Plans to 'prioritise career later' once youngest starts school as wants to model working motherhood to daughters	Deferred ambition with clear planned trigger point	SQ2
31	P4	Spoken to SLT who is a mother and part-time and has been reassured leadership and motherhood can work	Visible SLT mother part-time demonstrating motherhood and leadership	SQ1
32	P4	Request for formal return-to-work maternity leave policy to standardise approach	Lack of formal maternity return policy	SQ1
33	P4	Requests for non-contact settle-in day granted informally each time, but no formal policy exists	Ad hoc rather than policy-based support	SQ1
34	P5	Cried after son commented 'you're working again' on a Sunday; resigned from Head of Department shortly after	Emotional moment leading to deliberate step down	SQ2
35	P5	'At a certain level of responsibility, it can become incompatible'	Perceived incompatibility based on level of seniority	SQ2
36	P5	Second leave they 'rolled out the red carpet' and was given requested days without pushback	Contrast in support between maternity leaves	SQ1
37	P5	No formal career conversation since returning, but keeping progression 'in mind' for around 3 years' time	Deferred but retained ambition	SQ2
38	P6	Crippling postnatal depression after first leave; 'nobody had checked in on me. Not because of any individual, just because the systems weren't there	Unsupported on return due to lack of system	SQ1
39	P6	No clear KIT day guidance first time but much clearer structure second time	Inconsistent school process between leaves	SQ1
40	P6	No dedicated pumping space, so used first aid room with window panels where she had to hide to express	Inadequate facilities for breastfeeding mothers	SQ1
41	P6	Stopped breastfeeding when returned full time, no conversations around it, no space to raise it unless you brought it up yourself	Inadequate return conversations	SQ1
42	P6	No formal career conversation from anyone more senior than me, only colleagues	Lack of leadership encouragement for promotion	SQ2

Code Number	Participant	Data Extract (paraphrased/condensed from transcript)	Code	Research Question
43	P6	'If you're a leader, you're expected to give 100%, and if you're a mother, you don't always have 100% to give'	Perceived incompatibility due to needing to have total availability	SQ2
44	P6	Female SLT member who was a mother made her feel able to ask for accommodations she'd never asked for before	Visible mother on SLT as role model enabling self-advocacy	SQ2
45	P6	I put the brakes on myself and won't apply for promotion until youngest is settled in school	Intentional pause in ambition	SQ2
46	P7	Given reduced timetable, checked-in on timetable preferences, and time to express milk on return	Proactive, individualised return-to-work support	SQ1
47	P7	Headteacher 'more than happy' to support part-time Curriculum Leader role	Leadership actively enabling flexible TLR role	SQ2
48	P7	Felt like 'a nuisance' having to request pregnancy accommodations rather than provided by default	Burden on mother of self-advocacy	SQ1
49	P7	I'm really hoping it is compatible. Its going to come down to work-life balance and setting boundaries'	Cautious optimism about compatibility, contingent on self-management	SQ2
50	P8	Stepped down from TLR role within first week back; 'so hard leaving my baby' despite full intention to continue	Emotional reality overriding previous intentions	SQ2
51	P8	Stated she'd 'like to get back into leadership again at some point but going part-time made that impossible for now'	Perceived incompatibility with being part-time and in leadership	SQ2
52	P8	Headteacher held 3 meetings during maternity leave and was fully supportive of change in plans	Highly proactive SLT support	SQ1
53	P8	Wanted support with understanding maternity process rather than being given a policy	Challenge with understanding entitlements	SQ1
54	P8	Gap identified in Line manager's active management of the return, despite kindness	Line manager capacity or training gap	SQ1
55	P8	Requested job-share/4-day version of TLR role which was declined due to need for daily consistency for students	Structural role design as barrier to flexibility	SQ2
56	P8	Headteacher publicly signalled her as strong future applicant despite recent step-back	Explicit reassurance of continued career viability	SQ1
57	P8	'The feminist in me wants to say it would have no impact, but I know from experience that it does'	Tension between beliefs and personal experience of incompatibility	SQ2
58	P9	First return was asked to deliver whole-staff training with no resources on day one. She broke down	Unsupported maternity return caused acute distress	SQ1
59	P9	Her pre-planning before her leave was not implemented in her absence with no explanation as to why 'coming back and finding that nothing I'd put in place had been done was genuinely horrible. I'm the one carrying the consequences of that	Professional undermining	SQ1
60	P9	Current line manager has never asked how she is managing her return or workload balance since day one	Superficial, one-off check-in rather than ongoing support	SQ1
61	P9	Not approached about SLT vacancy and only found out after being asked by a colleague if she was applying	Lack of proactive sponsorship for senior roles	SQ1
62	P9	I'm not sure I've got any more to give. I'm not sure the time commitment is compatible with where I am at home.	Conscious decision based on perception of compatibility between motherhood and leadership	SQ2

Code Number	Participant	Data Extract (paraphrased/condensed from transcript)	Code	Research Question
63	P9	Only one colleague in 13 years took shared parental leave; 'seen as quite an inconvenience'	Cultural stigma around shared parental leave	SQ2
64	P10	Headteacher framed part-time senior role as a two-way 'review', no pressure to prove it works	Supporting flexibility with senior role	SQ1
65	P10	Took all 10 KIT days partly due to lack of awareness of shared parental leave options	Financial pressure caused by information gap	SQ1
66	P10	You're a mum now, so it's a different approach to things'. An explicit acknowledgement from headteacher	Leadership explicitly validating changed priorities	SQ1
67	P10	Deliberately did not give up TLR responsibility when going part-time	Resistance to linking part-time work with reduced ambition	SQ2
68	P10	Navigating half-term misalignment, early drop offs and commute is a tension point with remaining in role	Practical logistics as key barrier rather than culture	SQ2
69	P11	Line manager told her 'I'm just giving you all the rubbish because you're going to have another baby anyway'	Explicit discrimination from line manager	SQ1
70	P11	KIT days involved full teaching and exam moderation rather than light-touch catch-up	Exploitative use of KIT days beyond intended purpose	SQ1
71	P11	No one in her immediate team asked if she was okay despite visible, repeated distress. Her line manager didn't check in	Lack of support from colleagues and line manager	SQ1
72	P11	Line manager pre-emptively wrote in appraisal that she wasn't pursuing progression, without asking her	Career trajectory assumed and recorded without discussion	SQ1
73	P11	No support from HR, made to feel bad for taking time off for scans, led to decision to step down from TLR role	Career step back as direct result of lack of support from school	SQ1
74	P11	Line manager and/or SLT never asked about career. 'The opportunities have come up, but I haven't gone for them because I've been made to feel I wouldn't be supported in those roles'	Perceived lack of support for promotion from Line manager/SLT	SQ2
75	P11	Not offered a chair at 9 months pregnant on sports day in 30-degree heat, not aware could ask not to do duties 'none of that was every offered to me, and no one told me it was possible'	Absence of basic pregnancy welfare adjustments/risk assessment	SQ1
76	P11	New HR worker transformed process quality for a colleague's later maternity leave, much more positive experience	School process improved changing outcome	SQ1
77	P11	'I genuinely don't know if this job is sustainable for me long-term anymore'	Emerging thoughts of leaving teaching	SQ2
78	P11	Has started researching alternative careers outside teaching for the first time	Definite early disengagement from teaching as career	SQ2
79	P12	I felt like I'd lost a bit of who I was as a teacher. Can I even teach anymore?'	Confidence loss / professional identity disruption on return	SQ2
80	P12	Retained TLR at 50% following second leave and considers this workable	Partial retention of TLR as compromise	SQ2
81	P12	Interviewed for SLT role while 8 months pregnant with second child	Leadership continuing to consider her for promotion during pregnancy	SQ1
82	P12	It's hard being a mum and progressing into SLT...the fear of not fulfilling responsibilities'	Anxiety about reliability leading to self-limitation	SQ2
83	P12	No structured transition back, taught a full day immediately	Absence of phased return despite requesting it	SQ1

Code Number	Participant	Data Extract (paraphrased/condensed from transcript)	Code	Research Question
84	P13	Confidence 'definitely not what it was before' feeling overwhelmed on return. Policies were 'convoluted'	Confidence loss compounded by policy complexity	SQ1
85	P13	Worried about whether 'I could be a good mother, a good teacher, and a good leader at the same time' Identifies tension between teaching and parenting	Feelings of tension between teaching/leadership and parenting	SQ2
86	P13	Some SLT members are part-time mothers, seen as a positive signal for her own progression	Visible mother SLT normalising part-time senior roles	SQ2
87	P13	'Honestly, no - I'm not sure leadership is fully compatible with being a parent'	Explicit perceived incompatibility	SQ2
88	P13	Would step back from leadership responsibilities before giving up teaching itself if balance became unsustainable	Levels of professional identity with teaching prioritised over leadership	SQ2
89	P14	Line manager did not contact her once during leave; she found this unsettling despite valuing autonomy	Absence of contact experienced negatively despite no active harm intended	SQ1
90	P14	Felt 'immense and overwhelming sense that I didn't matter' on first return as team had adapted without her	Feeling of professional redundancy/disconnect on return	SQ2
91	P14	Only became Head of Faculty because of urgent staffing crisis, not a considered conversation about her career development	Promotion arising from school need rather than career planning	SQ1
92	P14	Never seen anyone on SLT with primary/nursery-age children in 10 years at the school	Absence of visible SLT with young children	SQ2
93	P14	Headteacher confirmed flexibility 'becomes more flexible the higher up you go' when asked directly	Senior leader actively reassuring about compatibility	SQ1
94	P14	Lack of support with understanding entitlements to shared parental leave that would have been 'a financial life-saver'	Lack of support in understanding Maternity entitlements	SQ1
95	P14	Had to raise a formal grievance to be paid 100% of TLR	Structural pay inequity requiring formal grievance to be resolved	SQ1
96	P14	Conducted gestational diabetes blood tests at her desk due to lack of risk assessment or accommodated time	Inadequate support for pregnancy-related health needs	SQ1
97	P15	Given 5 days to mark mocks at 36 weeks pregnant and was hospitalised shortly after	Excessive workload expectation in late pregnancy leading to health implications	SQ1
98	P15	No handover as maternity cover started after she had already left due to early hospitalisation	Poor continuity planning around maternity leave	SQ1
99	P15	Full timetable from day one of return with no phased reintegration despite requesting it	Absence of phased return despite request	SQ1
100	P15	Deliberately holds no TLR 'for a good few years' while child is young	Deliberate pause in responsibility-seeking	SQ2
101	P15	Line managers arranged a free period daily for first 1.5 weeks once struggle became visible	Reactive support once difficulty was visible	SQ1

Appendix F Emerging Themes

Emerging Themes	Codes In This Theme	Justification for Grouping
A. The Quality of Line Management as a Determinant of Experience	Absent/reactive line management contact; Absence of career conversation; Absence of phased return; Proactive promotion offer from leadership; Line manager empathy gap due to own experience; Adjustments only with self-advocacy; Poor communication of role changes during leave; Desire for connection whilst on maternity leave; Contrast in support between maternity leaves; Unsupported on return due to lack of system; Inadequate return conversations; Lack of leadership encouragement for promotion; Proactive, individualised return-to-work support; Burden on mother of self-advocacy; Highly proactive SLT support; Line manager capacity or training gap; Unsupported maternity return caused acute distress; Superficial, one-off check-in rather than ongoing support; Leadership explicitly validating changed priorities; Lack of support from colleagues and line manager; Career step back as direct result of lack of support from school; Perceived lack of support for promotion from Line manager/SLT; School process improved changing outcome; Leadership continuing to consider her for promotion during pregnancy; Absence of phased return despite requesting it; Absence of contact experienced negatively despite no active harm intended; Absence of phased return despite request; Reactive support once difficulty was visible	These codes concern the direct behaviour of line managers and SLT. The quality of individual management - more than any formal policy - determined whether participants felt supported, ranging from highly proactive support to reactive or absent contact
B. Explicit Bias and Poor Treatment	Biased assumption about reliability; Explicit discrimination from line manager; Exploitative use of KIT days beyond intended purpose; Career trajectory assumed and recorded without discussion; Absence of basic pregnancy welfare adjustments/risk assessment; Excessive workload expectation in late pregnancy leading to health implications; Poor continuity planning around maternity leave	A distinct and more severe cluster involving clear bias, discrimination, or welfare failings that go beyond general inconsistency in line management support
C. School Systems, Policy, and Structural Barriers	Inadequate facilities affecting personal choices; Desire for documented return-to-work policy; TLR/pay workload balance while part-time; Absence of formal event attendance policy; Lack of formal maternity return policy; Ad hoc rather than policy-based support; Inconsistent school process between leaves; Inadequate facilities for breastfeeding mothers; Challenge with understanding entitlements; Cultural stigma around shared parental leave;	Codes concerning gaps or failures at the level of school/trust systems and policy around facilities, pay, entitlement information, and formal processes rather than individual manager behaviour

	Financial pressure caused by information gap; Lack of support in understanding Maternity entitlements; Structural pay inequity requiring formal grievance to be resolved; Inadequate support for pregnancy-related health needs	
D. Professional Identity Disruption and Reconstruction	Sense of professional exclusion or disconnection; Emotional reality overriding previous intentions; Professional undermining; Confidence loss / professional identity disruption on return; Confidence loss compounded by policy complexity; Feeling of professional redundancy/disconnect on return	Codes capturing the internal, subjective experience of returning to work, including shifts in confidence, self-concept, and sense of professional belonging or identity
E. Perceived Compatibility of Leadership and Motherhood	Perceived incompatibility based on child's age; Observed gender difference in return-to-work opportunities; Autonomy and flexibility enabling balance of leadership and motherhood; Structural mismatch between school hours and parenting; Perceived incompatibility based on level of seniority; Perceived incompatibility due to needing to have total availability; Cautious optimism about compatibility, contingent on self-management; Perceived incompatibility with being part-time and in leadership; Structural role design as barrier to flexibility; Tension between beliefs and personal experience of incompatibility; Conscious decision based on perception of compatibility between motherhood and leadership; Practical logistics as key barrier rather than culture; Feelings of tension between teaching/leadership and parenting; Explicit perceived incompatibility; Levels of professional identity with teaching prioritised over leadership	Groups the different ways participants reasoned about whether leadership and motherhood can coexist, including conditional and conflicting viewpoints
F. Deliberate Reordering of Career Priorities	Deliberate pause in ambition; Reprioritisation of career post-motherhood; Sustained ambition despite structural challenges; Deferred ambition with clear planned trigger point; Emotional moment leading to deliberate step down; Deferred but retained ambition; Intentional pause in ambition; Resistance to linking part-time work with reduced ambition; Partial retention of TLR as compromise; Deliberate pause in responsibility-seeking	Evidences a pattern of conscious, deliberate reordering of ambition tied to a future trigger point, rather than its disappearance
G. Self-Limitation Through Internalised Assumption	Self-limiting due to perceived incapacity without an explicit block; Internalised assumption of not being eligible for TLR role; Anxiety about reliability leading to self-limitation	Participants who did not pursue opportunities because they assumed that they would not be considered or would not cope
H. Visibility of Senior Mothers as Role Models	Absence of mother role models on SLT; Visible SLT mother part-time demonstrating motherhood and leadership; Visible mothers on SLT as role model	The presence or absence of visible senior women who are mothers, and its

	enabling self-advocacy; Leadership actively enabling flexible TLR role; Explicit reassurance of continued career viability; Supporting flexibility with senior role; Visible mother SLT normalising part-time senior roles; Absence of visible SLT with young children; Senior leader actively reassuring about compatibility	effect on participants' confidence to request accommodation or believe progression remained possible
I. Career Progression Driven by School Need Rather Than Planning	Unexpected career progression post-return; Career redirected via employer offer rather than pursued through choice; Perceived career stagnation relative to peers; Blocked promotion with unconstructive feedback; Lack of proactive sponsorship for senior roles; Promotion arising from school need rather than career planning	Career change often arose from urgent organisational need rather than considered development, and progression was sometimes actively blocked despite effort
J. Emerging Disengagement from the Profession	Emerging thoughts of leaving teaching; Definite early disengagement from teaching as career	Poor experiences moved beyond narrowed ambition towards active consideration of leaving teaching. On review, this is retained as an emerging theme here but consolidated into Theme 1 in the Final Thematic Map, as it rests on a single participant (P11) and is the extreme end point of management or organisation failure rather than a separate theme.

Appendix G Final Themes

Final Theme	Sub-Themes	Explanation	Covers	Consolidated From
Theme 1: Organisational and Leadership Support Determines the Experience	1a. Quality of line management (proactive vs reactive, including explicit bias) 1b. Institutional systems follow behind individual goodwill 1c. Career progression often contingent on school need, not planned 1d. Emerging disengagement from the profession	Whether a participant felt supported - and whether her career progressed - was determined far more by the individual line manager and by ad hoc school practice than by any reliable trust-wide system. Support ranged from highly proactive to explicitly discriminatory within the same trust, and promotion frequently arose from urgent staffing need rather than considered development. For at least one participant, the cumulative effect of this poor treatment moved beyond narrowed ambition towards active early consideration of leaving teaching altogether	SQ1	Candidate Themes A, B, C, I, and J
Theme 2: Professional Identity Renegotiation on Return	2a. Confidence and identity disruption 2b. Feeling professionally redundant or displaced	Returning to work involved a renegotiation of professional identity for most participants - ranging from a loss of confidence in core teaching skill to a sense that their team had adapted to function without them	SQ1/SQ2	Candidate Theme D
Theme 3: Compatibility of Leadership and Motherhood is Conditional, Not Fixed	3a. Conditional on child's age, leadership level, or self-organisation 3b. Visibility of senior mothers influences what feels possible	Participants overwhelmingly described compatibility as conditional rather than fixed - dependent on the child's age, the seniority of the role, or their capacity to set boundaries - and the presence or absence of visibly senior mothers had a direct, reported effect on whether progression felt achievable	SQ2	Candidate Themes E and H

Theme 4: Ambition Reordered, Not Abandoned - and the Blurred Line with Self- Limitation	4a. Deliberate pauses with a future end point 4b. Assumed ineligibility and anxiety-driven self- limitations without an explicit school block	The dominant pattern was a conscious, deliberate reordering of ambition rather than its disappearance - but a significant minority did not pursue opportunities because they assumed, without confirmation, that they would not be considered or would not cope	Main RQ	Candidate Themes F and G
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Appendix H Theme Map

Participant	Theme 1: Organisational & Leadership Support	Theme 2: Identity Renegotiation	Theme 3: Conditional Compatibility	Theme 4: Reordered Ambition / Self- Limitation
P1	Y		Y	Y
P2	Y		Y	Y
P3	Y	Y	Y	Y
P4	Y		Y	Y
P5	Y		Y	Y
P6	Y		Y	Y
P7	Y		Y	
P8	Y	Y	Y	
P9	Y	Y	Y	
P10	Y		Y	Y
P11	Y			
P12	Y	Y		Y
P13		Y	Y	
P14	Y	Y	Y	
P15	Y			Y
Participants Total	14	6	12	9