

Thought piece - flexible working at all stages of career

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Dr Suzanne Brown is a Senior Lecturer in Initial Teacher Education at the Sheffield Institute of Education. Her research interests and publications are around flexible working in the teaching profession as part of improving teacher recruitment and retention. She established and is the organiser of the free to join Effective Flexible Working in Schools Practitioner Network which provides opportunities for the sharing of good practice around flexible working. She has written about the relationships between part-time working and career progression for women teachers. Additionally, she has written about flexible working as a means of helping women teachers to manage their menopausal symptoms as part of supporting the retention of teachers in mid-life. In this article she explores the importance of teachers being able to work flexibly at all stages of their careers.

Life happens to people. Events happen that we plan for, and sometimes when we don't. There are times in our lives, and consequently in our careers, when we might need more support. At other times we might reflect on our priorities in life and may decide that our work-life balance needs to be shaped differently. In this article I will explore how supporting people to work flexibly can be an important way of supporting teachers at all stages of their careers to thrive and be retained in the profession.

Flexible working within the teaching profession

The importance of supporting flexible working within the teaching profession for serving teachers is emphasised by Education Support (2023) who report that 64% of teachers surveyed were highly likely to leave teaching to work in other sectors where they could work more flexibly;

“The lack of flexible working policies in schools is driving teachers out of the profession, particularly those with their own children; and this is likely only to worsen, as the gap in home-working and flexitime widens between teaching, and other professions.”

(Education support, 2023)

Flexible working is when employees vary their work in terms of the amount, timing or location of the work (de Menzes and Keliher, 2011) and can involve a range of different formally or informally agreed arrangements. According to the Department for Education (2024), flexible working is associated with the following benefits in schools:

- retaining experienced staff
- recruiting from a broader pool of teachers
- promoting wellbeing
- improving work-life balance

Flexible working is now the norm

Working practices have changed post-pandemic across other sectors. Competitor market-places for new graduates have changed dramatically – flexible working is now the norm and the younger generation's expectations around work has changed accordingly. A survey in 2017 by Timewise Flexible Working Consultancy revealed that 92% of people aged 18–34 used or wanted an element of flexible working in their future profession regardless of the sector they wanted to work in – and this research took place before the pandemic!

A future workforce which expects flexibility is at risk of discounting teaching as a career because the education sector is behind others in terms of flexible working. In a female dominated sector, 29% of female teachers work part-time (School Workforce Census, 2023) compared to 37% for female employees across all UK sectors (ONS, 2023). Of course, teaching is a front facing role and will never be able to compete with some of the offers in other sectors, but we do need to recognise what the profession is up against and make it as attractive as possible.

It is important to recognise that not all entrants to teaching are recent graduates.

People of all ages, backgrounds and individual needs apply for ITT courses and subsequently will enter the workforce. Their wish to work flexibly might reflect stubborn and gendered expectations around caring responsibilities, but it is important to recognise it might not. Instead, it may be as part of wanting to share caring responsibilities, navigating menopausal symptoms (Brown and Marsh-Davies, 2024) or to have work-life balance which includes pursuing a hobby or volunteering for example. Their needs and wishes may change over time. New entrants might not seek to work flexibly in the first instance but may consider the future opportunities available should their lives change.

For those early in their teaching careers, there are implications of flexible working with regard to their induction and this should be equivalent to 2 years teaching timetable of a full-time teacher. More information can be found in [‘Induction for early career teachers \(England\), Statutory guidance for appropriate bodies, head teachers, school staff and governing bodies, April 2024.](#)

Retention challenges

[The Employment Relations \(Flexible Working\) Act \(2023\)](#) came into effect from 6th April 2024 which entitles employees to request flexible working from Day 1 of their employment. Discussing at interview the needs and wishes around possible flexible working may be helpful to schools in timetabling and staffing arrangements before plans are finalised.

As a highly trained asset to the profession, it is important to retain teachers, but sadly this is not without its challenges. Last year, 9.7% of teachers left, the highest since 2017/18, with attrition due to retirement decreasing (Education Committee, 2024). Around a quarter of teachers leave the profession within 3 years and fewer than 60% are still in the profession after 10 years (EPI, 2023). Jack Worth from the NFER makes the following point:

“Of course, the health of teacher supply is not just a recruitment issue. If we retained more teachers, then the targets would not be so high. Because of trainee dropout and attrition after qualification, every seven more teachers we retain means we would need to recruit 10 fewer teachers into training”. ([Opinion piece first published in Schools Week on Thursday 7th December 2023](#)).

But there is hope!

In 2021, a survey of school leaders of schools who offer the opportunity to work flexibly, reported that 82% believed flexible working opportunities had improved the retention of teachers and leaders (IFF, 2021). Ways of working flexibly might include (DfE, 2024):

- Staggered hours. The employee has different start, finish and break times.
- Compressed hours. Working full-time hours but over fewer days.
- Annualised hours. Working hours spread across the year, which may include some school closure days, or where hours vary across the year to suit the school and employee.
- In-year flexibility - Personal or family days. Days of authorised paid leave during term time to which all employees in a school are entitled.
- Lieu time/Paid time off work for having worked additional hours.
- Home or remote working. The employee carries out work off site, e.g. PPA time conducted off site, or leaders carrying out some duties from home.

Contract changes

Toward the end of their career, those teachers aged between 55-75 are able to claim phased retirement. Phased retirement provides an option for teachers to withdraw part of their pension to substitute their loss of income due to reducing their paid working hours or reducing their responsibilities ([teacherspensions.co.uk](https://www.teacherspensions.co.uk)). With the raising of the Normal Pension Age (NPA) and minimum pension ages (*ibid*), it seems reasonable to assume that more teachers might take this option of working flexibly. Schools will need to prepare themselves for more of these requests and the change in working patterns that this will involve.

Independent financial advice from a specialist in public service pensions should be sought by any individual considering changing their contracted hours of work.

Statutory changes to contracts are one way that flexible working arrangements, like the ones described above, are facilitated but sometimes temporary and/or non-statutory requests to work flexibly may help us manage unexpected events or circumstances that we are all potentially susceptible to in our lives. Life happens! At such times it is important for leaders to work with teachers to explore if the various forms of flexible working might be supportive whilst being mindful that for some, this may be associated with a period of vulnerability. Having a culture where flexible working is not associated with stigma, and instead is an advocacy of supporting teachers to thrive in their professional and personal lives, seems an essential pillar in a profession which espouses the values of fulfilling potential and equality (Brown, 2019). When pupils look around their classrooms what roles and ways of working do they see being modelled? Not only does the profession have to look after the teachers it has, but it also has to look after the next generation of them too.

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