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Published version

BROWN, Suzanne and MARSH-DAVIES, Katy (2021). How to make teaching more women-friendly post covid.

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THE CONVERSATION

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Teachers have shown great resilience and adaptability in the face of COVID. PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo

How to make teaching more women-friendly, post-COVID

Published: August 4, 2021 11.07am BST

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For women, teaching is often seen as a welcoming profession. The greater flexibility and work-life balance that the job is thought to offer is a big incentive.

That said, approximately 6,000 female teachers a year quit their jobs between the ages of 30 and 39, which is when the majority of women in the UK have children. Each year, around one in nine female primary teachers leave the profession. So something does not add up.

Women we have interviewed speak of quitting their teaching jobs due to the stress and guilt they experience when juggling different demands for their time. They also highlight a lack of understanding from their employers. In particular, requests from teachers to work in a more flexible way (organising their time differently, or working in part from home) are more likely to be rejected than in the wider workforce.



Teachers adapted to new ways of delivering lessons and caring for their pupils during lockdown. Timothy Kuiper / Alamy Stock Photo

We have found that teachers in the UK greatly appreciated the less rigid approach ushered in by lockdown, with its more flexible working hours and home-working. They are loath for things to go back to the way they were before.

If schools do not take this into account, they risk being left behind by other workplaces. Here are some ways in which teaching could be made more women-friendly, post-COVID:

Understanding women's needs

Like much of the workforce, COVID has meant teachers having to adapt in various ways. They have adopted new technologies to deliver lessons and assess their pupils' progress. Many have juggled caring responsibilities alongside their teaching duties.

Women are more likely than men to be carers, and this can mean they have different working requirements. One teacher we interviewed moved out of her family home to care for her parents during the first lockdown in England in 2020. She did not see her husband and four-year-old child for six weeks.

Upon returning to face-to-face teaching, she requested a more flexible working pattern but was told that this was "highly problematic" by her manager. She was made to feel she was "a difficult woman" for asking. As a result, she is now seeking an alternative career.

Our research shows that women are highly committed to both caring and professional roles, even when this is not recognised by their employers. The women we interviewed worked to very high standards in both domains, often at a cost to their own wellbeing. This professionalism and commitment should reassure managers wary of sanctioning their requests for more flexible working.

Women's needs change over time in response to developments in their professional and family lives. Wanting to go part-time often coincides with life events, including pregnancy, motherhood and illness. This highlights the need for regular reviews of working arrangements. It also underlines how requests for flexible working can be cries for help, which should be considered carefully.



Teachers need to be trusted to do their work and their accomplishments celebrated. MBI / Alamy Stock Photo

Reassessing workloads

Just before the pandemic hit, employees in the UK worked an average of 36.9 hours per week. In May 2021, that number was down to 35 hours per week. By contrast, full-time teachers have been found to regularly work around 50 hours per week.

Those we spoke to reported that even when they have reduced their paid working hours, their paid workload was still too heavy alongside their caring responsibilities. Schools must, as the government is encouraging, explore ways of reducing that workload, from more efficient use of technology to greater support for trainee teachers early on in their careers.

Women who teach part-time are also sometimes deterred from seeking promotion because of the perception that you have to be full-time to be in a senior role. There is a notable lack of senior leaders in part-time roles. Schools need to promote the idea that working flexible hours, or part-time, does not impede a teacher's ability to take on leadership responsibilities or be otherwise promoted.

Everyone – regardless of the number of hours they work – should be celebrated for their positive contribution to school life. COVID saw teachers going to the greatest lengths to ensure our children were not only taught and assessed but also, in some cases, fed and clothed: during lockdown teachers were looking out for their most disadvantaged pupils, doing grocery shops and delivering necessities to families in need.

Finding ways to empower the women among the teaching ranks to both do their jobs and care for their families, not to mention their own wellbeing, is crucial. The government's new scheme in England, Flexible Working Ambassador Schools, is a step in the right direction, with eight schools chosen to become role models in flexible working and show other schools how to take a similar approach.

Funded until December 2022, this scheme will hopefully contribute towards a change of culture and encourage senior leaders to rethink their approach to flexible working. This is vital to retain the talent that women in the teaching ranks represent.