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BROWN, Suzanne

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Published version

BROWN, Suzanne (2024). Flexible working in teaching. What's good for the goose is good for the gander. Sheffield Hallam University.

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Flexible working in teaching: what's good for the goose is good for the gander

'Teacher supply in England remains in a perilous state.' (NFER, 2023)

Whilst effective flexible working in schools has traditionally been a part-time working pattern associated with women teachers with caring responsibilities, this can be stigmatising. But, new legislation means a request to work flexibly is now an option for all, and from the first day of employment. Can the teaching profession embrace this as a golden opportunity to support and retain teachers more widely?

Teaching is losing out in the race to recruit graduates. Even if they are recruited, the profession is not very effective in keeping them in the workforce. The Covid-19 pandemic was an unexpected and unwanted event, but it also served as a social experiment around responses and changes and in working patterns and practices. In the post- Covid era other professions have offered more flexibility in working patterns to boost and retain their

workforces. Across the wider sector this shift has appealed to 9 out of 10 employees. The result is a threat to the attractiveness of teaching as a career and to which teaching has to respond by offering more flexible working opportunities or by compensating for a lack of such flexibility through higher pay.

From April 6th 2024, everyone will have the entitlement to request flexible working from the first day of their employment. This has particular implications for a profession which is dominated by women – albeit not at leadership level. Women teachers' roles as carers, particularly motherhood, alongside a heavy workload is a major factor in making the decision to not work full-time. In teaching, working part-time is the most commonly adopted alternative to full-time working, yet other ways of working flexibly are advocated such as staggered or compressed hours. In my experience, schools are less aware of these options, yet, they could be easily accommodated within school working practices.

In light of all this, it is not surprising that the teaching profession is under a recruitment and retention pressure to embrace alternative ways of working beyond the normalisation of a linear and full-time working pattern. The DfE has funded the development of 12 Flexible Working Ambassador schools which are beacons of good practice. In addition, there is an online toolkit to support schools in enhancing its flexible working provision. More locally, within the Sheffield Institute of Education I have established and lead the Effective Flexible Working in Schools Practitioner Network. This online forum meets termly and is a fantastic networking opportunity to share good practice around flexible working. Please do contact me if you would like to join the (free and online) group.

As teachers' pensionable age continues to rise in the UK, incidences of phased retirement and changes in working patterns for both women and men seem likely to increase. People in new demographic groups will wish to work flexibly as part of this process. It will become apparent that supporting flexible working will be about supporting anyone who may need, or simply wish, to change their working pattern. All of us can get sick or be injured and may need to work in a different way for a period of time. We may need to care for an elderly person. For some, providing care for children and parents at the same time may present a huge challenge. For women, this period of being a sandwich carer may coincide with them navigating symptoms associated with the menopause. Supporting teachers (or indeed anyone) to change the way they work, for a short or longer period of time, seems a morally imperative way of showing that they are valued as a person, a colleague and an employee and will hopefully mean they stay in these supportive workplaces.

The loss of teacher talent and potential needs to be stemmed. Our children deserve this. Bold and empathetic leadership should explore supporting different forms of flexible working in ways that are responsive to an individual's circumstances. As we mark

International Women's Day, I want flexible working to become more widely adopted within the teaching profession, and indeed the wider workforce; the link between the stigmatisation of women (who are the ones more likely to be in caring roles) and flexible working as uncommitted working needs to be challenged. Although this is about supporting women, it is also about supporting all colleagues. The Covid-19 era showed that widespread change in terms of working practices can happen quickly. The teaching profession cannot afford to ignore the momentum for change that came with it.

Dr Suzanne Brown is a senior lecturer in Teacher Education. Her research interests lie in teacher recruitment and retention including support for flexible working, teaching and the menopause and making schools places where people want to work. If you would like to be part of the Effective Flexible Working in Schools Practitioner network, please contact her at suzanne.brown@shu.ac.uk

Posted March 8, 2024 in

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