A RAW DEAL FOR PART-TIME LEADERS?

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The recommendation that middle and senior leaders should be able to work flexibly was a main finding from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) report 'Part-time teaching and flexible working in secondary schools' (Sharp et al., 2019), and flexible working is a key strand of the Department for Education's Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy (DfE, 2019a). But are those who work – or want to work – flexibly truly able to access leadership posts in our schools? This article examines the current landscape for flexible working in school leadership positions and considers the possible issues and benefits.

The issues

The education sector lags behind other industries in terms of flexible working. Twenty-eight per cent of female teachers work part time, compared with 40 per cent of all female employees in the UK. For men, it is eight per cent in the education sector compared to 12 per cent nationally (Carr, 2020).

The higher up the school hierarchy, the less common working part time becomes (**Table 1**).

Table 1: School workforce in England, November 2018 (DfE, 2019b)

Number working part time as proportion of full-time equivalent (%)	Heads	Deputy heads	Assistant heads	Teachers
All schools	5	11	13	29
Nursery and primary schools	6	13	18	35
Secondary schools	3	4	7	23
Special schools	5	8	13	26

Flexible working may be a barrier to career progression for a number of reasons. I will consider some of the issues here.

WILL IT DAMAGE CAREER PROSPECTS?

Teachers fear that working flexibly will hamper their career progression. A Teacher Tapp (2020) survey showed that 67 per cent of more than 5,000 teachers said that their headteacher/manager would be unlikely to allow them to work part time. Seventy per cent said that working part time would damage their future career prospects. Interestingly, men were 10 percentage points more likely to say that their career prospects would be affected.

WILL FLEXIBLE WORKING REQUESTS BE ACCEPTED?

Many feel that their flexible working request would not be accepted. A DfE-commissioned report showed that 29 per cent of 1,589 school leaders had declined flexible working requests in their schools (CooperGibson Research, 2019). This figure may mask a situation where people do not even make the flexible working request in the first place because they are certain that it will be rejected or harm their career progression. A Twitter poll of 282 people working in schools (Patience, 2020a) showed that 24 per cent had not made their request because they were sure that it would be rejected.

These fears appear to be justified. The NFER's research (Sharp et al., 2019) found that several of the school leaders interviewed would not agree to middle or senior leaders working part time. They thought that it 'would make it impossible to undertake strategic duties, manage staff and lead teams effectively' (p. ii).

IS LEADERSHIP COMPATIBLE WITH FLEXIBLE WORKING?

Some schools do not see leadership as compatible with working flexibly. Anecdotes from the MaternityTeacher PaternityTeacher Project and Flexible Teacher Talent network provide examples of school leaders across all levels and settings who have had flexible working requests turned down. It is relatively common to be allowed to work flexibly but to have to give up leadership responsibilities. For example, a full-time head of English can return to work four days a week after maternity leave but only if the leadership role is relinquished.

Senior leaders identify a number of constraints on implementing flexible working in schools, usually relating to resource and capacity issues. CooperGibson's 'Exploring flexible working practice in schools' final report from November 2020 reported that some senior leaders 'did not believe that flexible working arrangements were compatible with leadership roles (including their own). They were particularly sceptical that part-time, job share or split role arrangements could be effective for leadership positions.' (pp. 36–37) The report reflects concerns from school leaders about issues arising when they are not at school and the increased pressure on others if someone in the leadership team works flexibly.

ARE LEADERS WORKING FLEXIBLY GIVEN ADEQUATE PAY, TIME AND DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES?

Even when flexible working requests are accepted, there are still barriers to career progression, development and chances of success. A Twitter poll of 236 part-time teachers holding Teaching and Learning Responsibilities (TLR; Patience, 2020b) showed that 50 per cent of these postholders were expected to complete their entire leadership responsibility but for only partial pay. There are examples of leaders being allowed to work flexibly for a term or a year to see how it goes before making a longer-term decision. This puts those working flexibly under additional pressure during this probationary period. Combined with a failure to provide access to development opportunities or pro rata provision for performance objectives and responsibilities, this can result in those working flexibly feeling like they have been set up to fail.

The importance of career progression for those working flexibly

Attracting and retaining our next generation of teachers and school leaders is going to require better flexible working practices in our schools. Ninety-two per cent of younger workers either work flexibly or say that they want to (Timewise, 2017a).

We need to embrace flexibility in leadership in order to address the gender pay gap. The numbers of women aged 30 to 39 leaving the profession and those who return after maternity to a role with less responsibility represent a huge loss of talent. Analysing the median hourly rates for male and female employees based on data from the Office for National Statistics, the TUC found that female education workers earned 25.9 per cent less than men (Hazell, 2019).

In the UK, 87 per cent of employees either work flexibly already or would like to, but fewer than one in 10 job adverts offers flexible working (Timewise, 2017a). Fifty-two per cent of job applicants are nervous to ask about flexible working, and 42 per cent fear that asking would damage their chance of getting the job (Timewise, 2013). 'The result is that many excellent candidates get stuck in their flexible jobs, preferring to stay in place even if it means they miss out on career progression.' (Timewise, 2017b) Many teachers who have secured the flexibility that they need in a current post or school may feel stuck in that role through fear of not finding the same flexibility in a promoted post or in another school with better progression prospects.

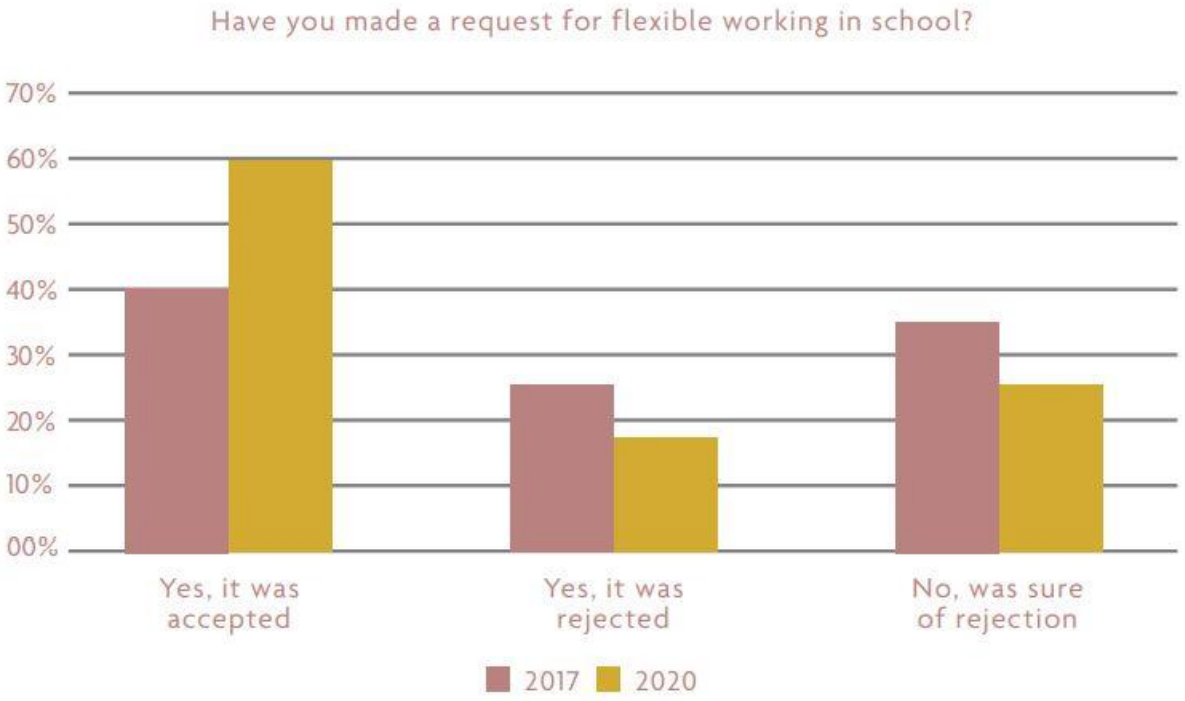
One of the NFER's conclusions was that 'Governors and school leaders should enable middle and senior leaders to adopt part-time working' (Sharp et al. 2019, p. v). If only full-time workers can be leaders then the leadership talent pool is limited. Where teachers have to choose between leadership and part time, they may be forced out of the profession, work beneath their level of experience and/or potential, or be forced into working full time against their wishes. Offering greater opportunity for flexibility for leaders will result in a more distributed model of leadership and better succession planning, as well as improving recruitment and retention of school leaders.

The good news

According to DfE workforce data (DfE, 2019b), as of 2018, there are now 2,186 part-time assistant heads in England's primary schools. As a proportion of the full-time equivalent workforce, this has increased from 12 per cent to 18 per cent. The latest figures show that there are 1,208 part-time heads in England, up from 733 in 2010, and there are nearly 2,000 part-time deputy heads, up from 1,348 eight years ago.

Flexible working is becoming more common in our schools. Data from Twitter polls (Patience, 2017; 2020a), with over 400 responses in total, has shown an increase in flexible working requests being accepted from 40 per cent to 61 per cent (see **Figure 1**). While this sample is small and unsophisticated, it is hopefully a sign that flexible working is viewed more positively now than it was a few years ago.

FIGURE 1:
TWITTER POLL ON FLEXIBLE WORKING REQUESTS (PATIENCE, 2017, 2020A)



What can schools do?

CULTURE

Flexible working should be for everyone: men, women, leaders, classroom teachers, parents, non-parents. If leaders can usualise it, role-model it and review it, it will become seen as a viable option for those also wishing to progress their careers. The opinion of the headteacher is still the main driving factor in the introduction and success of flexible working in schools (Sharp et al., 2019). Schools that use flexible working in a planned and proactive way rather than in a reactive and last-resort manner gain most from the benefits.

RECRUITMENT

Advertise jobs with flexibility, particularly at leadership level. Be open in interviews to questions and discussions about flexible working. In fact, you can make yourself more attractive to a wider pool of applicants if you mention flexibility in your adverts and build in opportunity to discuss it in your interview process (TESGlobalCorp, 2017).

TEACHING AND LEARNING RESPONSIBILITIES

Careful consideration should be made of TLR payments and responsibilities. A blanket rule of no part-time TLRs is limiting and unfair. If postholders are working part time, then either their pay or their responsibilities need to be adjusted to reflect this. If a maths lead has a 0.6 contract, they should either be paid the full TLR for the entire responsibility or they should be paid 0.6 of the TLR payment, with a corresponding 0.6 of the responsibilities.

CONTINUED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CPD)

School leaders should consider when and how CPD is offered and delivered. Can part-time staff still access it? Online or recorded delivery may help with this. Leaders should not assume that part-time workers don't want to develop themselves. Considering all employees as individuals and finding ways to fit CPD provision to their needs and access requirements is important in effectively developing and retaining staff and providing a pipeline for future leadership and succession.

LINE MANAGERS

Training for line managers in managing return to work after maternity and managing part-time staff can help with the CPD provision and planning for part-time employees, as well as encouraging and better supporting flexible working requests. Line managers should be enabled to strategically deploy, develop and support those working – or seeking to work – flexibly in their teams. Don't overlook part-time colleagues for training or promotion opportunities. Leaders and teachers should be able to work together to see how it could work and be mutually beneficial for the school and the individual.

What can individuals do?

FLEXIBLE WORKING REQUESTS

When making flexible working requests, focus on the benefits that the arrangements would bring to the school as well as to you. Consider and address the challenges and questions that may be perceived for your school context. Seek support from networks such as the MaternityTeacher PaternityTeacher Project, Flexible Teacher Talent and WomenEd.

APPLICATIONS

When applying for roles that are advertised flexibly, be clear and open in discussions about your wishes and requirements. There is always a degree of flexibility required on the part of both the employer and the employee if arrangements are to be successful, so don't demand a certain day of the week off unless you really need it. You may also wish to consider applying for jobs advertised as full time and then discussing flexible working either before the interview stage or after you have secured the role.

CONFIDENCE

Robbert Rietbroek, chief executive of PepsiCo Australia and New Zealand, asks his executive team to 'leave loudly' when they head home from the office (cited in Chung, 2017). He wants to usualise a healthy work–life balance and show that the organisation supports flexible working. If you work flexibly in a school, be proud of that; show others that is not something to be embarrassed about. I do not refer to my non-school days as my 'days off'. I am in school three days a week and I am paid accordingly; I don't get 'extra' time off.

It is important too for teachers working – or seeking to work – flexibly to be confident in their discussions and negotiations about working arrangements. Don't accept that there is no clear policy for attendance to INSET days or parents' evenings. Ask about what happens if you attend a training course on your non-school day and check that your pension is being calculated properly. It is easy for those who have their flexible working requests granted, especially those in leadership positions, to feel so grateful and lucky that they don't want to make a fuss. But every time that you clarify a policy or challenge something that is unfair, you are making it easier for all of those flexible workers who come after you.

Case studies

Sharing success stories is key to showing that flexibility can work in their situation, role or context. The more that we see flexible working in school leadership, the easier it will become. It will be better managed, easier to secure and seen as less of a risk and novelty. Schools or leaders who have never seen flexible working before or, worse, have seen it not work well, will inevitably be reticent about trying to overcome the challenges of offering it to leaders in their schools. Case studies of success, particularly in a similar context, can help to change this.

Conclusion

The demand for flexible working in our schools is growing, as is the understanding of how it can be successful at all levels of the organisation. There are undoubtedly challenges, real and perceived, but if we want schools to be diverse, modern and successful workplaces, then we can no longer just ignore the option of allowing school leaders to work flexibly.

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