**A matter of time? Gender equality in the teaching profession through a cross-national comparative lens**

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**Abstract**

This article draws primarily on a dataset of sixty semi-structured interviews conducted with teachers working in English and French state-funded secondary schools. Informed by feminist sociological theories of work and education and a cross-national comparative perspective, it explores the mechanisms leading to the production of gender inequalities in a profession which is often thought of as egalitarian or even favourable to women: teaching. A multi-level approach is adopted, which considers how the macro-social, meso-social and micro-social dimensions of the social world interact with each other and lead to the production of context-specific gender patterns (Crompton 1999; Le Feuvre 2008; Scott et al 2010), with specific attention to the effects of the spatio-temporal regimes of teaching which prevail in each country.

Keywords: Cross-national comparison – gender – secondary school teachers – France – England

**Introduction**

In many countries throughout the global North and global South prevails a view of the teaching profession as ‘egalitarian’, in the sense that women and men teachers are thought to be treated the same and given similar opportunities, or as ‘feminised’. While this latter term is polysemous yet rarely defined (Coffey and Delamont 2000; Skelton, 2002), I use it in this article to refer mostly to teaching as one of those professions in which women supposedly enjoy a matriarchal dividend, for example in the form of a preferential treatment and of better employment opportunities compared with their male counterparts. Various arguments have been mobilised by the media, policy-makers, the educational workforce and the wider public to justify these views (Moreau 2019; Moreau et al 2007, 2008). In particular, the relationship between women and teaching is often deemed unproblematic for women who, more often than not, *statistically* dominate the profession. In some cases, this statistical domination is equated with *social* domination – women’s numerical presence serves as evidence of the career opportunities available to them, or leads to claims that schools have become feminised spaces, imbued with ‘feminine values’ (as in Wansell 2001). In other cases, teaching itself is constructed as ‘feminised’ in the sense of being a suitable occupation for women. According to this view, teaching would require the mobilisation of caring, relational and other ‘soft skills’ or would fit nicely with the demands of care and domestic labour – all of which have been culturally associated with femininity and motherhood, as well-evidenced in the feminist literature (Delphy 1993; Gannerud 2001; Miller 1996; Warin and Gannerud 2014).

The prevalence of these claims fluctuates substantially across contexts, although they are consistently informed by a deficit view of women teachers and of ‘feminisation’ as discussed in the earlier literature (e.g. Moreau et al 2008; Lahelma et al 2000; Skelton 2002). In England, one of the countries I am concerned with, examples proliferate regarding how policy-makers and the media have held women responsible for a range of problems, including the deprofessionalisation of teaching and ‘boys’ underachievement’ (see e.g. Pyke 2000) despite the lack of empirical data supporting these claims and their dubious theoretical basis (Epstein et al 1998; Moreau 2014). In France, the other country I am concerned with, a view of secondary school teaching as an ‘egalitarian’ profession tends to prevail among teachers, including among participants to this study who often constructed their civil servant status and the recruitment and promotion criteria characteristic of the French teaching profession as a safety net protecting them from gender-based and other forms of discrimination (Fortino 2002; Moreau 2011a). Yet, in recent years, arguments similar to those heard on the other side of the Channel have gained in currency among politicians and the media (see e.g. Polony 2011). Moreover, in both countries circulate a view of teaching as ‘family-friendly’. In contexts like England and France where care remains primarily associated with femininity (Crompton 1999; Moreau 2011a), this often leads to teaching being constructed as ‘female-friendly’, with the balance between teaching and motherhood constructed as ‘harmonious’ (see examples in Tourret 2014; Pochard 2008).

This article does not engage comprehensively with these multiple definitions of teaching as ‘egalitarian’ or ‘feminised’ (see Moreau 2019, for a detailed discussion of these definitions). Instead, it focuses on some of the claims mentioned above about the feminised or egalitarian character (depending on the case made) of teaching. The views that gender inequalities are irrelevant to men and women teachers’ careers and broader lives or that women would enjoy a ‘matriarchal dividend’ because they are in the majority or because the profession is thought to be ‘family-friendly’ are scrutinised. Using a cross-national comparison of the careers of men and women who teach in French and English secondary schools, this article explores some of the gender inequality patterns characterising this profession in these countries as well as the conditions of their formation, with specific attention to mothers since, as we shall see in the article, their career patterns vary considerably across contexts (Crompton 1999). In doing so, I focus on the gendered effects of the spatio-temporal regimes of secondary school teaching, i.e. the cultural and legal norms which regulate the spaces and temporalities of teaching. This hyphenated term highlights the inter-relation of spatiality and temporality (Holland et al 2007; Massey 1993).

**Theoretical and methodological framework**

This article is broadly informed by sociological feminist theories of work and education, with specific reference to research adopting a cross-national comparative. It acknowledges the complex interactions taking place between macro-social factors (e.g. national cultures, including the intervention of the Welfare state in work and family matters), meso-social factors (e.g. teaching cultures, with specific reference to the country-specific norms regulating the spatialities and temporalities of teaching) and micro-social factors (e.g. individual biographies, including teachers’ personal circumstances and access to resources, all of which are framed by structural relations of power). I posit that these interactions lead to the production of context-specific gender inequality patterns (Crompton 1999; Le Feuvre 2008; Scott et al 2010). In contrast with biological essentialist and social differentialist discourses ‘naturalising’ gender or constructing it as ‘a social fate’ (Guillaumin 1992), gender is conceptualised in this article as a central component of society and people’s lives, a relationship of power which produces socially constructed gender binaries and hierarchies (Connell 1987; Hirata et al 2000). By outlining the variability of gender norms across contexts, cross-national comparison facilitates an understanding of gender as a socially constructed and dynamic system of binaries and hierarchies – in other words as a difference ‘that needs not be’.

My approach to cross-national comparison is consistent with a multi-level approach acknowledging the need to explore intra-national diversity (Broadfoot and Osborne 1993; Lallement and Spurk 2003). In particular, this approach shies away from earlier cross-national comparative work, which has often rendered gender matters and sometimes women themselves invisible (see, e.g., Maurice et al. 1982, see critique in O’Reilly 2000). Instead, drawing on earlier cross-national comparative studies of gender inequalities in the workplace, the preferred comparative approach calls for a greater recognition of gender and other equality issues (Crompton 1999) and acknowledges the heuristic power of comparison in deconstructing essentialist and differentialist discourses of gender (Guillaumin 1992).

Beyond this broad theoretical framing, this article is informed by feminist sociological studies of work, particularly teaching work, documenting how the gendered division of domestic and care work, recruitment and promotion criteria and practices, and the long-standing association between leadership and hegemonic masculinity have propelled the allocation of privileges to male teachers over their female counterparts (see, e.g., Acker 1989; Cacouault 2007; Coleman 2002; de Lyon and Widdowson 1989; Jarty 2013; Moreau et al 2008; Smyth 2006). This scholarship tends to focus on a single country and gender group (usually women), thus overlooking, as noted above, the heuristic contribution of comparison to an understanding of gender as socially constructed and relational. Moreover, while access to temporal and spatial resources represents a significant political and gendered issue (Bryson 2010; Massey 1993), studies exploring how the spatio-temporal regimes of the professions play out in relation to gender equality rarely focus on the teaching profession and/or rarely give centrality to gender matters (see, e.g., Holland et al 2007; Jarty, 2013; Lapeyre and Le Feuvre 2009; Le Feuvre and Lapeyre 2013).

To address this relative dearth of research, I rely primarily on a dataset of 60 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with a sample of French and English[[1]](#endnote-1) secondary school teachers, with 15 men and 15 women interviewed in each country. This article is also informed by an additional four exploratory interviews conducted as part of the pilot phase of the same project and by the findings of a separate project, which involved conducting 80 interviews and six focus groups with teachers, headteachers and governors based in a range of English schools (Moreau et al 2008). In the main study informing this article, equal proportions of men and women were interviewed in each country, reflecting a focus on gender. All interviewees were practising, qualified teachers at the time of the interview, i.e. holders of the Qualified Teacher Status in England and of either the Agrégation or the CAPES in France. The Agrégation is a national competition opened to Masters’ holders only and associated with higher levels of prestige and pay compared with the CAPES (Certificat d’Aptitude au Professorat de l’Enseignement Secondaire), another competitive examination, accessible at the time of the fieldwork to those holding a first degree)*.* Those holding an Agrégation are commonly known as the *Agrégés*, while those holding a CAPES are known as the *Certifiés*. Most participants to the original study were in their 30s or 40s (i.e. at mid-career stage). Apart from these criteria, the recruitment of participants onto this study sought diversity rather than representativeness in relation to variables likely to exert an influence on their experiences (e.g. geographical area, type of school, subject taught). The initial participants were recruited through my personal and professional networks, followed by a snowballing method, with the sample closely monitored throughout the study to to ensure maximum diversity (Blanchet and Gotman 2005). Participants worked in a range of lower and upper secondary schools. In both countries, fieldwork was conducted in the capital city, in a large metropolitan city and in a rural or semi rural part of the country. Altogether, participants taught a broad range of subjects and age groups (see Moreau 2011a for a more detailed account of the methodology and a sample description).

The interview schedule had a broad scope. Participants were asked to discuss: their most recent working day and to reflect on how ‘typical’ it was; their school experience; the circumstances in which they became a teacher; their career path; their identity as a teacher; and various aspects of their ‘personal’ life (e.g. care and domestic work, leisure, additional paid work, political and charitable activities). The spatio-temporal aspects of teaching emerged as a strong theme, with many teachers recurrently and often spontaneously alluding to these aspects. Interviews were fully transcribed and analysed using a thematic analytical grid (Robson 1993). The themes were derived from the initial research questions and were refined as a result of the careful reading of the transcripts, with the identification of sub-themes. The data were summarised by country and, within each country, by gender group, to identify cross-national differences and similarities, as well as gender-based differences and similarities within each context, reflecting in this a mixed concern for international and intra-national differences (Crompton 1999). Consistent with this approach, the following sections contextualise the experiences of teachers against the broader (macro-social) national context and the professional (meso-social) context, before turning to the analysis of teachers’ individual narratives.

**Gender inequality patterns, Welfare states and teaching cultures**

*Gender inequality patterns in the teaching profession*

The national datasets available in both countries concur in showing that the statistical feminisation of the teaching profession varies greatly depending on subject, phase of education and level of post, and that women tend to concentrate in the less prestigious and financially rewarding segments of teaching (DfE 2013; MEN 2013). In France, where women represent 58% of all secondary school teachers and where a subject expertise-led model of career prevails (Moreau 2011a, 2015), women are under-represented in the positions associated with the higher levels of subject expertise and rewards, i.e. they represent 62% of *certifiés* (CAPES-holders), 51% of *agrégés* (Agrégation-holders), and only 32% of the *professeurs de chaire supérieure* based in the *Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Ecoles.*[[2]](#endnote-2) They also represent 63% of those teaching in the *collèges* (lower secondary school) but 53% of those teaching in the *lycées d’enseignement général et technologique* (upper secondary schools) (MEN 2013). In England, where women represent 61% of all secondary school teachers and where a more managerial model of school career prevails, they are under-represented in middle and senior management positions, as 63% of classroom teachers, 49% of deputy and assistant headteachers, and only 36% of headteachers are female(DfE 2013).

The career trajectories of the teachers interviewed for the purpose of this study also highlight another gendered component of teaching careers. In both countries, patterns of employment are broadly similar among men and women who are childfree but become more differentiated when they become parents. However, it is perhaps even more striking that the working patterns adopted by mothers differ significantly between the two countries. French mothers who participated in this research tend overall to retain ‘male’ patterns of employment (i.e. continuous, full-time career paths), including when they have young children (a widespread occurrence in the sample and in the national teaching population). France general population’s ’s fertility rate is higher than the UK’s (Eurostat, 2016), with the fertility rate for French teachers also higher than the national average (Cacouault, 2007; Davie and Niel, 2013). No information was found regarding teachers’ fertility rate in England or in the whole of the UK. However, among participants to this study, French women teachers were more likely to be mothers than their English counterparts (13 out of 15 compared with 9 out of 15) despite being on average slightly younger. French mothers also had a higher number of children than their English counterparts. Among French mothers, part-time work was usually a very temporary measure and close to full-time (by law, part-time work must constitute at least 50% of a full-time job in the public sector). Other research suggest that taking a *Congé Parental* (which enables the extension of maternity/paternity leave under specific conditions) remains unusual among this group, and so does leaving the profession (Debril 2011). In contrast, English women teachers who too part in this study tended to adopt ‘specific’ patterns of employment and often for extensive periods of time when they became mothers. Despite a dearth of information regarding part-time teaching, recent data show that this is a more widespread form of employment than in France and often consists of a much smaller number of hours (20% is not unheard of, including among participants). Leaving teaching constitutes a common occurrence, often as a result of becoming a parent (Worth et al 2015). However, this last aspect was difficult to grasp in this study since all interviewees were in post, although some of the English male participants sometimes talked of a female partner, also a teacher, who had left the profession post-parenthood.

*Welfare states and the regulation of citizens’ private lives*

On a macro-social level, England and France share a number of political, economic and cultural features. Yet they also present some significant distinctions pertaining to the nature of their welfare state (Crompton 1999; Lewis 1997; Esping-Andersen 1990). The intervention of the French welfare state has traditionally been underpinned by feminist and *familialiste* concerns, with their respective prevalence varying over time (Daune-Richard 1999). In a country where state intervention in citizens’ private life is broadly perceived as legitimate (Esping-Andersen 1990), the political will to simultaneously encourage women’s production and reproduction (Fagnani 2000; Jenson and Sineau 1997) has led to a range of interventions facilitating the articulation of paid work and family matters, such as the development of a state-subsidised childcare provision (e.g. *crèches* and accredited childminders), which coexists with the *écoles maternelles* (pre-primary schools) attended by almost all three-year-old children (DEPP 2014). Pre-, after-school, and holiday childcare is also widespread and usually subsidised. The use of childcare is overall viewed as beneficial to children (European Values Study 2009). These measures have been instrumental in turning the country in what is known as *‘l’exception française’*, i.e. a high level of employment for women, including mothers, combined with the highest birth rate in the European Union (Eurostat 2016). However, this dual earner/state carer (Crompton 1999) or dual breadwinner/external care model (Pfau-Effinger 2004) remains associated with persisting inequalities in the labour market and in the domestic sphere (Aliaga 2006; Delphy 1993; Méda and Périvier 2007).

Similarly, the English welfare state has been concerned with gender inequalities for several decades, with the establishment from the 1970s of a legal framework in this domain. However, in contrast with its French equivalent, the intervention of the English welfare state has been driven by a more individualist and liberal approach, with, in particular, the intervention of the state in citizens’ private lives being often resisted (Esping-Andersen 1990; Faucher-King and Le Galès 2010). Since the aftermath of World War II, family matters have overall been constructed as private matters and mothers’ full-time employment as inappropriate, even damaging to children (Bowlby 1953; European Values Study 2008). Consistent with such views, the investment of public authorities in childcare provision has historically been scarce, with part-time work often viewed as the only socially acceptable form of employment for mothers (Gregory and Windebank 2000; Micheaux and Monsot 2007). However, it is also the case that cultural views of parenting and the intervention of the state in family matters have considerably transformed over the recent years. Following the arrival of New Labour in power in 1997, a range of measures supporting the combination of paid work and family life have been introduced. ‘New Labour’s work ethic’ (Holden 1999) has persisted under subsequent governments, as also illustrated for example by changes of attitudes towards mothers, once encouraged to stay at home to raise their children and now increasingly vilified for doing so, particularly in the case of working-class and single mothers (Gewirtz 2001; McRobbie 2007). However, employment rates among mothers remain relatively low, with interrupted careers and part-time work being common occurrences. The description of the Welfare state as a dual earner/female part-time carer (Crompton 1999) or male breadwinner/female part-time care provider model (Pfau-Effinger 2004) retains some currency.

*Secondary school teaching cultures*

As for welfare states, there are also some significant differences between England and France on a meso-social level, pertaining to school systems and teaching cultures (Malet and Brisard 2005). Historically, the French school system has been underpinned by a discinctive republican, universalist and secular ethos (Moreau 2011b, 2015; Osborn 2009; Planel 2009; Raveaud 2006). In a country where fairness tends to be equated with sameness, a centralised approach to educational policy-making predominates. The differentiation of the education system is broadly resisted, as encapsulated in the idea of the ‘*collège unique*’. However, this statutory and procedural homogeneity dissimulates some significant variations between schools in terms of prestige, student population and academic performance (Thévenin and Compagnon 2005; van Zanten 2012). In England, nearly three decades of neo-liberal policies aiming to increase competition between schools, combined with a view of social justice in which fairness is equated with meeting the ‘specific’ needs of each child and a more differentialist view of citizenship (Moreau 2011b, Osborn, 2009), have however led to a much more stratified education system, often described as a ‘quasi market’ (Glennerster 1991) and to an ever increasing focus on schools standards rather than on the formation of the ‘well-rounded individual’ (Moreau 2019; Raveaud 2006). As a result of the accumulation of various layers of policies implemented by successive governments over the years, the sector is composed of schools which are considerably diverse in terms of student population as well as of their status, specialism and ethos. As argued by Roberts et al, neoliberalism also redefines what represents ‘good teaching’ in gendered ways, in which performing ‘good teaching’ is increasingly expected to be aligned on performances of masculinities (Mahony and Hextall 2000; Skelton 2002). Yet ‘entrepreneurial policies and discourses also call for erasure of the gendered, classed, and raced nature of the labour of educating’ (Roberts et al 2017, p. 2), meaning that this alignment is rarely acknowledged.

Considerable cross-national divergences also characterise teachers’ recruitment and status. In France, becoming a statutory secondary school teacher requires to pass a national, subject-streamed competitive examination: the CAPES or the *Agrégation*, both primarily based on academic excellence in the subject. This contrasts with the greater diversity of teacher education routes, the lower level of consideration granted to academic excellence in the subject and the stronger focus on teaching skills observed in England (Moreau 2019; Malet and Brisard 2005). Furthermore, French teachers are employed by the state and enjoy a highly secure form of employment as civil servants. Their allocation to specific schools is the result of a complex, national procedure. Headteachers have traditionally enjoyed limited power over teachers, with *inspecteurs* conducting the classroom inspections of individual teachers which determine the pace of their progression on the pay scale. Career opportunities are limited and consist mostly of gaining the *Agrégation* for those who have entered the profession through the CAPES route, although teaching classes with a high level in the subject is also perceived as a form of career development. In contrast, English teachers apply to and are employed directly by their school, with the headteacher making decisions in terms of appointment and promotion, in consultation with the senior leadership team and the governing body. Such differences are echoed in teachers’ sense of identities and their actual work, with French secondary school teachers’ work narrower and centred on classroom teaching, and English school teachers faced with a broad range of teaching, pastoral, administrative and managerial tasks.

**The spatio-temporal regimes of secondary school teaching in England and France**

Before turning to teachers’ narratives, it is important to briefly recall the legal and contractual frameworks which regulate teachers’ working times in each country. In the case of French teachers, pastoral, administrative and management activities are mostly undertaken by other groups (Moreau 2011a, 2015; Malet and Brisard 2005). Related to that, the work of French secondary school teachers centres on classroom teaching and closely related activities (i.e. preparation and marking) – a focus also reflected in working time regulations. The 15 May 1950 Decree Law has established that the standard weakly teaching workload is of 18 hours for a *Certifié* (CAPES holder) and 15 hours for an *Agrégé* (*Agrégation* holder), and as little as 8-10 hours for the *professeurs de chaire supérieure*, with additional teaching hours strictly regulated and attracting extra pay. There is no legal or contractual obligation for teachers to remain in school outside teaching hours. National data show that French secondary school teachers work on average just under 40 hours (MEN 2013), once meetings as well as preparation and marking times are taken into account. It is worth noting here that, at national level, there are considerable variations across subjects, with teachers of arts and humanities subjects (all subjects in which women concentrate) doing longer hours as a result of marking times. However, men are more likely to undertake additional teaching hours (‘*heures supplémentaires*’) which attract additional pay (MEN 2008).

Interviews conducted with French teachers reveal three specific patterns characteristic of their spatio-temporal regime. First, their narratives highlight the limited cultural expectations which prevail when it comes to their presence in school outside teaching hours, with for example one teacher describing their working time outside teaching as ‘*du temps choisi*’ (*elective* *time*). This lack of expectation is also reflected in the absence of on-site office for teachers, with most ‘non teaching’ paid work conducted in their home.

Second, interviews with French teachers reveal that their timetables are negotiable and, indeed, negotiated. Headteachers, who have limited influence on teachers’ careers but overall responsibility for timetable allocation, can sometimes use these as incentives. Fabienne,[[3]](#endnote-3) for example, explains how in her school those volunteering for activities which are not strictly part of their role are rewarded with ‘preferential treatment with their timetable’ (‘*une petite fleur pour l’emploi du temps*’). Yet interviews reveal the benevolence of most headteachers, who often agree to teachers’ requests. It is not unusual for parents to negotiate (usually successfully) not to teach on days when pre-primary and primary schools are closed (typically, on a Wednesday) or to start teaching later in the day, even though they may be in full-time employment (as in the case of Christine and Marie). In some cases, such requests may even enable teachers to undertake another professional activity.

*My timetable is tailored to my needs, as I come from Toulouse and I have children. Overall, the headteachers and deputy headteachers always try to address the needs of the teachers… My working conditions are very, very good, in the sense that overall I have a very, very good timetable.* (Christine)

*I am happy with my timetable… There were a few skips at the beginning of the year, I have had to fight a bit so that my timetable finally looks normal, because I had the odd [teaching] hour in the middle of the afternoon on Wednesdays… So I managed to have this changed… On Tuesday afternoon, I am at [higher education institution]. I have asked to keep my Tuesday afternoon free, which [the headteacher] has agreed to without any problem. On Wednesdays, I don’t work.* (Marie)

A third pattern of French teachers’ spatio-temporal regime, as highlighted by the participants, lies with their ability to modulate their workload, usually without dire consequences career-wise. This, and the various demands associated with teaching different subjects and in different classes, would explain the considerable variations in working hours observed among participants (from a weekly average of 27 to 60 hours).

The spatio-temporal regimes of English secondary school teachers are in stark contrast with those of their French counterparts. In relation to legal and contractual frameworks, it is worth reminding that, according to the 1987 Teachers Pay and Conditions Act, secondary school teachers are expected to work a minimum of 1265 hours in school per year, spread on 195 days. However, this figure does not include time spent preparing lectures, marking and writing pupils’ reports, and the Act specifies that teachers are expected to dedicate the appropriate number of hours necessary to the completion of their broad missions (without additional pay). Participants to this research alluded to their continuous presence in schools throughout the day, the intensity of their working days, high levels of accountability, the importance of team work, and the polyvalence expected from them – all of which are likely to hinder English teachers’ capacity to modulate their working hours and to result in lower levels of flexibility and autonomy. English interviewees worked long hours, usually around 50 hours and sometimes over 60 hours according to their own estimates, echoing in this national surveys (STRB 2008). Descriptions of their working days reveal a continuous presence in the school on extended periods of time, with an intensive pace of work.

*I think I work far too many hours... basically, I get in at 8 or 8.15... Teaching ends at 3 o'clock. Then you might have a meeting until 4 o'clock. Then you are preparing your classes, so let’s say that is until 5 o'clock. Then I have my Head of Year responsibilities, which mainly involve, in the day, running around talking to the students. But at the end of the day, it is contacting parents... I just want more free time. That is the only thing. If I could improve anything, I would like more free time.* (Esther)

*… I arrive here at quarter past eight... I would say that from the minute I arrive here to the minute I leave, I don’t stop. Even when I am eating my lunch, I am dealing with other issues.* (Kathleen)

England-based research participants also enjoy limited room for manoeuvre when it comes to negotiating their spatio-temporal work regimes with senior managers, apart from the possibility of working part-time. Furthermore, their ability to plan their working patterns in a reliable fashion is limited by the polyvalence and availability expected from them. As one interviewee puts it, ‘There is no typical working day. It just doesn’t happen’ (Theresa). While this may be seen as an attractive aspect of the job and indeed has been one of the arguments used in past recruitment campaigns, it also impacts on teachers’ ability to plan their private commitments around their working days. It is thus maybe unsurprising that, while in both countries teachers’ spatio-temporal regimes represent the most recurrent theme in the interviews conducted, French teachers describe it as the most positive aspect of their job, their English counterparts as the most negative one. Such contrasts also emerged from the fieldwork conditions. It often took weeks, even months, to arrange interviews with English participants. Interviews were also sometimes interrupted by colleagues and students. In comparison, their French counterparts were usually quick to agree to an interview and often offered to meet over coffee or lunch, suggesting a higher level of control on their working times as well as fuzzy boundaries between home and work. This was particularly the case of French mothers, who sometimes looked after their children while taking part in the interview – a point to which this article comes back later.

**The gendered effects of the spatio-temporal regimes of secondary school teaching in England and France**

Interviews with French teachers highlight how a spatio-temporal regime associated with a high level of autonomy, combined with a welfare state broadly supportive of work-family balance, contributes to explain why the vast majority describe their work-life balance in very positive terms. It also provides an explanation for the fact that women teachers, including mothers of young children, are usually able to continue their career full-time and with very little interruption.

*...when they were small, I used a childminder… It wasn’t a problem… [Headteachers] try, in terms of the timetables, to get us a 9.30am starting time, or to get us to finish by 4.30pm. Well, they try to accommodate our needs as much as can be in relation to children.* (Marie)

*You manage your own working time. I find it very positive. Because if I want to stay up until 2 o’clock in the morning, I can. So I teach 17 hours [a week], so that gives me a certain freedom to organise myself outside these hours, so that’s positive.* (Carole)

The same factors contribute to explain why, according to national statistical datasets, only 9% of French teachers are employed part-time, usually for short periods of time and close to full-time (MEN 2013). Out of the four French teachers (all women) opting for part-time teaching, only two did so for family-related issues and both had demanding family circumstances (a new born for one, four young children for the other one; both had a male partner in a demanding professional career).

However, the flexibility of French teachers’ spatio-temporal regime was also found to contribute to fuzzy boundaries between paid work and other activities (Hoschild 1997). Detailed accounts of participants’ working days revealed how some aspects of teachers’ work (e.g. preparation and marking work) invaded the personal sphere, as they worked in the evening, at the weekend and often during the holidays. Reciprocally, private matters intruded their working days, which were often characterised by the juggling of and alternating between teaching and domestic matters. For example, some French interviewees spoke of running errands or dealing with personal matters between teaching hours or of picking up their children from school and cooking them a home lunch before bringing them back in school after the lunch break.

While these porous spatio-temporal boundaries characterise the lives of all French interviewees, this blurring was found to be particularly acute in the case of mothers, who were the more likely to use the flexibility of teaching to combine the demands of paid and unpaid work. As a result, their partners appear to be the ultimate beneficiaries of the spatio-temporal flexibility characteristic of secondary school teaching. This gendered use of flexibility has led some scholar to use the term ‘*emplois du temps maman*’ (‘timetables for mummies’), when referring to the allocation of family-friendly teaching timetables (Jarty 2013). While a gendered division of care and domestic work is not specific to this profession (Aliaga 2006), in the case of heterosexual French women teachers it is also likely to be exacerbated by hypergamic matrimonial alliances, as they often lived with men who were in professions attracting higher levels of pay than teaching, and often associated with an heavy workload and a lower level of flexibility.

*[Domestic work] that’s me, 100% me. Because my husband has become a manager.* (Catherine)

*I have a timetable that I can adjust… so,* de facto*, I am the one who is in charge all the domestic work, that’s for sure.* (Sabine)

The gendered uses of the flexibility of teaching, combined with an unequal division of domestic and care work, contribute to explain why the very few French teachers dissatisfied with their work-life balance are all mothers. The double shift of mothers who are teachers was also found to have an impact on their career. As mentioned above, for CAPES-holders, preparing the Agrégation is often perceived as the main, if not the only, career progression opportunity. Teaching in the *lycées* and more generally in the classes with the most advanced level in the subject taught does not represent *stricto sensus* a promotional path but is often perceived by French teachers as a form of career development. However, both paths require a significant temporal commitment, meaning that these options are often out of reach for those with significant caring responsibilities. Fabienne, for example, referred to her transfer from a *collège*, where she had spent seven years, to a *lycée*, as ‘going from one extreme to the other’ in terms of her workload. Both Eliane and Elise, who teach in a *collège*, explained their reluctance to move to a *lycée*, as ‘it would require an investment outside [school] which is significantly higher compared with the *collège*… I need to be able to combine [my work] with my private life’ (Eliane) As a result, this project was often postponed and possibly jeopardized, as interviews also revealed that teachers’ confidence in their subject expertise tends to decline over the years. Asked if she would like to teach in a *lycée*, Elise explained:

*… Maybe when [son’s name] has grown up a bit, when I will have more time... And as time passes, … I can’t imagine myself going back to a* lycée*, for reasons linked to my subject… I would have to put in a huge amount of work, and I don’t feel that I have the time now that I have the little one.*

Decades of intensification of English teachers’ work have had a well-identified impact on this group, including in terms of stress, burnout and retention, with only ambulance drivers experiencing higher levels of stress (Johnson et al 2005). This led some English participants to reject a ‘family-friendly’ discourse of teaching (such as Theresa, below). While others drew on this discourse, their narratives simultaneously highlighted its limits. For example several interviewees mentioned the possibility to leave school early. However, it is rather telling that ‘leaving early’ often appeared to be a fantasy rather than a seized opportunity, in a professional culture in which long hours in the school are often equated with commitment.

*I do love the working hours, the fact that we have so many holidays and that you can leave school at 3.15 if you wanted to. I do love that and that would be hard to leave for something else.* (Cynthia).

*The fact is that if I wanted to be it could just be a 9-3.15 job. If I wanted it to be that’s what it could be so I’ve got the opportunity where I want to come into school late and go home early. I’ve got the flexibility within my day.* (Carl).

*You know, I do look at some of the married women and those in particular who have children, and you know, I do sometimes say to myself, I don’t know how they can do this job, you know, to the extent that they do and still balance their whole life… I am getting home at 6.30 some nights, and I have only got myself and my partner to think about. But if I had to go home and feed three children and get them ready for bed, and then put them to bed and everything else, it would be a different matter.* (Theresa).

As in France, the spatio-temporal regimes of English teachers have been found to have some gendered effects. In particular, mothers often expressed a sense of struggle in combining paid work with domestic and care work, in a context where the latter is still perceived as ‘women’s work’ (Scott et al 2010). This sense of struggle was experienced on a practical level and, in contrast with their French counterparts, on a moral level, in a country where attitudes to mothers’ work are ambiguous (European Values 2009).

English teachers’ coercive spatio-temporal regime, combined with limited support from the welfare state in the reconciliation of work and family matters and a gendered division of domestic and care work, also provide an explanation for the number of mothers opting for part-time teaching or leaving the profession altogether. Indeed, 18% of secondary school teachers (DfE 2014), mostly but not only women, work part-time, often to care for the needs of a young family (Powney et al 2003). In the absence of an equivalent to flexible measures such as the ‘*emplois du temps mamans*’ enjoyed by French teachers, part-time work appears to be a strategy to increase the flexibility of teaching, rather than simply diminishing one’s workload. Indeed, part-timers tended to work every weekday and close or above a full-time, consistent in this with large scale surveys (Hutchings et al 2009; STRB 2008), although being part-time meant that they did not have to come in to school everyday. Sharon, for example, was employed by her school at 80% but worked about 50 weekly hours. As in the French case, the (mostly female) use of these flexibility measures was not without effects on women’s careers as there was no guarantee that ‘returners’ will get back to a job associated with similar levels of responsibility of pay and as some headteachers and governors have been found to be prejudiced against part-time workers (see, e.g., Moreau et al 2008). As well as a negative impact on gender equality in the workplace, a negative impact on the division of care and domestic labour was also visible, as exemplified by the following comment consistent with other studies showing that the division of domestic work becomes even more unequal when women work part-time rather than full-time (Gregory and Windebank 2000): ‘Oh, I do everything, yeah. I mean, that is a problem, because I’m part time I think my husband leaves everything to me, because I have that day’(Clare, 80%)*.* Like the ‘*emplois du temps maman*’, in heterosexual households, these ‘specific’ work patterns benefit first and foremost men, whose careers remain uninterrupted while women pay the price for motherhood.[[4]](#endnote-4) Asked if having a family had had an impact on his career, Neil explained:

*No. No, not for me. But for my wife ... She has taken a career break because she has had a couple of kids. It was our conscious, her conscious decision not to return to work until the kids went to school at five. So she was out for five or six years not teaching, because she wanted and we believed it was important for her to be at home looking after them. Since she has been back, she has worked some part-time and gradually increased that as they became more independent.* (Neil).

**Conclusion**

This article explores gender inequalities in the secondary school teaching profession in England and France and considers the condition of their formation, with specific attention to the spatio-temporal temporal regimes which characterise secondary school teaching and to their gendered effects. The spatio-temporal autonomy associated with secondary school teaching (high in France, more constrained in England), in conjunction with different conceptions of the welfare state (with the more interventionist and ‘familialist’ French approach of the welfare state contrasting with the neoliberal and individualist English approach) play out in ways which encourage in each country the emergence of norms of employment which are context-specific and gendered.

Most of the interview material cited in this article refers to the interviews conducted with women, in particular to those who are mothers, as the norms of employment adopted by this group varies considerably across national contexts. In comparison, the norms of employment adopted by men, whether they are parents or not, and by women who do not have significant caring responsibilities appear less contingent upon national and professional cultures, consistent in this with earlier research on women’s employment (Crompton 1999; Scott et al 2010). French mothers often adopt a ‘cumulative’ model, according to which they are expected and encouraged to adopt ‘male’ norms of employment *and* to become mothers. However, the higher level of spatio-temporal autonomy observed in France, combined with the hypergamic matrimonial alliances of women teachers, ultimately reinforce the imbalanced division of domestic and care work, in their disfavour. While English mothers who are secondary school teachers concentrate in the ‘mummy tracks’ (i.e. an often part-time and discontinued career path, usually with limited or no promotion; Schwartz 1989), their French counterparts deal with dual-sided effects of the ‘*emplois du temps maman*’ (Jarty 2013) and other flexible measures, which allow them to retain some ‘male’ norms of employment but contribute to a gendered division of domestic and care work. Meanwhile, in England, a lower level of support from the welfare state and a more constraining spatio-temporal regime imply that women teachers often have to ‘choose’ between prioritising their production or reproduction activities – a choice which is actually highly constrained and only imposed upon women, although two of the mothers in an heterosexual partnership were able to combine motherhood with an upward career path. While more research would be needed to understand these two cases, it should be noted that both had a higher level of qualification than their partner and that both partners were committed to the equal sharing of care and domestic work. This egalitarian division of domestic may constitute a prerequisite for mothers to remain in full-time employment and to have an upward career trajectory in a professional culture and national context which are less supportive of the reconciliation of work and family demands than has been observed in the French case.

In the introduction to this article, I have discussed how the teaching profession is often viewed as egalitarian, in the sense that gender is thought to be irrelevant to the careers of men and women teachers, or even as ‘feminised’ – a term used here primarily to refer to the view that women enjoy a ‘matriarchal dividend’ which conferr greater opportunities and preferential treatment to women over their male colleagues. While teaching represents a major sector of employment for women and men, it is also very clear from the statistical datasets available in both countries and in many others that, in education, women are under-represented in senior decision-making positions and more broadly in those attracting the highest levels of financial and symbolic rewards (DfE 2013; MEN 2013). Thus, the *mixité* of a profession, in the sense of a co-presence of men and women in significant proportions as is usually the case at secondary school level, does not automatically translate into gender equality (Fortino 2002), as men still benefit from the ‘glass escalator’ whether they are in the statistical majority or the minority (Williams 1992). The empirical data discussed in this article also challenge a view of teaching as ‘family-friendly’ in the sense that it would fit nicely with the demands associated with having a family. As well as being underpinned by heteronormative and maternal views of women, and lacking a problematisation of the association of women with domestic and care work (Delphy 1993; Dillabough, 1999), this view ignores the fact that this presumed ‘women-friendliness’ of teaching does not extend to women’s careers. The narratives of some women teachers, especially of those who are mothers and who are England-based, highlight how the spatio-temporal regimes of teaching are not always propice to ‘work-life balance’, particularly for English teachers and for mothers (and, *a fortiori*, for English teachers who are mothers). However, spatio-temporal regimes, in their interaction with national cultures and teachers’ ‘personal’ circumstances encourage, without determining, the adoption of gendered norms of employment. As argued by Holland et al. in their ethnographic study of teachers, school activities are framed by space and time. Yet, even in school contexts where teachers’ bodies are subjected to panopticonic surveillance (Foucault 1977), ‘people also seek to vary or alter spatial and embodied practices and relations’ (2007, p. 222).

Despite the problematic nature of some of the claims explored in this article, they remain powerful in shaping the way people, whether academics, policy-makers, practitioners or the ‘wider public’, think about gender issues in the teaching profession (Moreau 2011b; Skelton 2002). This and the fact that teaching represents a major sector of employment for women point to the need for further research deconstructing the way power operates in a profession often thought of as meritocratic or even as allocating privileges to women. The fact that these claims re also point to the need for including gender and other equality issues in the education and training of those who have a voice in teachers’ recruitment, deployment and promotion, including teachers themselves, school managers, governors and education policy-makers.

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1. For readability purpose, ‘French’ and ‘English’ refer to the country of residence rather than to the nationality. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Elite *post-baccalauréat* sections hosted in some *lycées*, which prepare students to *Grandes Ecoles*’ entry exams. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Pseudonyms are in use throughout the article. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Contrarily to what was observed in the French sample, among which only women worked part-time, some English male participants were working part-time. However, this was never for ‘conciliation’ purposes and, instead, seemed to be made possible precisely by the lack of caring responsibilities. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)