

Are part-time teachers discriminated against in French secondary schools?

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Introduction

This chapter is based on the findings of research carried out at the behest of the Women's Group of the National Union of Secondary School Teachers (Syndicat National des Enseignements du Second degré, SNES) and the National Union for Physical Education (Syndicat National d'Education Physique, SNEP), two branch unions for teachers belonging to the Fédération Syndicat Unitaire (FSU). Noting the inequalities concerning professional development and pay between women and men, as well as problems with harassment in certain establishments that affect women more than men, the Women's Group wanted action research to be carried out on teachers' everyday work, looking at the issues that arise from gendered social relations in terms of employment conditions and work experiences.

Among the findings of this research¹ a number of specific problems affecting part-time teachers emerged, which we shall examine here.² Although one might have thought that these teachers' choice of part-time working would help to improve their quality of life at work and make it easier for them to achieve a work–life balance they often mentioned problems and pressures related to status at their workplace. We hope to develop these little-documented aspects, which reveal organisational problems that, in our view, need to be brought into the open.

Teaching part-time in France: a very unusual working-time 'choice'

In several EU countries part-time working is the norm for women (80 per cent of women in the Netherlands, over 50 per cent in the United Kingdom and between 40 and 50 per cent in Belgium, Germany and Switzerland – Vogel

1. A general report has been produced on the research as a whole, with its two disciplinary standpoints: Cau-Bareille and Jarty (2014).

2. Only the data arising from the ergonomic investigations are presented here.

2012). The situation is different in France, where only 24 per cent of employees, male and female, work part-time. Part-time work is considered to be ‘atypical’ work (Maruani and Michon 1998) there in comparison with full-time work, which remains the reference. Indeed, part-time work is often stigmatised or disparaged. The general view is that it is mainly something for women (Angeloff 2009).

The education sector provides a good illustration of this state of affairs. ‘Voluntary’ part-time work, which is a particular instance of part-time work (see Box), is even rarer in this sector, accounting for just over one secondary school teacher in 10, with women (15 per cent) resorting to it more than men (5 per cent). This take-up is well below that in other European countries (Siniscalco 2002).

The general rule as regards part-time working in French public education

The rule permits the use of part-time employment for a portion of full-time working, namely 50 per cent, 60 per cent, 70 per cent, 80 per cent or 90 per cent. There are two types of part-time employment:

- **part-time working ‘by right’** to raise a child below three years of age, to provide care for one’s spouse, a dependent child or a parent or grandparent. There is also a right to part-time working for health reasons, on the advice of an occupational physician;
- **‘authorised’ part-time working** for reasons other than those just mentioned, such as preparing for exams, participating in training courses or carrying out a parallel professional activity. A request for such authorisation can be rejected on the basis of operational requirements.

In all cases, teachers can choose to reduce their working time temporarily, with the option of returning to full-time working when they wish to do so.

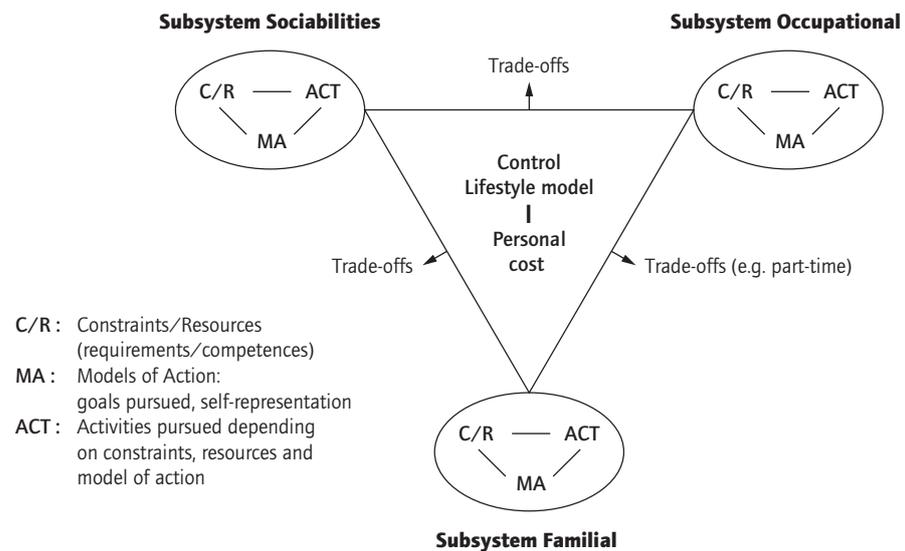
Reference: Law 84-16 of 11 January 1984 (Articles 37–40). Memorandum 2004-065 published in the Official Bulletin of the Ministry of Education No. 18 of 6 May 2004.

According to Ernst (2013), among permanent teachers working part-time, almost as many work half-time as work around 80 per cent or regular hours (22 per cent and 25 per cent, respectively). Shorter working hours tend to peak at 34 years of age and primarily concern women with young children (part-time working by right), which leads one to believe that part-time working is first and foremost a tool for juggling work and family life, which enables people to cope with a tricky phase of their life course. A second peak comes at the very end of people’s working life (authorised part-time working). Switching to part-time working is thus a way of conserving one’s health in the run-up to retirement, retaining the satisfaction of working without becoming completely exhausted (Cau-Bareille 2016).

Methodology

This research follows an ergonomic approach that allows us to pursue both a systemic approach to teachers' activities, situating them in their organisational and institutional contexts, and a historical approach to health and activity, which enables us to capture the development of forms of involvement in work in light of changes that may supervene in terms of health and in the private sphere. It makes use of the System of Activities model developed by Curie (2002). This model proposes a synchronic approach based on forms of subjectivity, in which everyone looks for strategies that will optimally reconcile the three areas of life in which they are involved – professional, familial and social – and therefore the pathways present in each of them (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Schematisation of the System of Activities model (after Curie 2002)



From a general methodological standpoint, this research – from which we only present the findings relevant to part-time working – is based on a qualitative approach. It was conducted in three phases: individual interviews with teachers at different schools, collective interviews with work groups by subject taught and individual interviews within the framework of a case study conducted at a secondary school. Overall, our sample of those who have experienced periods of part-time working in the course of their professional lives comprises 24 people: 18 women and six men.

Table 1 Number of teachers in our sample who have worked part-time during their career encountered at different stages of our research

	Proportion of part-time worked	Phase 1: individual interviews	Phase 2: work groups	Phase 3: secondary school	Total
Men	50%	1		1	2
	From 50% to 80%	1	2	1	4
Women	50%	7			7
	From 50% to 80%	7		4	11
Total		16	2	6	24

Findings

Reasons for seeking a working time reduction

Table 2 Reasons given by teachers who have worked part-time at some point during their careers, by gender (sample of 24 people)

Reasons for working part-time	Men	Women
Looking after young children	1/6	14/18
Significant health problems or tiredness	2/6	9/18
Enabling a colleague to do the whole of their service in the same school		2/18
Carrying out activities outside work	2/6	2/18
Desire for time off work due to professional trauma or injury	2/6	
Pedagogical reasons: helping them with their job	1/6	2/18
Preparing to take the 'agrégation**'		1/18

* The 'agrégation' in France is a competitive examination for the public education system, enabling the successful candidates to teach in secondary schools or in higher education.

Two main reasons for reducing working time emerged clearly from the interviews: 'looking after kids' and 'health problems/tiredness' (they could also be combined).

Parental part-time working predominates, mainly concerning women with children below three years of age. This is part-time working 'by right', which cannot be refused. Tiredness can be a significant factor in such part-time working, resulting from the difficulty of combining work with looking after young children. These findings are in line with the literature on part-time working (Ernst 2013; Jarty 2009).

Two men also put forward this reason, but invariably cite another reason, too: for one (39 years of age), it was 'carrying out another professional activity', while for the other (40 years of age) a pedagogical reason underpinned his decision: 'doing a better job as a teacher'. The dimension 'providing child care' is therefore not necessarily as pressing an issue for men as it is for women. This is a familiar finding (Jarty 2009).

Turning to authorised part-time working, it concerns mainly teachers at the end of their careers or people with health problems; less often, it concerns people wanting to prepare for competitive examinations or carrying on professional activities outside school or teaching. Two men at the end of their career also opted for part-time working in circumstances of ‘professional trauma or injury’. One (60 years of age) had had to deal with a pupil who had spit in his face, which left him feeling extremely distressed. The other (53 years of age) had been assaulted by a parent in the middle of a lesson. Working part-time is thus a way of distancing oneself from work. Such situations are not unusual in teaching and affect men as much as women. They inevitably affect people’s willingness to continue to work full-time.

Working part-time does not mean reducing one’s professional commitment

The vast majority (90 per cent) of the teachers interviewed said that they benefited from the extra time, which enabled them to prepare lessons more thoroughly, to engage in transversal projects or to do research. ‘Since I started working part-time, I spend much more time each week – when I’m not preparing for classes – doing research, doing lots of things; in other words, I’m still fully invested in the job. I don’t get the impression I’m doing it differently.’ (F, 49 years of age). For some, working part-time is an attempt to do their job better, in less of a hurry, improving their work–life balance a bit.

We also found that part-time working is rarely accompanied by a reduction in workload. ‘Personally, I find that the Ministry of Education does quite well out of the deal because in business part-time working is exactly that. In teaching, however, no way! To some extent, I say to myself, yes, I get a part-time wage, but I’ll also have a part-time retirement; and I’ll have worked full-time my whole life. When you’re working 80 per cent part-time, you’re soon back at full-time again because you realise that at 80 per cent you’re actually paid less because you still have a lot on your plate: you’re working at 100 per cent. Working part-time is a trap.’ (F, 41 years of age). This dimension of part-time working, already emphasised by Vogel (2012: 21), is rarely addressed or debated, even by the trade unions. The problem is that the choice of part-time working is all too often not informed and is beset with pitfalls. It would be a good idea for the trade unions to provide information on the possible risks.

Teachers working part-time therefore do not feel that they are ‘letting anyone down in terms of their professional commitment’, as Angeloff (2009) already noted. Nevertheless, they often have the sense that their head teacher or college principal considers them to have become to some extent ‘semi-detached’ from their work and their school’s concerns in the face of education reforms that are increasingly intensifying institutional demands and strains.

Part-time jobs that create difficulties in the current context of education funding cuts

From the Ministry's standpoint the reforms imposed on secondary education for several years now are contributing to an intensification of work ('doing more with less') on the part of everyone employed in the system, including both teachers and management and administrative staff.

Such multi-faceted intensification is linked to two main factors. The first concerns the human and financial resources allocated to educational establishments, which are being cut every year (the proportion of overtime in overall hours allocated to schools is increasing), thereby forcing teachers to work overtime. 'School principals really have to resort to overtime. It's important to understand that when schools or colleges receive overall allocations of hours they are told: OK, that's how many hours you're getting. The proportion of overtime hours is always quite high, let's say between 8 and 10 per cent. That means that if a school needs 100 hours, it isn't going to get 100 hours, it's going to get 90. So those [other] 10 [hours] that the students need, someone has to provide by working overtime. In other words, it's compulsory. However people working part-time can't do overtime. That causes huge problems for schools and colleges.' (F, 39 years of age).

The second is connected to the proliferation of testing in a context in which the human resources for administering examinations are not always provided for or paid. This means that schools have to rely on people's good will and teachers' availability to organise exams.

The difficulty facing upper management is to get teachers to accept such overtime when their workload is already substantial, while at the same time some of them are only working part-time; in other words, by their very nature they cannot do overtime. This inevitably gives rise to tensions.

Manifold consequences

By opting to reduce their working time such teachers are bound to face a range of consequences: tensions with management and with colleagues who have to make up for their 'lost' hours. This is likely to have an impact on the allocation of classes, their time schedules and their performance ratings.

Tensions with management

These teachers are always going to find it difficult to ensure that they really do work part-time. The view often is that they have more free time than their full-time colleagues and so they are often asked to perform additional duties, such as becoming head teacher, supervising exams or accompanying students on school trips. 'When someone asks to work part-time it's usually because they want to spend more time with their family. Many principals don't understand this. [They think] that this colleague gives fewer classes so they have more time

and that means it's OK to ask all kinds of "favours" from them, whether it be meetings or unpaid school trips. One of my part-time colleagues told me "no, no, there's nothing in writing about this stuff, in so many words". When you are on 80 per cent hours you get an 80 per cent salary; you're only supposed to do 80 per cent of meetings, after all, and since you have fewer classes you do fewer class councils. And as a result the principal takes a dim view of it and says, "Oh yes, her, you can never ask her to do anything!" (F, 36 years of age).

As a result of this, all kinds of 'reprisals' may ensue, as mentioned by 90 per cent of the part-time teachers we interviewed. They complain of being given 'rotten' time schedules since they switched to part-time working, because school principals consider them to be an 'adjustment variable', filling in the gaps in students' timetables, without taking their wishes into account. 'They took advantage of the fact I was working part-time by using me as a stopgap, also to stand in for other teachers because I was there less often, less than the others. I had to help out by filling in wherever necessary. I got the feeling that I was nothing more than a stopgap. I was always last in the queue, because it was always easier to draw up a part-time timetable.' (F, 41 years of age).

In fact, their switch to part-time working does not necessarily allow them to free up more days or half-days during the week. 'I don't think that working time is any more pleasant when it's part-time than when it's full-time. My first timetable in September meant that I came in every day; I did two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon.' (F, 54 years of age). This form of working time thus does not necessarily promote a better work-life balance. 'I was always saying to myself, "watch out, you'll have to be prepared, you mustn't waste time! In half an hour you'll have to start again". I knew that my day wasn't finished with the students, that is the hardest thing; in other words, to relax when you know that you'll have to come back again.' (F, 41 years of age).

These teachers ultimately find themselves in a paradoxical situation. The fragmentation of their working time makes it more difficult to strike a good work-life balance, even though that was the whole point of switching to part-time working. Hence the tears and the upsurge of anguish on reading the timetable at the start of the year. 'I recall certain scenes at the start of the school year at the back-to-school assembly, right when the part-time teachers find out that their timetables are all over the place and they react accordingly. If they read their timetables and it turns out that their hours are distributed without taking any account of the fact that they are working part-time plenty of tears are shed on the day before the first day of school. I saw the same thing this year, too. As it happens, the women who are most distraught are those working part-time whose timetable is scattered throughout the week. This reaction shows how important part-time working is to them; they opted for it because they don't want so many hours or whatever.' (F, 56 years of age).

Part-time working, which in any case entails a financial sacrifice, can in the end be very costly for parents, who have to get someone to look after their children every day when their working hours are so fragmented.

The same applies to the allocation of responsibilities. The teachers we interviewed have the feeling that they are given primarily to full-time teachers, to people 'you can count on' based on their commitment to the school or college and their willingness to take on additional duties. The criterion of presence in the workplace tends to trump competence. Around 90 per cent of the part-time teachers we interviewed explained that when they announced their decision to go part-time the management took away the 'good classes', the classes preparing for examinations (in France), but also that they do not necessarily get those classes back when they return to full-time working: 'I lost some classes when I switched to part-time [classes studying for specialist technical certificates], which I didn't get back when I returned to full-time.' (F, 42 years of age).

On the whole, these teachers feel that they are regarded and valued differently from when they worked full-time: 'one consequence of part-time working is a loss of status in the eyes of the management' (F, 32 years of age). Three of them reported that it resulted in a lower grading on the part of the school principal when they switched to part-time working. 'For me, the fact that I had children and worked part-time has put a brake on my career, especially at the start. Furthermore, my evaluations by principals when I worked part-time were not very good because I didn't put in as many hours as they wanted. I remember once that a principal put in my evaluation that he found it difficult to assess me because I was hardly ever there. I didn't appreciate his remark at all and I went to see him. He let the evaluation stand. I thought to myself that I had been penalised for having children!' (F, 43 years of age).

This kind of differential, even discriminatory treatment gives rise to ill-feeling, even resentment at work; sometimes people even give up working part-time. Such situations, which are tantamount to psychosocial risks (along the lines of psychological bullying), are rarely mentioned to colleagues or trade unions, leaving the teachers affected to deal with their problems alone. This gives rise to genuine suffering and feelings of injustice.

Tensions with colleagues

There is often pressure from full-time colleagues concerning the allocation of the most difficult classes. Teachers working part-time often find themselves having to accept more difficult classes in view of their extra capacity to recuperate after class. 'In negotiations on who gets what classes the following kind of thing comes up: you work part-time, you have fewer hours, surely it would be easier for you to take a few more fifth-form classes.' (F, 54 years of age). It may also happen that certain colleagues doubt their word in discussions of the subject being taught: 'my colleague quite often complains that I'm basically not there half the week, and of course that's right, I'm only there half the week. And when he wants to criticise me for something he can just say, anyway, it's easy for you, you aren't here half the week. ... Yes, it's happened that at a meeting he's said to me that, anyway, given the time I spend at the college I don't really matter!' (F, 60 years of age). This gives us a glimpse of workforces having to cope with heavier and heavier workloads in the

workplace. Part-time working is thus not just an individual challenge, but a collective and organisational one.

Are men and women affected in the same way?

Let us recall that the motives for switching to part-time working are different among men³ and among women. For most women the main reason is looking after children, less so among men (although it does exist), whose main reason is rather to enable them to engage in non-teaching activities. Health issues are cited by both groups.

Finally, if one analyses the impact of gender on the experience of part-time working it turns out that problems with working time and class allocation are as often found among men as among women. However, if part-time working taken up by women to look after young children is still an artefact of social stereotypes that legitimise it then that clearly differs from the situation faced by men. ‘Some of my colleagues in my subject have made comments ... there was some surprise, a little envy: “sure, financially he can afford to switch to part-time working”; also some surprise that a man in a household opts for part-time working. There were four of us in my subject at school; two of them took the view that my decision disrupted our teaching and I became a bit stressed ... the atmosphere wasn’t particularly pleasant.’ (M, 39 years of age).

Often their action is not really understood and can lead to some fairly unpleasant remarks on the part of colleagues or management. Similarly, switching to part-time working for reasons of tiredness, health problems or exhaustion meets with a lack of acceptance among men. ‘Part-time working is taken up mainly by two kinds of people: women, first of all, and older teachers, by which I really mean older men, because guys are getting into it. In the past, among us, male colleagues who opted for part-time working, were quite rare and people tended to take a dim view of it: “he’s switching to part-time working because he’s tired, he’s worn out, because the kids are getting on top of him!” They said that kindly. It was a bit degrading for men to opt for part-time working; sort of. There was a stigma attached to it for the younger ones. Now what is new is that we men take it because we’re getting worn out: this is the first generation that has to work past 60 years of age because now we don’t have much of a choice!’ (M, 60 years of age).

Conclusions

Contrary to what one might have imagined, working part-time in French public education does not necessarily mean an improvement in working conditions and a better work–life balance. In fact, it often marginalises teachers in a school system structured for full-time working and whose demands are changing as regards teachers’ presence at school. Behind closed doors in the workplace

3. Given the low number of men in the sample (6), these results are only indicative and require confirmation from a larger study.

inequalities exist that can have ramifications even for teaching itself (classes, grade levels), for time organisation (timetables) and for the mental health of teachers working part-time.

Capturing all of this requires seeing work up close, analysing developments affecting workplaces, meeting teachers, drawing them out to talk about their working time, which is something of a taboo subject among colleagues and may be the subject of tricky negotiations with management. With nowhere to talk about their problems in the workplace, tense or even abusive situations may elude local trade union representatives, who will then not be able to support the teachers affected.

We therefore consider it important to re-establish social dialogue within schools, not only in relation to working time, but also concerning the intensification of work that the situations of part-time workers highlight, criteria pertaining to decent work and the evaluation of teachers. This could be achieved by making trade unions and school and college principals aware of the issue of part-time working. As Angeloff (2009: 81) suggests: 'It is important to establish more personalised support for people working part-time because their very situation marginalises them. More fundamentally, this means that finally part-time working has to be regarded as a category in its own right, in conjunction with the full-time majority and no longer as something separate.'

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