

Written evidence from Plus Ça Change, Judith Murphy [MEW0001]

On my walk this morning, 3 days into the Summer holidays, I was thinking about what has actually changed in teaching since the Pandemic. These thoughts were perhaps prompted by my dress; I chose a dress that I last wore for one of the YouTube videos I made to support home learning a year ago. I remember how the school year ended on a remote 'high' and how happy and fulfilled I felt following the successes of online learning and teaching and all the IT skills I had developed and mastered. I also recall the joy from the level of pupil engagement and the fantastic work submitted online, which could be marked and returned using my own time management and working day pattern. This really suited my age and stage as my menopause symptoms continued to include lack of confidence, fatigue and restless nights.

Now sadly, a year on, I do not have the same feeling of professional achievement and I feel not only that my recent-found skills have regressed, but I equally feel exhausted and depleted from a very challenging year in schools an education. From the start of term last August, when the reality of returning to the classroom and pupil indiscipline set in, I developed increasing nervousness in front of large classes and worsening menopause symptoms that I couldn't easily manage in the school environment. In addition to this, Covid health & safety became the ubiquitous priority with restrictions leading to workplace isolation which further eroded my fragile self-esteem. In January, following a consensus from Occupational Health and my GP, I was diagnosed with severe workplace anxiety. I quit my post as a Modern Languages Teacher; Now following counselling and support I am gradually getting my confidence back but I will never return to full time teaching in a school. I currently work part time teaching Complex Needs in Midlothian, and although I am delighted to have this privilege, I am not the person I was a year ago and I am a long way from the IT sage and funny online tutor I'd become during lockdown.

I find it interesting how lockdown brought to the fore the necessity for more flexible of ways of working in schools and education, particularly for menopausal women. The 'by the bell' paradigm for the more mature female teachers was long in need of review, but it was never even open for discussion. It has taken a Pandemic to ramp this up a notch yet it has been there since women. I have been frustrated, and actually hurt, for some time now by the fact that I am going through a perfectly natural ageing process yet my profession does not really support me in any practical way. The menopause is undoubtedly the most complex and difficult part of my life thus far; The perimenopause phase which probably started in my mid-late forties was physically very tough with heavy periods, breast pain, fatigue and bloating, however the actual menopause which is my current state of being is mentally grueling. It is in fact extraordinary, and I am still trying to understand it and settle with a new sense of self. The menopause symptoms include insomnia, chronic anxiety, fear and abstract change of identity. I am going through all this yet I am still expected to function as usual in a static workplace environment with little or no exploration of how my profession can propose ways of working flexibly to support me through this. Surely this can't be right? I find it incomprehensible. I am highly skilled and highly qualified with an excellent teaching record of 20 years – for what? To be silenced and left to suffer unrecognised? What kind of example is this for modern society where all manner of rights have voice and adjustments made? It is even more incomprehensible and insulting in education as not only should we be modelling inclusion, but we should be teaching towards an appreciation of girls and women at all stages of their lives and careers. If I were to make some suggestions to shape a new way of working for menopausal teaching professionals they would include ;opportunities to deliver lessons from home, longer breaks to ensure adequate time for personal hygiene, a confidential, trained point of contact to help with anxieties and the option for secondments away from the school and the classroom. It is now two years since I first started talking about my menopause and to end on a positive note, the menopause also brings many benefits in wisdom, creativity, new direction and ultimately personal growth.

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