

**Crossing Boundaries: Exploring Midlife Experiences with Menopause in the UK
Secondary Teaching Profession**

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Abstract:

How do women teachers navigate the embodied challenges of menopause within institutional cultures that render such experiences invisible? This developmental paper explores the under-researched intersection of menopausal embodiment, professional identity, and institutional norms in UK secondary education. Drawing on Joan Acker's (1990) Gendered Organisation Theory and Glen Elder's (1994) Life Course Perspectives, the study focuses on women who experience menopause while working in UK secondary state schools. Using two-stage life history interviews, it investigates how women teachers negotiate the tensions between personal well-being and professional expectations – what this study conceptualises as 'border crossing'. By framing menopause as an embodied and institutional phenomenon, rather than a private or biological disruption, the study aims to theorise its implications for teacher retention, identity, and gender-sensitive policy. In doing so, it offers a conceptual framework for understanding how menopause may contribute to silent attrition and challenges the prevailing absence of menopause in education policy.

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1. Introduction

Menopause, a universal life-stage transition for most women¹, remains strikingly negligible in workplace discourse and organisational research despite its profound implications for women's professional lives (Tomlinson, 2024). Growing awareness shows how menopausal symptoms like fatigue, brain fog, and mood swings can erode confidence, disrupt performance, and contribute to career stagnation or early departure from the workforce (Hardy et al., 2018; Bazeley et al., 2022). This situation is concerning within the UK secondary teaching sector. Here, women constitute approximately 65% of the workforce (DfE, 2025), and where performance cultures demand emotional regulation, stamina, and visible productivity (Manuel et al., 2018). A survey revealed 59% of school staff reported menopause negatively affected their work, yet only 17% felt supported by their schools (DfE, 2024). Notwithstanding, menopause remains institutionally invisible in teacher well-being policies and largely absent from discussions surrounding professional identity and retention. This paper originates from this silence, seeking to understand how a significant embodied experience intersects with institutional cultures that refute its presence.

Against the backdrop of an ongoing teacher retention crisis in the UK, educational scholarship and policy have predominantly framed workforce sustainability through a career-stage lens (Huberman, 1989; Booth et al., 2021). However, this reliance on career-stage models is fundamentally problematic for understanding the experiences of menopausal teachers. Firstly, 'career-stage' applications are inconsistent (e.g., 6-19 years, 8-24 years) and oversimplify the entangled personal and professional lives of teachers, thereby obscuring embodied transitions like menopause (Hargreaves, 2005; Day & Gu, 2010; Goodson and Sike, 2001).

Secondly, and crucially, these models, like much traditional organisational theorising, are underpinned by an androcentric logic. As Acker (1990, p. 150-151) powerfully argues, the pervasive assumption of an 'abstract', 'gender-neutral', and 'bodiless' worker not only shapes organisational structures and theories of professionalism but also "obscures and helps to reproduce the underlying gender relations" by rendering women's distinct life patterns and embodied experiences invisible (Martin, 2004). This dual critique illuminates why existing frameworks are inadequate for understanding menopausal teachers' experiences. Hence, addressing these limitations necessitates a holistic life-course perspective that challenges the 'stereotypical and outdated male model of continuous labour market participation across the life-course' (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 684).

Broader organisational scholarship has begun to address the negative impacts of menopause on women's economic participation, related tensions in women's private and professional lives (Brewis et al., 2017; Verburgh et al., 2024), and explored how menopausal women navigate the 'ideal worker stereotype' across various occupations (Steffan and Loretto, 2025).

¹ In this study, "women" refers to individuals who self-identify as women. Although the study primarily engages with cisgender women teachers (assigned female at birth) undergoing natural menopause, it acknowledges that menopause is not experienced by all women – due to surgical, medical, or premature reproductive changes – and that not all individuals who experience menopause identify as women. Gender and embodiment are understood as socially constructed and lived in diverse ways, and the study is attentive to how intersecting factors such as age, culture, class, race, and sexuality shape women's experiences. This framing centres participants' own language, reflections, and identities, without assuming a fixed or universal account of womanhood or menopause.

However, the distinct experiences within the teaching profession remain notably under-explored in qualitative research. The demanding and public-facing nature of UK secondary teaching, with its rigid and patriarchal organisations, presents unique contextual pressures warranting specific investigation (Brown, 2019).

Therefore, this study aims to explore how women teachers in UK secondary state schools navigate the embodied challenges of menopause within institutional cultures that render such experiences professionally invisible. Drawing from the Gendered Organisation Theory (Acker, 1990) and informed by Life Course Perspectives [LCP] (Elder, 1994), the study conceptualises menopause not just as a biological or private event, but as a temporally situated, embodied phenomenon that unsettles dominant professional norms. Additionally, the sensitising concept of ‘border crossing’ is introduced to explore moments of disruption, dissonance, or disclosure as teachers’ embodied experiences confront institutional ideals of composure, continuity, and control (Blumer, 1954, cited in Bowen, 2020; Clark, 2000).

This developmental paper proposes two key contributions. First, it offers a conceptual reframing of teacher retention by introducing a conceptual lens that centers embodied disruption of menopause as a structuring tension within professional identity, challenging disembodied career models and theorising menopause as an institutional phenomenon. Second, it seeks to generate practical implications for developing more gender-sensitive educational policies and practices, contributing to a sustainable teaching workforce by highlighting menopause as a critical tension between biographical and institutional time, particularly relevant amidst the intensifying retention crisis.

2. Literature Review and Preamble to the Conceptual Framework

2.1. Beyond Biomedical Understandings to Embodied Life Course Experience

Discussion surrounding menopause foreground its biological aspects, with essential medical findings accurately documenting hormonal changes and psychological symptoms (D’Angelo et al., 2022), which are vital for clinical understanding and care. However, solely relying on biomedical perspective to explain the entirety of the menopausal experience can be reductionist. This monolithic focus, if not contextualised, risks perpetuating a body-mind dualism (Descartes, 1984), treating complex embodied changes primarily as a set of isolated physical events. Price’s (2015) Bodymind theory challenges this by asserting the inextricable link between mental and physical processes, recognising that menopausal symptoms are integrated into a person’s holistic embodied experience that profoundly shape their cognition, emotion, and identity (Steffan and Loretto, 2025). This is particularly salient in teaching, which requires emotional and cognitive engagement (Price, 2001). To this extent, researchers called for a biopsychocultural approach that, incorporates critical biological knowledge while underlining the interplay of psychological and sociocultural factors, thereby acknowledging the diverse lived experiences reported in organisational research, which vary with job demands, support, and the engagement of work, health, and family domains (Hardy et al., 2019; Brewis et al., 2017)

That said, the LCP (Elder, 1994) is highly appropriate for analysing these diverse, contextualised, and embodied experiences as they unfold over time. Its principles (*lives in historical time, timing of transitions, linked lives, agency, life-span development*) allow menopause to be understood as a dynamic life transition, of which timing and experience are intertwined with personal history and background, and individual agency (Steffan and

Potocnik, 2023; Brewis et al., 2017). However, traditional LCP applications risks under-theorising gender and power (Moen, 2011), potentially neutralising gendered constraints, thereby marginalising embodied experiences central to women's lives. Therefore, this study adopts a feminist-inflected LCP to explore how menopause is experienced and reflected upon by women teachers over time and within institutional settings. The approach enables attention to the embodied and contextual nature of menopause (RQ1), how women reflect on the social perception of their experiences within school environments (RQ2), how these insights shape their continuing decisions and identities within gendered organisational cultures (RQ3), and how they evaluate their adequacy of workplace support (RQ4).

2.2. School as Gendered, Ageing, and Performative Workplace

While a feminist LCP situates menopausal experiences within individual trajectories, a critical examination of the UK secondary school as an institutional context is equally vital. Schools, like other workplaces, can be understood as 'gendered organisations' through Acker's (1990) viewpoint, positing that organisations generally are not neutral spaces but are structured around an abstract, disembodied 'ideal worker', or in this context, an 'ideal teacher' norm. This is particularly paradoxical in the teaching profession, where female numerically dominate, yet operates under the structures, career pathways, and notions of professionalism that retain masculine-coded assumptions (Blackmore, 2013). In other words, the 'ideal teacher' reflects expectations of unwavering composure, continuity in performance, and bodily control, attributes intensely demanded within UK's increasingly high-stake accountability culture (Towers et al., 2022).

Additionally, Steffan and Loretto (2025) found menopausal women across occupations caught in a 'paradox' of challenging this ideal worker stereotype while being constrained by it, leading to masking symptoms. Such embodied realities of menopause directly conflict with this expected professional performance. Shildrick (2018) suggests, bodies perceived as 'unruly' or unpredictable can disrupt normative workplace ideals. The menopausal bodymind thus becomes a site of tension against the disembodied 'ideal teacher', whose professional identity is performatively enacted (Price, 2015; Butler, 2006). These dynamics are compounded by gendered ageism, which stereotypes equating ageing with declining competence, resulting in institutional invisibility of menopause (Targett and Beck, 2022). The DfE (2024) finding that 63% of female teachers 'had not discussed [their symptoms] with someone in their line management chain and [even] did not plan to do so' starkly illustrates a culture of silence, which may contribute to 'silent exclusion' and impact retention (Steffan, 2021). Recognising the school as this complex, gendered, and performative space is crucial for an investigation of how menopause is experienced and perceived by women teachers within institutional and relational contexts, while also challenging androcentric norms embedded in educational organisations.

2.3. 'Border Crossing' as an Analytical Lens

To understand how menopausal women teachers navigate these embodied life course experiences (Section 3.1) within the challenging and gendered school context (Section 3.2), this study employs 'border crossing' (Clark, 2000) as a key sensitising concept (Blumer, 1954, cited in Bowen, 2020). This concept refers to the dynamic negotiation of socially constructed and permeable boundaries, particularly relevant for teachers whose personal and professional lives are deeply entangled (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). The 'entanglement of

work, life, and health pressure’ underscores the constant boundary work menopausal women undertake (Steffan and Loretto, 2025, p. 116).

For menopausal teachers, ‘border crossing’ involves navigating: the body/work border (embodied experiences permeating professional tasks); the private/public border (managing symptoms in the classroom or around colleagues); and the voice/silence border (decisions around disclosure or coping mechanism). The sensitising concept of ‘border crossing’ thus serves as an analytical tool to examine how teachers enact *agency* (Elder, 1994) within the structural constraints of the *gendered school organisation* (Acker, 1990). It helps illuminate the strategies, tensions, and identity work involved in maintaining a professional self while experiencing a significant personal life transition (Steffan, 2021).

3. Research questions:

1. How do women teachers experience menopause within the culture and demands of schoolwork?
2. How do women teachers reflect on the ways which their menopausal experiences are perceived within the school environment?
3. How do these experiences and reflections inform their decisions about disclosure, role engagement, and career trajectories?
4. What support do women perceive as meaningful or lacking in managing menopause in school settings?

4. Methodology

This exploratory study is grounded in an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1994; Berger & Luckmann, 1966), seeking to understand the subjective meaning individuals ascribe to their experiences of menopause within the secondary teaching profession. It draws on feminist epistemologies, prioritising women’s voices, acknowledging co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participant, and emphasising ethical considerations of reflexivity and care throughout the research process (Stanley & Wise, 1983).

A qualitative life history approach is employed due to its high appropriation in capturing the nuanced, temporal, and situated experiences of menopausal teachers (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). It allows for an exploration of the transition embedding within their broader life narratives and career trajectories, aligning with the study’s life course perspective.

Purposive and snowball sampling is used to recruit approximately 15-20 participants. The sample² considers women who self-identify as currently experiencing or experienced (peri)menopause while working as a teacher in UK state secondary schools.

Data is collected through two-stage semi-structured life history interviews. The first interviews use a life grid tool to help map key life and career events alongside menopausal experiences, facilitating rich recall and contextual understanding (Parry et al., 1999). The

² Although many participants are anticipated to be in their midlife years (40-60 years), the primary inclusion criterion is the experience of the menopausal transition itself, allowing for diverse ages of onset and duration.

second interview, conducted after initial reflection, allows for deeper exploration of emergent themes and offer an opportunity for respondent validation (Woodiwiss et al., 2017).

Template analysis guides the data analysis process (King & Brooks, 2017). An initial template of priori (set of) codes would be developed directly from the premises of literature review and conceptual framework. This template would be applied flexibly, allowing for the refinement of existing codes and the incorporation of emergent themes that arise organically from participants' narratives, consistent with the interpretivist and feminist commitments outlined. Ethical procedures, including informed consent, ensuring anonymity, and secure data management, are strictly adhered to.

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