

Japanese elementary school teachers' professional experiences of long working hours

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This study is an in-depth investigation of the experiences of a small group of elementary school teachers in Japan, who have among the longest working hours in the world. A total of eight teachers from four public elementary schools volunteered to take part in this study. Its design is descriptive-qualitative, using an in-depth, semi-structured interviewing approach which is well-suited to understanding complex academic and social phenomena. Through field visits and interviews, a number of demands were identified that place considerable stress on teachers, all of which relate to extra-curricular expectations beyond the core roles of planning, teaching and assessment. Few resources are available to help cope with these demands, leaving teachers overwhelmed and exhausted, and frustrated as they have little recourse to affect change. The findings should serve as a warning of the risks to teacher well-being.

Introduction

International studies report that teaching is one of the most stressful occupations (e.g. Desrumaux et al., 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). One of the major stressors for teachers is long working hours (Bannai, Ukawa & Tamakoshi, 2015). Long working hours potentially increase physical health risk factors (e.g. Iwasaki, Sasaki, Oka & Hisanaga, 1998), mental health risk factors (e.g. Bannai et al., 2015), and professional performance risk factors (e.g. Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016). One country where teachers are at particular risk is Japan, with Ikuta (2019) finding that school teachers had the longest working time across 34 countries and regions, at 53.9 hours per week. Japanese teachers have longer working days, shorter breaks, and shorter sleep times than teachers in England, Scotland and Finland (National Institute for Educational Policy Research, 2019). Although teaching is a highly valued and respected profession in Japan (and perhaps because of this reason), teachers are expected to devote their lives to their jobs, which is seen as a calling rather than a career choice (Mason, 2019).

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2016), over 5000 public school teachers in Japan are suffering from overwork and are on a medical leave of absence from their teaching careers due to related mental illness. *Karoushi*, or 'death by overwork', is also a serious problem among Japanese teachers, and while under-reporting means that the prevalence of work-related death and illness is largely unknown, more than 60% of elementary (primary) school teachers in 2016 exceeded an average working day of 11 hours, exceeding the government criteria by which a worker's death can be attributed to overwork (Seno, 2017).

Because of the important role that teachers play in communities, and the well-acknowledged impacts that overwork has on their working lives, there is considerable international research attention on teacher working conditions. However, the focus on teachers in Japan is less prominent, and is generally quantitative in nature. One reason is that it is extremely difficult for teachers in Japan to speak critically of their workplace, for fear of backlash not only from their employers, but from wider communities (Mason, 2019). Further, there are considerable challenges in researching teachers in Japan, ironically due to their long working hours that often prohibits participation which requires a time and energy commitment. Therefore, this qualitative study provides a unique glimpse into the working lives of teachers in Japan, helping to better understand the demands of their jobs and how they cope with those demands within the cultural contexts in which they work. Specifically, the study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the major demands and challenges on elementary school teachers experience during long working hours?
2. What resources, if any, do teachers have access to in order to cope with these demands?

Working conditions are having a serious impact not only on individual teachers in Japan, but the education system more broadly, with fewer young people wanting to enter teaching as a career and more teachers leaving early (Bannai, Ukawa & Tamakoshi, 2015), putting pressure on teacher supply. Therefore, understanding the realities of what is contributing to teachers' heavy workloads, and the efficacy of support available, is of paramount importance to ensure sustainable working conditions.

Elementary school teaching in Japan

Japanese elementary schools provide six years of education for students aged from six to twelve (Grades 1-6). The core curriculum consists of Japanese, social studies, mathematics, science, life studies, music, arts and handicrafts, home economics, moral education, and health and physical education. While English has now been added to the elementary school curriculum, at the time of data collection it had not yet been introduced. One teacher is assigned to one class, generally consisting of around 30 to 40 students, and the teacher is responsible for the teaching and assessment of all subject areas from Monday to Friday (MEXT, 2018).

MEXT (2018) stipulated four major roles for teachers in regards to their teaching of the curriculum: lesson planning, teaching, assessment, and professional development. While all of these roles would be familiar to teachers across the world, in Japan professional development has a formalised and mandatory position within schools, in the form of *jugyou kenkyu* or 'lesson study'. Lesson study consists of observations of colleagues lessons as well as school-based, in-service training conducted by senior teachers (Matoba & Sarkar Arani, 2005). Lesson study is tailored to meet the interests of teachers by involving them in planning and observing lessons to solve pedagogical concerns in an effort to refine instruction and improve student learning (Sato, Tsuda, Ellison & Hodge, 2020).

The elementary school curriculum promotes not only academic skill development, but also physical activity practices, such as through sport events and mini-marathons, and positive social characteristics, such as through the daily lunch program (Sato, Tsuda, McKay, Furuta, & Kajita, 2020). The purpose of the lunch program is for students to gain an understanding of nutrition, practise table manners, prevent picky eating, and practise role-sharing and self-control. Students take turns in rotating groups to complete serving and cleaning tasks, which helps to teach students how to work with other classmates and also contributes to the welfare of the classroom (Tsuneyoshi, Kusanagi & Takahashi, 2016). Additionally, when academic classes end, students are assigned to clean the school classroom and building in small groups (Cooke, 2005). The classroom teacher is responsible for managing and monitoring these routines as part of their daily duties (MEXT, 2018).

Teachers also have a range of roles beyond the curriculum, and for elementary school teachers these are divided into five main categories (National Institute for Educational Policy Research, 2015). 'Morning work' involves daily morning meetings with teachers and other members of staff to discuss classes and individual students. 'Office work' relates to administrative duties, with teachers responsible for management of supplies and accounts. 'Student guidance' involves proactive activities to build relationships with students, such as greeting them at the gate as they enter the school, but also reactive measures in response to unsafe or inappropriate behaviour. 'Communicating with local residents' may include "responding to queries from local residents in the vicinity of the school" (p. 4) as well as attending community social and sporting events. Finally, 'grade and class management' may involve planning school events and managing regular newsletters to parents.

Communication between home and school is an important part of the Japanese education system. During the first semester of each year it is customary for teachers to visit the homes of each of their students in order to get a better understanding of their family situation (MEXT, 2009). Throughout the year, communication continues through each student's individual communication notebook, which is sent home daily, and messages sent between home and school may extend beyond academic issues (OECD, 2010). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) praises this aspect of Japanese education as 'a story of sustained excellence', noting that "teachers follow the students through the grades, and because they are involved in their students' lives outside of school and are in constant communication with the parents, they are accountable to the parents in a unique way" (p. 146). While indeed this may be seen as one contributor to Japan's high level of academic success, the high levels of expectations are not sustainable for teachers.

Conceptual framework

The job demands-resource (JD-R) theory captures complex phenomena in an employee's career that influence his or her well-being through the interaction of job demands and job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2014). *Job demands* refers to the physical, psychological, social, or organisational aspects of an individual's job that require physical

and/or psychological effort and cost (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001). The other side of the model deals with *job resources*, defined as the physical, psychological, social, and organisational aspects of the job that (a) are functional in achieving work goals; (b) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, or (c) stimulate personal growth, learning, and development (Bakker, 2011). Alone, job demands are not necessarily negative, but when resources are not available to help meet those demands, this can interfere with an individual's ability to achieve professional growth (Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling & Boudreau, 2000). Further, when resources are not adequate to meet demands, it can also impact an individual's personal life, upsetting the work-life balance necessary to help prevent health problems including mental illness (Lunau, Bambra, Eikemo, van der Wel, & Dragano, 2014).

The JD-R theory has been applied to studies across a variety of national and occupational contexts that have provided strong empirical support for its proposed model (Dicke, Stebner, Linninger, Kunter & Leutner, 2018), including numerous studies involving teachers. There exists an imbalance between the demands placed on teachers, and the resources available to cope with them, burnout and exhaustion can result (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). There are a number of resources identified in the literature as specifically effective for teachers in helping them meet the demands of their job, and individual (teacher) and organisational (schools) resilience are found to play a role and assume responsibility in teachers' occupational stress (Brouskeli, Kaltsi & Loumakou, 2018). For example, De Neve, Devos and Tuytens (2015) investigated the role of teacher autonomy, while Kwakman (2003) showed the importance of social support from colleagues. Runhaar, Sanders and Yang (2010) focused on transformational leadership and how leaders' values and mentorship can stimulate and motivate teachers' professional development. These and other resources are vital for ensuring balance in teachers' working lives (Simbulaa, Panarib, Guglielmic & Fraccarolid, 2012). Indeed, in a study of over 800 teachers in Finland, it was found that even when demands on teachers were very high, resources were able to act as a buffer to diminish the impact of those demands (Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti & Xanthopoulou, 2007).

While the current body of literature provides important insights into the job demands of teachers, the authors are not aware of any major study that involves school teachers in Japan as central participants. Thus, the authors make a unique contribution to the knowledge body through a focused exploration of the demands and resources of teachers within the sociocultural context of Japan, from which further research can be built.

Methods

The research adopts a descriptive-qualitative design, using an in-depth interviewing approach (Seidman, 1998) which is well-suited to understanding complex academic and social phenomena. The use of multiple field visits and semi-structured interviews that involved verbal exchanges with Japanese elementary school teachers was an ideal opportunity for teachers to reflect on and articulate their professional experiences.

Teachers were conveniently selected from four public elementary schools located in three metropolitan cities in the Kanto region. The selection of the participants involved, after following the required ethics and consent procedures, soliciting nominations from elementary school teachers who self-reported as working long hours, and who were willing to discuss their work environment. A total of eight teachers voluntarily consented to take part in this study. Pseudonyms of the eight participants and some limited characteristics are indicated in Table 1.

This paper reports on one part of a larger study of Japanese elementary teachers' professional experiences (Sato et al., 2020; Sato, Ellison & Eckert, 2020). Data collection took place during a series of field visits to participants at their respective workplaces by the lead author during December 2017 through May 2018. While the interview schedule included questions relating to a diverse array of aspects of participants' professional experiences, this paper focuses on participant data related specifically to issues surrounding their working hours. To help support understanding of teachers' experiences, a range of supplementary artefacts were collected during the school visits to complement the interview data. This included samples of teachers' lesson materials, class monitoring charts, and professional development materials.

In order to prepare the data collected in Japanese for analysis and reporting in English, a cross-cultural translation technique developed by Banville, Desrosiers and Genet-Volet (2000) was applied. The technique involves a group of researchers proficient in both languages working individually and collaboratively in order to ensure that meaning is retained through the translation process. In this case, the process began with three Japanese-English bilingual doctoral researchers individually translating the interview transcripts and the supplementary artefacts. Later, they formed a committee with an established researcher to critically compare and discuss their translations to ensure that the meaning of the original items is preserved, making edits as recommended. Finally, all members were sent a copy of the completed translation for final comment and critique.

In order to analyse the translated interview transcripts, a constant comparative analysis method was used which involves the reduction of large qualitative datasets by coding and recoding data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). By constantly comparing data within each interview, and across participants, the researcher is able to categorise codes (Boeije, 2010), in our case meaningful narrative phrases that relate to either job demands or resources. In this study coding was conducted by the lead author, and reviewed by the third author as well as two peer debriefers, to avoid potential researcher bias.

Results and discussion

Table 1 shows an overview of an average working day for each of the participants, who collectively spent an average of around 15 hours in their schools each working day. Additionally, based on their commute time, the teachers are spending less than ten hours at home on an average weekday. Our participants self-identified as working long hours, and while their working conditions are not unique, being among the 60% of elementary school teachers who work more than 60 hours per week, they do represent the high end

of the scale, being in the top 3% of teachers in terms of their time spent on school campus (Seno, 2017).

Table 1: Characteristics and working conditions of participants

School code	Name (pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Teaching experience	Arrival time*	Departure time*	Hours at school*
A	Ishimori	33	Male	11 years	7:00	23:00	16
A	Ochiai	31	Male	9 years	7:00	22:00	15
B	Iki	35	Male	13 years	7:00	21:00	14
C	Tachikawa	27	Male	5 years	7:00	21:00	14
C	Tochigi	40	Male	18 years	5:30	19:00	13.5
C	Yokota	31	Male	9 years	7:15	23:00	15.75
D	Fujita	26	Female	2 years	6:30	22:00	15.5
D	Sagawa	25	Female	2 years	7:30	22:00	14.5

* Usual weekday working hours as reported by participants.

Our first research question explores the demands that contribute to teachers' long working hours. Table 2 is a joint display which names each of the demands identified in the analysis of the interview data, along with a participant count that can facilitate meaningful contextualisation, and a participant quote that provides a brief description of the demand as provided by the participants (Guetterman, Fetters & Creswell, 2015). The open-ended and participant-driven nature of the study means that the demands raised are likely not an exhaustive list, but a reflection of the issues that were most prevalent in the participants' minds at the time of the interviews, and thus likely those which present the most pressing challenges to their daily teaching lives.

As shown in Table 2, the majority of demands were raised by more than one participant across more than one school context, with the one exception being field trip preparation. Interestingly, no concerns were raised about the demands of planning, teaching, or student evaluation, with all demands related to extra-curricular tasks. This is reflected in international data which shows that despite having significantly longer working hours compared to other OECD countries, actual teaching hours are below the international average (OECD, 2010).

All eight teachers who were involved in the study reported five common demands, and while the sample is small and not representative, the recurrence across teachers in four different schools with a range of levels of experience does suggest that these demands may be considerable challenges for elementary school teachers more broadly. However, there is limited mention of these specific challenges in the research literature, and in policy discourse regarding working conditions. Indeed, most attention in the literature on teacher workload in Japan is given to extra-curricular activities, although this is a more prevalent concern for teachers in junior high school and high school (e.g. Mason, 2019), and as such not mentioned by the teachers in this study. Indeed, because junior high school teachers have longer average working hours, they are usually given more attention both in the media and in research than elementary school teachers, and as such the demands raised

Table 2: Demands raised and discussed by participants during interviews and field visits

Demand	Count(a)	Text example
Daily exchange of student-teacher diaries	8 (3)	I had to give various academic assignments and asked my students to write reflection papers ...how they met goals and objectives of math, reading, physical education as well as classroom duties. I also gave comments and feedback to my students. (Iki)
Lesson study (as defined earlier)	8 (3)	When I observe other teachers' lesson studies, many teachers are required to participate in post-lesson study discussion from 5:00 pm to 7:00 pm. Then, they returned to write lesson study evaluations and give feedback to them. (Tachikawa)
Student guidance	8 (3)	I had students with behavioural problems. I would say they had aggressive behaviours and their parents did not care about them at home. I did not want to step into their private life but I know I need to step in as part of <i>seikatsu shido</i> , because I am their classroom teacher. I should serve as their father sometimes. After school, I had to patrol around the student's hometown on bicycle, in arcades, train stations, around 7-8 pm and then return to school. (Yokota)
Lunch and cleaning duties	8 (3)	I need to monitor when students serve lunch to other classmates. To make sure they do not get burned fingers and hands. I also need to check stains and food allergies ... (Also) I have to re-clean my classroom. I think not all of my students clean effectively, because of their developmental age (Ochiai)
Sports festival	8 (3)	I am organising sports festival held every October. We had to train how to dance and <i>kumitaiso</i> (b) with my students in the evening. September is a tough month, with the beginning of the new semester and preparing the sports festival at the same time. (Ishimori)
Teacher mentor duties	4 (2)	I need to mentor junior teachers about school administrative works including professional development sessions. I need to provide useful tips and conduct <i>nemawashi</i> (c) or getting consent forms from teachers and administrators. (Tochigi)
Field trip preparation	1 (1)	I have to prepare and organise field trips for all students. I need to find transportation, create emergency contact lists, earthquake and disaster emergency plans, plan meals, activities ... It is overwhelming. (Iki)

(a) Number of the eight participants who raised and discussed the demand (number of the four schools at which participants are based). (b) A group gymnastics activity where students use their bodies to make different shapes, such as human pyramids. (c) An informal process of quietly laying the foundation for proposed duties or projects, through conversations with various people.

here are given much less attention. The only other issue that does gain some attention in Japan, particularly through the media is that of Sports Festival, although the attention has largely focused on the physical impact of the various activities on students (*Asabi*, 2019), and not on the impact it has on teachers. This provides further justification for the need to investigate the demands of elementary school teachers, given their unique experiences separate to other sectors.

In response to the second question regarding the resources available to teachers to help them cope with the demands of their jobs, we identified four resources, again not likely to be an exhaustive list. We also note that discussions of demands exceeded that of

resources, as dictated by the participants themselves, and this is likely to be reflective of a natural negativity bias that reflects the stronger psychological effect of negative events and situations than positive ones (Baumeister, Finkenauer & Vohs, 2001). Two of the four resources raised by the participants were social in nature, although there is a wider influence of collegial support compared to support from principals, which was a resource noted only by one participant. The other two resources were psychological in nature, related to teachers' personal desires which they felt assisted them in coping with the challenges they face.

Table 3: Resources raised and discussed by participants during interviews and field visits

Resource	Count(a)	Text example
Collegial support	5 (4)	In general, I appreciate all support from colleagues. They give me corrective feedback in positive ways. My colleagues spent time and efforts for improving my lessons and lesson study plans and assessments. I appreciate them. (Fujita)
Desire to be a better teacher	3 (3)	I am a beginning teacher and would like to improve my pedagogical skills. I believe that I should practice pedagogical skills and improve my observational skills at the same time. (Sagawa)
Desire to change working culture	2 (1)	There are hierarchical relationships between senior and beginning teachers. I was told by senior teachers that I should teach this way, because all teachers should follow traditions. To me they are from 'the old school', but not me. (Fujita)
Principal support	1 (1)	I am learning about the meaning of leadership and concepts of school administration from the principal. Sometimes, I have to study and take administrator's exams and tests. I receive support from him. (Tochigi)

(a) Counts are as defined in Table 2.

Among the reporting and discussion of job demands and resources, a number of salient themes were identified across the data set. The following discussion introduces those themes, bringing in the voices of the participants and reflecting on the existing research literature.

Overworked and exhausted

The most obvious concern arising from this study is the clear imbalance between demands and resources. JD-R theory suggests that even when demands are high, adequate resources can offset the negative impacts those demands may otherwise have. Unfortunately for teachers in this sample, they are not only faced with considerable demands, they have few resources available to support them in meeting those demands. This has left teachers feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. Teachers were concerned that they may develop psychological distress and mental health problems during their professional services, and expressed little hope for the future in light of demographic trends.

I know that some teachers have mental health issues. I think overworking behaviours may risk teachers' health. Japan is one of the most depopulated countries in the world. I believe that it has a 1 to less than 2... something.... birth rate. We overwork, because the content of our professional service has not been changed much in the last several years.

This means that we have more tasks year by year, but the number of teachers is declining. It is tough. (Tochigi)

Indeed, the future for teachers in Japan is not promising, and in concert with the phenomena of depopulation, the birth rate of Japan has now decreased to 1.41 (World Bank, 2019). With an ageing population and low birth rate, the Japanese government estimates that the population may shrink by 32% by 2060 (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2007). Thus, school districts are hesitant to hire staff, increasing the number of in-service teachers, in order to keep the student-teacher ratio in balance, a reality that has been chided by many teachers (*Mainichi*, 2016). Indeed, staffing shortages adversely affects teachers' work environments in various ways, such as reducing their personal time, and making it more difficult to recover from work-induced fatigue (Bannai, Ukawa & Tamakoshi, 2015).

I struggle to keep work and family balance. I think last time I saw my baby was last week. When I came home, I could not play with him, because he was already sleeping. My wife is on maternity leave. Now is still ok, but I think we need support from our parents. The teacher shortage is a challenge, but I am not sure how long I can keep up this professional life. I am really thinking about graduate school and working at an university, I may be able to have better work and family balance. (Ochiai)

Important to note is that no physical or organisational resources were reported by the teachers. While some education jurisdictions and schools in Japan are putting in place initiatives to help improve working conditions for teachers, such as using time cards to regulate start and finish times, reducing the length and number of meetings, or hiring support staff (MEXT, 2017a), it appears that teachers in this sample, those that have among the longest working hours in the country, are not working in situations where these initiatives are being implemented, very likely compounding their workloads.

Resources as demands

All participants are classroom teachers responsible for a different class at various year levels, so they need to develop grade-specific pedagogical skills (Okumura, 2017). Teachers were comfortable teaching certain academic subjects such as reading, math, and science in their classrooms. However, they experienced difficulty in specialised subjects such as physical education and foreign languages. Thus, they recognised the importance of *lesson study* to enhance their learning through sharing ideas and resources with other teachers. The opportunity allowed teachers to expand their thinking and understanding of theory and practices in elementary education (Sato et al., 2020). In this way, lesson study can be seen as a resource that, according to Bakker's (2011) conceptualisation, is a resource that is (a) functional in achieving work goals, and (b) stimulates personal growth, learning, and development. What it does not do, however, is (c) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological cost.

Honestly, I think post-lesson discussion is important, but it is time consuming. More specifically, lesson study assessment is quite challenging, because I had to create guidelines of what and how to observe and assess lesson study. Once I created assessment charts, I have to share with my colleagues and discuss it. (Iki)

It is very telling that the analysis of participants' narratives resulted in the two forms of formalised support for teacher development, *mentoring* and *lesson study*, being framed not as resources, but as burdens (ie demand) on their time and energy. So, for example, while Sagawa noted that the attention to career development meant she felt that "this is a good school to begin my career", she ultimately felt "a little overwhelmed and would like to have a balance of family and work." Indeed, the obligations attached to lesson study were particularly extensive.

When I observe other teachers' lessons, many teachers are required to participate in post-lesson study discussion from 5:00 pm to 7:00 pm. Then, they return to write lesson study evaluations and give feedback. Professional development is so important, but scheduling is quite difficult. I believe this caused teachers' overwork. (Tachikawa)

In Japan, teachers often have difficulty coping with the professional and emotional pressures of professional learning, as was also seen in a Dutch study (Jansen in de Wal, van den Beemt, Martens & den Brok, 2020). Through the imposition of extra tasks to build professional expertise, without accounting for the impact on other areas of professional practice, resources that are put in place to assist teachers actually become demands, further upsetting the balance that the JR-D model requires for teacher well-being. It is vital in addressing this imbalance for "school districts and teachers ... to question why they must expand their professional development roles" (Fujita). Indeed, the teachers across this study reported strongly their belief that professional development was a major contributor to their overwork, and that it must be restructured and reconsidered.

Lack of flexibility and freedom

Despite their concern for the impact of their current and future working conditions on their own and others' well-being, teachers had little autonomy to enact any change. For example, several teachers expressed a desire to take home student-teacher diaries, enabling them to work from home. Although this would not result in a decrease in working hours, teachers still felt that this would improve their working conditions. However, this was not permitted by school authorities because the content of the diaries is considered confidential and thus cannot be taken off school grounds.

In my school, teachers are not allowed to withdraw and carry out their students' diaries outside of the school. Honestly, I have time dilemmas with exchanging students' daily diaries as it is the tradition of this school, but I could not reduce my duties, because I had to follow the *Gakushu Shido Yoryo* (Course of Study). (Iki)

The *Course of Study* for elementary school issued by MEXT (2017b) is a set of fixed teaching standards for all schools across ten learning areas, covering content and sequence of learning. While school districts use student-teacher diaries to complement the official aims of the Course of Study, they are technically "not a part of core academic subjects, so I want to grade the assignments at my home" (Sagawa). Regulations across the schools, however, meant that teachers had a "hard time reducing long working hours" (Iki). Teachers felt that flexibility of professional freedom might enable them to reduce their working hours, but without adequate input into their own working lives, they felt

frustration and stress. This lack of autonomy was also seen in the case of lesson study, which was also one of the demands common to all participants.

At my elementary school, teachers do not have choices or flexibility about their schedules. I see that lesson study is a historical and traditional part of the professional culture at the elementary school. But I think that is a problem; teachers do not have an opportunity to raise their voices about the professional development system. When senior teachers say how the professional development should be run, all teachers should follow. That is a problem (Fujita).

Teachers' sense of their ability to control and impact their professional environment is crucial for developing and sustaining well-being, although this is challenged in situations where there is a high level of institutional regulation (Webb & Sheeran, 2005). This autonomy "requires supervisor's understanding and acknowledging their subordinates' perspectives, providing meaningful information in an informational manner, offering opportunities for choice, and encouraging self-initiation" (Deci et al., 2001, p. 931). Among the participants in this study, autonomy is desired but not afforded, in part due to culturally entrenched hierarchical structures, which leads to the next theme.

Hierarchical structures

From a cultural perspective, Japanese beginning teachers are guided by senior teachers who act as mentors, and are expected to show unquestioning respect and submission to authority (LeTendre, 1994). Thus, while mentorship aims to support less experienced teachers as they navigate the early phase of their career, they also serve to preserve the age-related hierarchies that are part of wider Japanese culture, although which are arguably stronger in the older generation (LeTendre, 1994).

I am mentoring the beginning teachers. I tell them what subjects they need teach and how to prepare their lesson studies. When my mentee choses content I am not familiar with, I request them to change the lesson study topics, because I have to mentor and give feedback. I know this is hierarchical ... but I need to do my job ... (Tochigi)

Fujita and Sagawa, the youngest of the participants, questioned the stress resulting in the hierarchical nature of mentorship. For them, it meant not being able to voice their opinions, and this was expressed in the preceding theme, where Fujita shared the reality that "all teachers should follow" the advice of senior teachers. Due to their status as less experienced teachers they are cautious not to break established social norms. Indeed, they had concerns that using independent coping strategies may be construed as immature and selfish, threatening harmony in social relationships (Cross, 1995).

I was taught that I was required to read past lesson study reports from the past five years by senior mentors at my school. I feel that senior mentors pushed me to follow the lesson study history and tradition, but they do not give me any choices when I prepare my lesson studies. One example is that I wanted to create a student centred-learning environment, but senior teachers wanted me to use teacher-centred teaching. (Sagawa)

Fujita believes that the answer is for school districts to disrupt the imbalanced power relationships between senior and junior teachers, and to recognise their different

perceptions of overwork. She reported that “senior teachers push me to understand the history and traditions of professional development. This makes me annoyed”. However, the burden of mentorship and lesson study activities was not limited to junior teachers, and teachers across the spectrum of experience level are struggling with their workloads, but at the same time are unable or unwilling to oppose the power structures that set them.

Wearing many hats

There are considerable expectations placed on teachers to not only teach the curriculum, but also to be involved, if not largely responsible, for the personal development of their students. This extends to eating manners, hygiene and cleaning skills, which are part of the daily routine, as described earlier. While the benefits of such programs are well-acknowledged in Japan, and praised in media across the world, it is the reality that these tasks are complicated, and students, especially those in the younger grades, may not have the ability to complete the tasks effectively. It is generally left to classroom teachers to re-clean classrooms after students leave, who may express concerns about hygiene and safety, taking on the role undertaken by janitors in many other parts of the world.

I know that lunch serving is important, but I am worried about germs and dirt that may cause food poisoning ... I have to re-clean after all the students leave. This is not a simple task to do, and is quite time consuming. (Ochiai)

Teachers in Japan also take on a parent-like role, and this is particularly reflected in the explicit requirement to conduct student guidance, which in Japanese is derived from the terms *seikatsu* (life) and *shido* (to point out the path) (LeTendre, 1994). This involves elementary school teachers giving considerable attention to individual students' life circumstances, to affect their beliefs, lives, and moral values, and help them (and their families) solve various problems including those relating to family issues, poverty, and mental health concerns (Ono, 1964). This means that teaching is considered more than a job, and their influence is clearly not limited to the physical boundaries of the school, or within regular school hours.

I have seen that there are many students who suffer from academic pressures from their parents. Some students from 5th and 6th grades stopped coming to school. I know that these students' parents wanted them to attend private middle schools which combine middle and high schools so that these students do not have to take high school entrance exams, but it was competitive to be accepted. I needed to contact their families [because the parents never listened or paid attention what I said] and visit them. *Seikatsu shido* is not a part of the [official] curriculum, but I feel this is a part of moral education for my students. (Inaba)

Like with most of the other demands of the job, Inaba acknowledged the importance of the role, but also its contribution to long working hours. Across the interviews, teachers expressed concerns about their ability to conduct life guidance and lead students with various academic and social needs. They felt they were not prepared for balancing life guidance and teaching roles which caused long working hours at public schools, nor did they have the ability to prioritise their tasks.

Conclusion

Within a context where teacher supply and quality is being impeded by increasingly long working hours for teachers, the aim of this study was to investigate the demands placed on elementary school teachers in Japan, and the resources available to help them cope with those demands. The study identified five demands that were common to all of the participants working in four different school settings, with few resources available to help them cope with these demands. Teachers felt burdened by these extra-curricular demands, but not by their planning, teaching and assessment workloads, which is often the case in international research outside of Japan. This divergence from the trends seen in the wider literature presents a strong justification for a Japan-centred study to complement the mainly Anglo-centric research body. However, there is a common thread among teachers across studies who are overwhelmed and exhausted, threatening not only individual health and well-being, but also the quality of education and the supply of teachers. This is an issue that cannot be ignored in Japan or elsewhere.

While there are resources available to teachers to aid their professional development, in some cases they are having an adverse effect on teachers, who are given little autonomy in their roles, and little recourse to express dissatisfaction to those in authority. Thus, discussions of teacher roles must move away from the traditional top-down model, to be sensitive and responsive to teachers' needs and interests (Sato, Haegele & Foot, 2017). Teaching as a profession in Japan is highly complex, extending to a role beyond the confines of the school into broader communities, but in order to protect teachers, boundaries need to be set and sincere discussions should continue going forward concerning how to equitably balance the needs of students and communities, and the needs of teachers who are struggling to cope in intense and unsustainable working conditions.

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