Teachers, Twitter and tackling overwork in Japan

Shannon Mason
Nagasaki University, Japan

Excessive workloads are a concern for teachers across the world. Overwork puts pressure not only on the physical and mental health of teachers, but also on their ability to provide quality education to their students. Nevertheless, many teachers struggle under the weight of excessive workloads, and have very little input in the top-down policies that impact their everyday working lives. In Japan, where overwork is a pervasive problem, teachers and their allies have been using Twitter to share their stories and advocate for more manageable working conditions, and this has coincided with an increase in mainstream attention to the issue. This paper presents a qualitative content analysis of highly engaged 'tweets', to identify how one form of social media is being harnessed to bring wider public attention to an otherwise neglected educational issue. The study has implications for teachers in other parts of the world looking to develop their agency through social media advocacy.

Introduction

Excessive working hours can introduce a range of physical and mental health conditions for employees. Studies have related excessive working hours to increased risks of physical health problems (Hayashi, Kobayashi, Yamaoka & Yano, 1996; Iwasaki, Sasaki, Oka & Hisanaga, 1998), as well as mental health affects (Maruyama, 2017). Long working hours can also result in lower productivity (Collewet & Sauermann, 2017), lower employee motivation (Nakata, 2017), and higher rates of workplace injury (Dembe, Erickson, Delbos & Banks, 2005). Despite this, many developed countries struggle to provide employees with a work-life balance that supports prosperity for national economies, and at the same time supports the physical and emotional well-being of their workers.

Excessive working hours have long been a problem in Japan (Asgari, Pickar & Garay, 2016). In 1988, the *Labor Force Survey* found that approximately one quarter of all male employees worked an average of 60 hours per week or more (Morioka, 2004). A survey in 2006 showed no improvement, with a third of male employees working over 12 hours a day (Kanai, 2009). While the most recent international data show that Japan is outside of the top 20 industrialised countries in terms of annual working hours (OECD, 2018), there are serious issues with under-reporting in Japan, which is regularly cited as having among the longest working hours in the world (Lane, 2017).

Japan's culture of long working hours is epitomised by the existence of the term *karōshi,* for which there is no direct English equivalent. *Karōshi* is a term that was introduced to the common vernacular during the economic boom of the 1980s, to describe the increasing phenomenon of otherwise healthy young (mostly) men, who died due to sudden heart failure as a result of "excessive work overload" (Hosokawa, Tajiri & Uehata, 1982, in Kanai, 2009). In more recent years, *karōshi* has also come to include employees who kill themselves as a result of mental disorders caused by excessive working hours.

The rates of *karōshi* are difficult to determine, but data show that the problem is increasing. From 2011 to 2014, cases involving employees under thirty increased 45%, and cases involving female employees increased 39% (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2016).

There are deeply rooted cultural norms that make the issue of overwork particularly difficult to tackle in the Japanese context. "Working late has long been seen in Japan as a badge of corporate loyalty, repaid by employers in the form of ironclad job security" (Soble, 2016, para. 9). Employees are often required to show loyalty to their company by giving *saabisu zangyō*, a form of overtime which is rarely recorded or compensated for. A strong collectivist culture and strict hierarchical social structure means that few employees are willing to risk their jobs or social status by challenging these norms. This is particularly true because most companies recruit full-time employees directly from a pool of recent university graduates. The likelihood of securing a stable, full-time position decreases with age, and those who have already demonstrated a lack of loyalty and work ethic by leaving a company, are often met with suspicion. Thus, leaving a job can have a very real impact on an individual's future employment and financial status.

Teacher workloads in Japan

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Japan (MEXT, 2009) identifies four major roles of teachers. In regards to their subject specialisation, teachers are responsible for planning and teaching lessons, professional development including observing other teachers' lessons, assessing students, and self-evaluation. In regards to guidance and pastoral care of students, teachers engage in numerous activities including managing a home room, interviewing students and parents, visiting students' homes, and keeping class activity records and home communication booklets. Education and career guidance is also required, to assist in students' transition to and from each stage of schooling, and then on to university or the workforce. Teachers of older students will specifically be involved in career counselling, university entrance guidance, intensive study camps, and organisation of workplace experiences and internships. Finally, extra-curricular activities, such as coaching or leading after-school activities, and leading games and tournaments also make up a teachers expected obligations. MEXT (2009) acknowledged the difficulties of the job in the modern age, but notes that there are rewards (left unspecified) from being engaged in a career upon which high societal expectations are placed (p. 2).

Teaching is a highly valued profession in Japan, one that commands respect and a higher than average salary. Teaching is considered more than a job; it is a calling, one that teachers are expected to devote their lives to, and this means that there are extremely high expectations placed on them by parents, local communities, and society more broadly. The level of devotion is perhaps best illustrated by a case in 2014, where a veteran teacher faced intense criticism from some members of her community for not attending the entrance ceremony of her high school home-room students, taking the morning off to attend the entrance ceremony of her own child, who was beginning her first year of elementary school. She had followed the required procedures to take legally entitled leave

for the event, which is an important one in a Japanese child's life, one that is often attended by extended family. Although she had left hand-written notes to each of her students and their parents, who were greeted by other home-room teachers, it was not enough to appease some parents in attendance who chided her lack of ability and willingness to conduct her duties. The story made national news, with input from a local politician who complained that "she is lacking in appreciation of her duties as a home-room teacher, and also in ethics as an educator" (Baseel, 2014). Although there were also voices of support, expectations to put students above all else are still strong. Thus, the motivations of teachers who complain are often questioned, and many teachers may be reluctant to speak out openly.

Teachers in Japan have among the longest working hours in the world. On average, teachers in elementary schools work 56 hours per week, and 58 hours in junior high school. This translates to almost 60% of elementary school teachers, and almost 75% of junior high school teachers, working above the '*karōshi* line', a threshold determined by the Japanese government, where the risk of death by overwork significantly increases (Senoo, 2017). The threshold is set at 100 hours of overtime in any given month, or 80 hours of average overtime in a six-month period (Ichikawa, 2018), on top of the standard Japanese working week of 38 hours and 45 minutes. In a comparison of the working conditions of teachers in England, Scotland, Finland, and Japan, Japanese teachers again had the longest working days, alongside the shortest breaks, and the shortest sleep time (National Foundation for Educational Research, 2008).

Despite teaching time in Japan being lower than the international average, total weekly working hours are 15 hours above the international average (Table 1). Contributing to long working hours are extra-curricular activities, and to a lesser extent general administrative work, and lesson planning and preparation.

Table 1: Breakdown of teacher weekly working hours, Japan and international average

	Japan average weekly working hours	International average weekly working hours	Difference from international average
Teaching time	17.7	19.3	-1.6
Lesson planning / preparation	8.7	7.1	+1.6
Teamwork / collegial dialogue	3.9	2.9	+1.0
Marking student work	4.6	4.9	-0.3
Student counselling	2.7	2.2	+0.5
School management	3.0	1.6	+1.4
General administrative work	5.5	2.9	+2.6
Communication with parents	1.3	1.6	-0.3
Extra curricular activities	7.7	2.1	+5.6
Other tasks	2.9	2.0	+0.9
Total working hours	53.9	38.3	+15.6

(Data from 2013 Teaching and Learning International Survey. OECD, 2014)

Extra-curricular activities, known as *bukatsudō* or *bukatsu* for short, are school sporting and cultural clubs that are run for students, at school, but outside of normal school hours,

generally beginning in junior high school. Activities, such as baseball, soccer, dance, and music are lead by teachers, who supervise and coach students after school, on weekends, and during long vacations. School club activities over the past several years have gained considerable negative media attention, often framed as *bukatsu mondai* (bukatsu problem), or 'black' *bukatsu*, a pejorative term used to refer to exploitative companies and practices (Mie, 2013). Of the students across Japan who joined a school club in 2017 (and in some schools and regions this may be compulsory), over 90% had obligations on Saturdays, and around 65% on Sundays, with 22% participating seven days a week (MEXT, 2017). While students are not within the scope of this study, it is important to note for context that the impact on school club activities is not only felt by teachers, and that 59% of students have indicated that they feel "distressed" as a result of their participation (Mainichi Japan, 2017).

Agency and (online) advocacy

This study is guided by the well-established concept of teacher agency. Agency at a broad level is an individual's capability to 'make a difference'. Giddens (1984) defined agency as the deployment of

> ... a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others. Action depends upon the capability of the individual to 'make a difference' to a preexisting state of affairs or course of events (p. 14).

For teachers, being an active agent means making an "active contribution to shaping their work and its conditions" (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2015, p. 624). Teacher agency is important because it affects the implementation of institutional and national policies at the classroom level, with implications for effective teaching and learning (Tao & Gao, 2017, p. 346).

However, the reality for teachers in many jurisdictions is that the policies that affect them are often debated and developed at the top level and passed down, making them generally marginal players in decision making processes. Teachers are often "referred to as passive agents of the state who are expected to be 'persuaded and trained' to magically translate" policy visions in schools (Batra, 2005, p. 4). Teachers' "absence in the policymaking process creates a disconnect between the goals and design of education policy and the actual lived challenges of implementation" (Good, Barocas, Chávez-Moreno, Feldman & Canela, 2017, p. 505).

Emerging conceptualisations of teacher agency propose that it is not something that is held, but something to be achieved (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015). For this reason, some advocates of education reform have recommended teachers become 'policy literate', enabling them to become more active in the policy development process, rather than remaining passive consumers of policy (Poyatos Matas & Mason, 2015). Teachers are often in a vulnerable position however, because subverting official policy rhetoric can put their jobs at risk. Indeed, teachers in many schools work under ethical guidelines that prohibit them from making comment on government policy, such as through the media

(Shine & O'Donoghue, 2013). Thus, the ability of educators to contribute to open discussions about the decisions that will impact their own careers and lives, are further suppressed.

In recent years, social media have provided under-represented voices with platforms for advocacy, allowing direct communication to wider audiences, and if necessary under the security of anonymity. This study is guided by two tripartite models that provide a framework for how advocacy campaigns use social media. The two models differ in their terminology but are otherwise similar, presenting three ways in which users harness Twitter for their particular agenda: to distribute information about their cause, to reach out to people in order to build a community, and to call for action beyond social media (Guo & Saxton, 2014; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012).

High profile advocacy campaigns have seen "people who'd been traditionally left out of popular discourse … (use) social media to tell their own stories in their own words" (Cauterucci, 2016). In Japan, a case of *kar□ shi* in 2015 involving a young Tokyo woman bought considerable media attention to the issue of overwork, in large part due to social media. Midori Takahashi killed herself after spending months working more than 100 hours of overtime at a prestigious advertising agency, and after complaints to her supervisors resulted in harassment (Soble, 2016). Takahashi documented her daily realities on Twitter, which clearly map her deteriorating physical and mental health. While advocating for better working conditions was likely not her motivation for posting her tweets - they only came to prominence after her death - the memorialisation of her words have helped to bring a deeper and more human understanding of the problem.

Teacher working hours in Japan, particularly issues surrounding extra-curricular activities, have begun to appear more regularly and more in-depth in mainstream media in the past several years. It has been noted that the voices of teachers on Twitter have helped to bring broader attention to the issues they face (Uchida, 2017). Thus, how this formerly voiceless population has harnessed social media to bring wider attention to a complex and somewhat taboo social issue, is of particular interest to researchers both inside and outside of Japan. In the specific case of this study, the author aims to investigate the following research questions:

- What tweets concerning teacher workload in Japan have had the highest levels of engagement?
- Who is authoring these tweets?
- How are users harnessing Twitter to bring the issue into wider public discourse?

In a modern era where online media are increasingly impacting social norms, the investigation of Twitter data is both timely and worthy. While Japan is a unique country with its own particular sociocultural context, it provides an interesting case study because it has the highest teacher workloads in the world, there has been noted success in using social media in highlighting the issue, and because, as a non-English speaking country, their experiences are often left out of international discourse. Indeed, "half of messages on Twitter are not in English [and] Japanese is the second most used language" (Guyot,

2010), making the analysis and reporting of non-English content a unique feature of this study.

Methods

This study began with building a corpus of relevant public 'tweets', short messages of up to 140 characters (later increased to 280 characters) posted on Twitter (http://twitter.com). Twitter's advanced search function was used to search for references, in Japanese, to 'overwork', 'overtime', or 'working hours' of 'teachers' in 'schools'. Because the specific issue of extra-curricular activities was identified in the literature as a major contributor to teacher's workload in Japan, references to 'extra-curricular activities' were also sought. Inclusion criteria were set to ensure a sufficient number of recent and highly engaged with tweets, balanced with a desire for a manageable corpus to facilitate manual qualitative analysis. Thus, tweets were limited to those that were posted during the past two academic years (April 1, 2016 - March 31, 2018), which had observable engagement with at least 400 other users, through a combination of 'replies' (comments made in reply to a particular tweet), 'retweets' (when a tweet is shared with other users), and/or 'likes' (when a user indicates their support for a tweet).

Each tweet was given an individual code (T1 to T152), and a range of form characteristics (username, profile details, date of posting) were identified and entered into an *Excel* spread sheet. The content of each tweet, along with any images or links to external media were collected. Engagement metrics including the number of replies, retweets, and likes were recorded as of the final week of June 2018. Although engagement with a tweet generally occurs in the short period immediately after posting, the dynamic nature of social networking means that this number is not static, and is likely to have changed since the time of data collection.

The content analysis began with importing all of the retrieved content into the *MAXQDA12* software package (VERBI Software, 2016), which supports the qualitative content analysis of a range of data types in multiple languages. The data were analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process of thematic content analysis, beginning with multiple readings of and familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes, before producing the final report.

Results

What tweets concerning teacher workload in Japan have had the highest levels of engagement?

The data searches retrieved a total of 152 tweets that met the inclusion criteria. The data presented in Table 2 provides an outline of the features of those tweets, showing that the average tweet included 20 replies, was retweeted 2,890 times, and was liked 2,322 times.

Table 2: Engagement metrics of tweets about teacher workload in Japan (N=152 tweets)

	Lowest number	Highest number	Total for all tweets	Average per tweet
Replies	0	323	3,039	20
Retweets	154	52,578	439,208	2,890
Likes	205	58,627	352,905	2,322

Just under half of the tweets (n=71) attached additional media material in the form of images, other tweets, and links to external online content. The interconnected and dynamic nature of Twitter meant that in numerous cases the same media were shared by multiple users, while in some cases links to content were no longer active. Thus, included in the final analysis was an additional 78 artefacts: 61 images, eight online news articles, three tweets from other users, two online petitions, one blog, one teacher advocacy website, one link to a television program, and one link to a book.

Who is authoring tweets concerning teacher workload in Japan?

The tweets were posted by 86 different users of Twitter (Table 3), and while over 40% (n=26) of users did not provide any consequential information regarding their identities, many others provided enough information in their public profiles to gain some insights. The largest group of identifiable users were those involved directly in education, with 27 current teachers, two former teachers, one pre-service teacher, and one group of teachers accounting for over one third of users (n=31) and just over 40% of tweets.

Table 3: Authors of 152 tweets concerning teacher workload

User category	Users (N=86)		Tweets (N=152)	
	Number	%	Number	%
Teacher, current	27	31	56	37
Academic	9	10	28	18
Media organisation	4	5	11	7
Citizen, other (a)	5	6	9	7
Lawyer	3	3	6	4
Child of teacher	3	3	3	2
Teacher, former	2	2	3	2
Teacher, pre-service	1	1	2	1
Author (incl. books on workload)	1	1	1	<1
Doctor	1	1	1	<1
Parent	1	1	1	<1
Political party	1	1	1	<1
Politician	1	1	1	<1
Publishing company	1	1	1	<1
Teacher, collective	1	1	1	<1
Unknown	25	29	27	18

a. Users indicated a specific career or life situation without a direct relationship to education

Within the group of currently practising teachers, all but two chose to remain anonymous, with only some sharing a subject area or a general geographic location. Around one third

of users (n=29) included a reference to teacher overwork, overwork more broadly, or specifically the issue of extra-curricular activities, in their public introduction. 11 users provided a link to their personal blogs which in part or in whole address the issue of teacher workload.

In this sample, the users with the most followers were the four media organisations: *Yahoo News*, *Livedoor News*, national broadsheet *Mainichi Shimbun*, and Japan's national broadcaster *NHK*. All gave prominence to the issue of teacher workload by sharing their related news to their followers (from just over 350,000 to just over 2.5 million). However, only one tweet from a media organisation was in the top 60 in terms of its engagement. While the tweet with the highest level of engagement came from the user who identified as a doctor, all of the other top ten tweets were authored by teachers.

How are users harnessing Twitter to bring the issue into wider public discourse?

The thematic analysis identified six different ways in which the tweets in this sample contribute to the discussion of teacher workload in Japan. These themes are outlined below, bringing in relevant literature where appropriate, as well as translations of the tweets to provide illustrative examples. The tweets have been translated from the original Japanese by the author (a native speaker of English proficient in Japanese), and the translations were reviewed by a Japanese native speaker proficient in English. At times the English translations may not feel completely natural, but this is unavoidable to capture both the emotion and phrasing of the original text (Birbili, 2000). Because this study is qualitative in nature, and because the sample cannot be said to represent all relevant content, themes are not weighted and are presented in way that best narrates the findings.

Sharing statistics

In this sample, Twitter is used to share information and statistics from news and government reports, in an attempt to build wider awareness of the problem. As would be expected, these statistics revolve around the number of hours worked by teachers, with figures of 60%, 70%, and 80% of teachers exceeding the *kar□ shi* line cited. Government reports also show that weekend duties for junior high school teachers related to extra-curricular activities have doubled in the past ten years, and that teachers are not adequately compensated for their time leading club activities, which is seen as a volunteer position. While some users choose only to share links to the original report or news article, others add their personal commentary, as below:

> Today's Yomiuri Newspaper [image of article included]
> Teacher: Overtime of more than 80 hours per month leads to *kar□ shi*
> Council: Teachers' salaries are adjusted at 4%
> Teacher: That's overtime pay for about 8 hours per month, that's out of touch with reality!
> Council: If we pay for the actual hours worked, we would need a budget of at least 300 billion yen. Now that's not reality, is it?
> Teacher: ... Huh, what? #Workstylereforms
> (T19, Teacher)

Warning of the impacts

Some users shared their personal stories to provide a warning of the potential and actual impacts of teacher workloads, complementing the statistical data. Several news reports are shared about cases of *karōshi*, including one of a teacher who prior to his death had left a document on his computer that he had asked his colleague to read "if something happens" (T15). It says something of the realities of teachers' lives that some feel that death is imminent, as shown in this tweet, which also references the death of a colleague:

> The other day I got the notice of a colleague's death and went [to the funeral]. It seems that after overworking every day he went home late and collapsed at home and died just like that. The teacher who came with me and I talked on the way home, "We are close to *kar□ shi*, aren't we… If we die at home there won't be a worker's compensation payout", I muttered, and then felt empty. I had thought it was better to die at home, but I wonder if we have family then it might be better to collapse at school…
> (T13, Teacher)

To clarify, the reference to dying at work rather than at home relates to laws surrounding worker's compensation payments, which are less likely to be paid out to surviving family members if the death does not occur in the workplace.

As the conditions for teachers become more widely known, fewer are entering the profession and more are leaving prematurely, putting pressure on the teacher supply chain and ultimately on teacher quality.

> So we have reached the age where "there are not enough teachers".
> A frightening era where we can no longer talk of teacher "quality".
> By the way, up to now, there have been many people online saying "There are lots of people who want to be teachers! If you don't want to do extra-curricular activities, if you complain about unpaid overtime, then just quit and pass the job on to someone else!" Haha. (T147, Teacher)

> I have been observing female college students for nearly 20 years at the turn of this century. At first, there were many parents who told their daughters to go for a teacher's licence, but the number has decreased suddenly over the past ten years, and the number of times I've been required to guide teaching practice has also decreased. Basically, with the movement of the role of teacher toward black [an epithet discussed earlier], and especially in Osaka with its severe educational control, parents seem to have changed in their awareness. (T117, Academic)

The issue of teacher attrition comes alive in one case, with the following tweet posted by a user during their last week of teaching, who now identifies themselves on their public Twitter profile as being a former teacher:

> One more week until I leave work. I have loved teaching and finding new materials. The time spent with students in class was a wonderful and irreplaceable time. However, this is not enough to continue in the current state of education. Working 15 hours a day without a break, or for 30 consecutive days, you become a slave. For me it was impossible. I will quit.
> (T127, Former teacher)

It is sometimes those looking at the problem from the outside who make poignant observations that pique the interest of others. The voices of the children of teachers stand out in their emotion.

> My father was carried in an ambulance due to overwork. He has to stay in hospital. Forcing an unprecedented amount of work on one person, working from morning until night, Saturdays and Sundays, and the final result was collapse. What is a teacher's job? Is it a place to kill the body and mind? So frustrating. Dad, please rest now.
> (T97, Child of teacher)

> It's often said that high school teachers' working hours are so, so bad, but when my dad came home from school at 9pm the other day, and then went back to work again at 11pm, it made even me go pale.
> (T98, Child of teacher)

Appealing for humanity

The high pedestal on which teachers are placed is manifested in a lack of humanity applied to teachers. This has placed them in an extremely precarious position where they are required, either through explicit school policy or implied social expectations, to conduct an impossibly large number of tasks, and dedicate their lives fully and wholly to the education system. Among the tweets are highly emotional pleas for parents and society to see teachers as human, and to accord them basic human rights.

> Please give us teachers the right to rest. Please give us the right to lead a human life. A life at school 16 hours a day is abnormal. To the parent who calls the school at 10pm and says, "Why has Mr. XX gone home already?", what are you angry about? Shouldn't you question why the phone will even connect at 10pm?
> (T53, Teacher)

> ... Despair. Despair. I am a teacher with children. I became a teacher because I wanted to teach. Then one day the parents told me, "Please don't take a day off extra-curricular activities on Saturdays and Sundays". Umm, I work from Monday to Friday. I am exceeding the *karōshi* line. My body is only flesh and blood, when can I rest? …
> (T50, Teacher)

> Another complaint from a parent.
> They say, "organise more club-activity practice matches, increase practice time, don't take weekends off as the tournament nears".
> Teachers are not slaves.
> Teachers are not professional sports trainers.
> Teachers are not superman.
> To all parents, teachers are also "human". Please understand that.
> (T96, former teacher [at the time of data collection])

Speaking out to opposition and power

With an issue as topical as education in Japan, there are strong opinions from both those who call for and those who oppose education reform. In this sample there are cases of users identifying voices of opposition and challenging what they see as misguided and outdated attitudes.

> While leading extra-curricular activities in junior and senior high school, I feel that many students (and teachers!) think that in order to improve their music skill, they strongly feel, "I don't have a right to enjoy music, I must endure hard and difficult practice". What is the cause of this way of thinking?
> It's like a monk bearing penance in order to gain enlightenment. (T75, Teacher)

> At local government training "Is teaching 'black'"?
> I doubted my ears that those words came from the mouth of a top school committee board member.
> "Even if you do extra-curricular activities on Saturday and Sunday, you can go home early on weekdays, right? There are a lot of people working in general companies working from 7am to 11pm".
> If this is the thinking from the top, then nothing will change in schools.
> (T62, Teacher)

> A school teacher was brought to me. Upon investigation, it appears that he worked 320 hours of overtime last month. Divided over 31 days that's 10 hours every day. His family has fallen apart, his kids refuse to go to school, his wife has become ill, too. The principal, vice principal, and union don't understand, they told him, "In my day I worked more than that". (T152, Doctor)

Others call out directly those in power, particularly MEXT and the Ministry of Finance which sets the education budget, gaining a sense of agency that has not been afforded to them during policy development and implementation.

> Hello, Board of Education?? Hello, MEXT??
> Of course, you know, right?
> You're pretending not to see us, right?
> Over 70% of teachers exceeding the *karōshi* line (and they don't get paid overtime)- [Link to news article]
> (T79, Teacher)

> Maybe we should change the name of the Ministry of Finance to "Ministry of Destroying Education", or the "Ministry of Killing Teachers". If they are going to plan to reduce the number of teachers when there are already increasing deaths from overwork ...
> (T1, Teacher)

Strategising efforts

The nature of this study, which is an analysis of Twitter content and not the users who created it, means that it is not possible to determine with any certainty the motivations of teachers and their supporters for posting their experiences and opinions online. It is possible that some users find it cathartic to vent their anger and frustrations, and give no further thought to who might read their tweet or how others might engage with it. There is evidence, however, that some are using Twitter in a purposeful and strategic way. The issue of teacher workload moves to and from Twitter and other media channels. There are cases of user tweets being cited in a newspaper article, and that newspaper article being shared on Twitter, providing another source of information but also another opportunity for engagement. It is the academics and lawyers in this sample who are able to use their positions to contribute news articles, and as such are powerful allies for teacher advocates.

There are also examples of users engaging in discussions about how best to influence public opinion, and thus potentially, policy and practice regarding teacher workloads.

> Instead of saying
> "There is no overtime pay, and salary adjustment will only be paid to a teacher at 4% of their salary",
> I think the seriousness of the problem is clearer if you say,
> "Even if teachers work 100 hours of overtime, they will only receive 8,000 yen [approximately $72 USD at the time of writing]".
> If you want public opinion on your side, you need to find a way to talk to everyday people.
> (T3, Teacher)

Reporting progress

The tweets also provide some hope for the future through the reporting of progress. The extent to which social media discourse is influencing public opinion is difficult to determine, although it appears that the users themselves feel a sense of agency through their participation in online advocacy.

> The principal of a teacher I know is strongly enforcing a "weekend school club activity is forbidden" policy.
> He called in the teachers who want to work weekends and scolded them, saying, "Look at this newspaper article. Even MEXT is moving in this direction".
> Our actions are definitely spreading, little by little.
> (T111, Teacher)

> NHK is serious… A 40-minute live broadcast all about "black school club activities".
> The guests are Professor XX and myself. In full activist mode. Please share with us your opinions. [Link to television broadcast information]
> (T76, Academic)

> The council press conference made the news! I appreciate their [teachers'] courageous acts [in speaking publicly]. This is something everyday teachers can do. The voices of the people concerned must surely be loud. Work reform for teachers too!
> (T86, Teacher)

Discussion

The data collection and analysis procedures have shown that in this sample, teachers are the main contributors to the online discourse regarding teacher workload. For the most part, teachers choose to remain anonymous, meaning that they likely share the same concerns as teachers in other countries about repercussions for speaking out. The exceptions were two teachers who identified themselves by name, position, and workplace, as well as providing links to their own blogs, books, and/or seminars. With a public profile and presumably income from other sources, these teachers appear to be in a less fragile position in terms of their employment, and thus may feel more comfortable in sharing their opinions openly. They stand out as exceptions, however.

Also contributing to the sample was a wide range of users who have a vested interest in the plight of educators. This shows that concerns are not solely the domain of teachers, and other groups are also concerned about the impact of the problem on the education system, or on the issue of overwork more broadly. For the academics and lawyers who are highly engaged in the online discourse, they provide an important role in supporting teachers as respected and known (or knowable) professionals whose input may be seen as less subjective and thus more credible.

Some users appear to harness Twitter for the express purpose of advocacy in relation to teacher workload and other educational issues, and as such are developing their agency. In doing so, some have become mindful of the ways in which they can best contribute to the discussion and thus potentially bring about change. Further, the active interaction between Twitter and other forms of media both online and offline appears to play an important role in expanding their audience and generating further interest and support.

While most of the users are individuals (or individual corporations in the case of the media), many of the users with high-engagement tweets follow each other and tend to share each other's' tweets, suggesting at least an informal collaborative effort. In the case of the collective of teachers, the profile states that a "number" of public junior high school teachers use the account, with an express purpose of abolishing the forcing of school club activities on teachers. Interactions between teachers in similar positions may build a sense of solidarity, and this development of a social network in itself may help retain teachers in the field, as international research has shown (Mason & Poyatos Matas, 2015).

It would stand to reason that users with a large number of followers would command more engagement with their Twitter content than those with fewer followers. This is not true in this sample where the accounts of newspapers with a wide national following are less influential than individuals with a limited public profile and thus relatively fewer followers. It appears that other factors are at play when users decide to engage with a tweet, and teachers' voices appear to be of particular interest, perhaps because they provide a human face to the problem. The emotional investment of teachers appears to be repaid in terms of empathetic support from others, if only online, but which nevertheless may serve to validate teachers' dissatisfaction.

Six themes were identified to represent the ways being highly engaged with tweets contribute to the online discussions. Applying the frameworks proposed by Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) and Guo and Saxton (2014), users reached out to the public through the sharing of quantitative statistics, balanced with the sharing of personal stories. In developing a sense of community, users take a two-fold approach. On the one hand they invite others to sympathise with and understand their situation, often with emotional appeals and intimate insights into their daily lives. On the other, they refuse entry to the community of those who oppose, challenging their opinions and attitudes publicly and directly.

In this sample, calls to action are less direct and less obvious than might be expected based on the Lovejoy/Saxton, Guo/Saxton models, which notably are a result of analyses of English-language online content. Japanese society in general values low-context communication over high-context communication, and this influences how people communicate and understand messages both online and offline (Atsawintarangkun & Yuizono, 2014). This does not mean that action is not being called for, but the way in which is it expressed is less conspicuous and in keeping with cultural norms. The evident strategising, collaboration between users, and sharing across platforms has coincided with an increase in public discourse in broadcast and print media, and at least part of this can be attributed to engagement of the issue on Twitter. Japanese Twitter users are much more likely to be conscious of the potential for backlash if a campaign becomes too direct or aggressive. In a country that values "peaceful unity and conformity with a social group, with a commitment to cohesive community taking precedence over personal interests", threats to social harmony may have the effect of alienating potential supporters rather than drawing them in (Hirata & Warschauer, 2014, p. 7).

It is interesting to note that unlike large-scale and internationally known online advocacy campaigns which are often organised by a hashtag (a keyword prefaced with a # symbol, as in #blacklivesmatter), there are no recurring hashtags in this sample. During the data collection procedures a number of hashtags were noted (such as #bukatsumondai and #blackbukatsu, in Japanese), but few were included in the sample of highly engaged tweets. Hashtags have been an important tool in coordinating content in social media movements. A study of Twitter engagement in online health advocacy in the United States showed a significant and positive correlation between the use of hashtags, and engagement with a tweet (Saxton, Niyirora, Guo & Waters, 2015). Thus, the use of a coordinating hashtag presents itself as a potential way for teachers and their supporters to further develop their influence.

In this sample, there is one final theme that is an addition to the guiding tripartite model. This involves Twitter users reporting on the progress of the issue of teacher workload, both in their own efforts but also more broadly. This is important because it builds a sense of hope that "springs from anticipations of possible future solutions to perceived present problems" (Hjorleifsson, Árnason & Schei, 2008:378). While the extent to which the Twitter discussions have contributed to the evident broadening of discussions beyond the platform is unclear, what is clear is that users themselves feel that they are making a contribution, and that encourages them to continue with their efforts, as advocates and teachers who otherwise have passion for education and those at the chalkface.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to better understand the issue of teacher workload in Japan, and in particular how the issue is being presented to the wider public through social media, in this case Twitter. While every attempt was made to identify tweets with a high level of engagement, the nature of Twitter is such that its content is not neatly indexed, with content moving, disappearing and changing as time progresses, and thus the sample is not representative. Further, the data collection, analysis and interpretation crossed two

languages, a research design which "involves researchers taking translation-related decisions that have a direct impact on the validity of the research" (Birbili, 2000). While all care was taken to minimise the risks to validity, the researcher's status as a non-native speaker and cultural outsider will inevitably bear inherent biases. Finally, this study focused on content and not the people who contributed the content, and an investigation into the Twitter users themselves would bring a further level of depth to the research body. Despite these limitations, the study provides an insight into the ways in which Twitter is being used to address a problem of significant national importance in Japan, with implications for how teachers in other jurisdictions might use online platforms for their own advocacy campaigns.

The findings of this study suggest that Twitter provides a vital outlet for teachers to voice their concerns regarding their working conditions, giving them a sense of agency that they may not otherwise be afforded. Not only is it a safe space for them to share their personal experiences, it also offers validation of their dissatisfaction through hearing similar stories from others, and with it a sense of solidarity. The stories told directly by teachers give humanity to a problem that is largely reported quantitatively, and this is possibly one reason the issue has gained more public attention in recent years. While teachers are the main contributors to the discussion, other groups are also powerful allies to their cause, including academics and lawyers who provide a 'credible' bridge to other more mainstream media. The path to improved working conditions for teachers in Japan is not likely to be short or smooth, but social media offers an opportunity for teachers and advocates to engage in the debate, which when harnessed effectively, can influence positive change in the real world.

Acknowledgment

I would like to send a sincere thank-you to Professor Itsuro Inage at Nagasaki University for reviewing the translations included in this paper, and for bringing a native-speaker perspective to the study.

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Shannon Mason is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at Nagasaki University. After a career as a language teacher in Australia, she now teaches pre-service teachers in Japan, and conducts research on a variety of educational issues, including teacher attrition and retention, and working conditions in schools.
Email: shannon.lee.mason@gmail.com

Please cite as: Mason, S. (2019). Teachers, Twitter and tackling overwork in Japan. *Issues in Educational Research*, 29(3), 881-898. http://www.iier.org.au/iier29/mason.pdf