

Abstract

Title

Tensions and Support Needs in Teachers' Return to School after Extended Graduate Study in Japan

Research Overview

Graduate study is often seen as enhancing teachers' perspectives and reflective capacity. However, less attention has been paid to the challenges teachers face upon returning to school. This study examines how teachers experience and navigate tensions after graduate study and what support is needed during their reintegration process.

Purpose of Study

This study aims to explore the tensions experienced by in-service teachers returning to school after extended graduate study, how they cope with these tensions, and what forms of support they require. While prior research on teacher education in Japan has highlighted the positive outcomes of graduate study, such as broadened perspectives and deeper reflection, less attention has been paid to the challenges teachers encounter after returning to practice. These challenges include feelings of mismatch with school contexts, differences in perspectives with colleagues, and changes in expected roles. Drawing on teachers' narratives, this study examines how graduate study is positioned within their career trajectories and how it generates specific tensions and support needs.

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative case study design, drawing on teachers' narratives to examine their return-to-school processes after extended graduate study. The participants were four in-service teachers in Japan (Teachers A–D) who had pursued extended graduate study during their teaching careers. Data were collected through longitudinal, semi-structured interviews conducted over a one-year period, beginning just before their return to school and continuing through their first year back in the school context. The interviews focused on their life histories and personal narratives before and after returning to school. The data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis to examine how teachers positioned their graduate study experiences within their career trajectories and how these experiences generated distinct tensions and support needs.

Results and Discussion

Across all four cases, graduate study functioned as a critical turning point in teachers' career trajectories. It provided new perspectives for re-examining themselves and their schools from an external standpoint, while also fostering greater sensitivity to the voices of colleagues and students. However, these expanded perspectives simultaneously generated tensions upon returning to school, particularly in relation to perceived mismatches with existing school cultures and differences in perspectives with colleagues.

The analysis showed that teachers who voluntarily pursued graduate study were more likely to experience tensions when attempting to apply their learning in school contexts. In contrast, even those whose participation was less self-initiated developed deeper self-understanding and reconstructed their career perspectives through reflection, suggesting that the significance of graduate study depends not only on initial motivation but also on how the content of their learning is interpreted.

The analysis identified three main patterns in how teachers coped with these tensions: they

strategically postponed making definitive judgments to allow for adjustment within their school contexts; they flexibly adapted and transformed what they had learned in graduate study to fit the practical realities of their workplaces; and they refrained from expressing their perspectives within the school and instead maintained balance through connections with external communities, including their graduate institutions and professional networks outside the school.

The analysis also identified multi-layered support needs. At the school level, administrative support, such as careful role assignment and opportunities for dialogue, is essential. At the institutional level, graduate programs should provide post-completion follow-up. At the policy level, boards of education should offer clearer information regarding long-term professional development programs and the effective utilization of returning teachers. Such support is crucial for negotiating tensions and sustaining professional growth.

Building on these findings, three implications can be drawn. First, graduate study should not be understood as completed at the point of program completion, but rather as an ongoing process of learning across teachers' careers, in which meanings are continuously reconfigured through the interplay between practice and reflection after returning to school. Second, teacher career development should be reconceptualized not as a linear progression, but as a multi-directional trajectory that may include periods of leave, return, recurrent education, and career transitions. Third, there is a need to establish multi-layered support systems involving schools, universities, boards of education, families, and professional communities, to support teachers' tensions and prevent isolation.

Keywords: teacher professional development, narrative analysis, professional tensions, support needs, professional reconstruction