

Workplace Transition During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Personal Reflection

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In early 2020, after working six years at elementary school level, I was ready to enrich my teaching experience in a new setting, so I decided to take up a teaching position as an ALT at the Fuzoku Compulsory Education School at the University of Fukui. I wanted to feel fulfillment in my work-life, but I was ill-prepared for the complications and adversity I would confront in my job transition during the COVID-19 pandemic. While I consider myself a proactive person, whether when taking on a new hobby such as gardening or undertaking a new project to outfit a school library with more English books, this self-image was soon challenged. Every time I had a moment of introspection, my job transition in April 2020 emerged as the catalyst. I decided to confront my struggles, hoping to uncover a deeper awareness of myself as a teacher, while in the process realizing what practical solutions teachers require in their own changes in career.

Teachers in all capacities are familiar with environmental changes in the workplace. The Japanese education system encourages teacher school assignment changes, which may occur as often as every one to three years, and assignments may be capped at ten years in some areas of Japan (Numano, 2017). ALTs are not immune to these transitions in the workplace. They find themselves coping with environmental changes, which typically include new staff members, new students and perhaps even a new school. Recognizing that change is typical in a teacher's career, teachers of all types should also understand that dealing with change is a necessary part of one's ability to find fulfillment in one's job. I believe teachers can live fuller, happier lives by knowing how to deal with change.

When I transitioned to my new workplace in April 2020, I found myself in a new environment, leaving behind the comforts of a ten-person-strong ALT office with whom I interacted on a daily basis. I realized that the emotional complexity of managing my new work environment without the assistance of my fellow non-Japanese peers was taking a toll on me. Even though being alone was not new for me, I

missed being able to rely on the comforts and emotional understanding of my peers. I suddenly felt like a stranger in my new environment. What had been opportunities for joy in the past quickly became burdensome. As the days went by, I struggled to cope in this unfamiliar environment.

Objectives

- To suggest positive responses to workplace transitions individually and in communities.
- To introduce the benefits of professional counseling services.

Practical Implications

Through my experience of workplace transition, I learned that there are certain things that I can control and certain things that I cannot, much of which I experienced for the first time. For instance, I couldn't control the policy implementations brought on by the pandemic, which led to the cancellation of many events. I also couldn't control the decision to keep students at home for three months, resulting in online lessons and the issues that came with remote learning. However, I knew I could depend on my ability to be proactive in times of uncertainty, which I harnessed, preparing assignments and online materials and familiarizing myself with online learning platforms and other ICT before meeting my students. I drew upon Parker et al.'s (2012) suggested problem-focused coping strategies which "seek to directly resolve challenges of threats" (p. 505), for example, making priority lists and accepting what can and cannot be changed in one's environment. These strategies provide the foundation for a positive response to change in teachers' work-life.

It is well understood that teachers, especially new ones, cannot depend on getting meaningful and adequate professional support if this support is limited to their workplace. Teachers' professional learning networks are expanding to the online realm, which complements but does not replace the physical one, adapting to teachers' process of

learning needs (Trust et al., 2016). Online communities, including JALT, have become a source of comfort in my own life—places where I can craft my voice while expressing my opinions and sharing my concerns. These communities, which embrace the aspects of teaching and research that I enjoy, have welcomed and accepted me. I recall joining my first webinar at the end of March 2020 and instantly feeling connected to my interests in teaching. This led me to becoming a regular member of the 語り合い会 (*katari-ai-kai*) hosted by the University of Fukui, an informal, voluntary monthly online meeting between ALTs, JTEs and HRTs. Such online professional learning networks thus offer vital support that enhances individual strategies for responding to change.

Beyond these online learning communities, I longed for more meaningful relationships, which I had not yet found in my daily work. A lack of accessibility, including language barriers, prevent most individuals from receiving on-site counseling, when this is even available at all, for teachers. I found myself in a similar situation and decided to seek guidance from a trained, unbiased third-party professional with whom I could discuss my grievances. Luckily, as an alumnus of the University of New Brunswick (Canada), I was able to seek help through their counseling services. Through this experience, I recognized the importance I place on work as a source of happiness in my life, which had been lacking. The experience was a short four weeks, so I was encouraged to continue counseling and was provided with the ability to self-reflect and self-monitor. My counseling experience also made me more aware of the plethora of online services available, in part thanks to the pandemic, in addition to long-standing services such as the Tokyo English Lifeline (TELL), Tokyo Counseling Services and Tokyo Mental Health. Teachers coping with especially challenging change might find powerful support from specialist services focused on mental health.

Reflective Conclusion

As my journey evolves, I continue to forge meaningful relationships with my colleagues and students and reflect on how my workplace transition has impacted my state of happiness. I also look back to the relationships that have brought me to where I am today and for which I am grateful. I have realized

that our interactions with people allow us to confront and therefore control our own situations. Looking back on this year, I realize now that I am much more self-aware of not only my needs as a teacher and coworker, but also as a person. I hope my work leads me to assist others in their own job assignment changes and I also aim to encourage better mental-health practices and initiatives in the workplace.

References

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About the Author

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Link to presentation on YouTube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLv9c_cjYn0

