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The Effects of Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity on Eikaiwa Teachers

ABSTRACT

Eikaiwa teachers experience workplace issues that can be understood as role conflict and role ambiguity. Role conflict refers to the dueling pressures between roles that can cause poor results or not being able to finish tasks for one or both roles. Role ambiguity refers to the lack of clarity of a role, which may result in the role not being performed appropriately. Role conflict and role ambiguity have been found to be predictors of symptoms of burnout. In this study, Eikaiwa teachers were interviewed to examine if role conflict and role ambiguity were present and how symptoms of burnout were connected to these experiences. Results showed that examples of role conflict and role ambiguity lead to Eikaiwa teachers experiencing symptoms of burnout which further led to their decision to continue teaching or to leave the teaching profession. This study may be useful for teacher development in terms of taking action to create a better working environment.

Keywords: role conflict, role ambiguity, teacher burnout, eikaiwa teachers

My first teaching position was at an Eikaiwa school. There I learned the basics in teaching that included how to handle students of all ages as well as how to teach with different proficiency levels within the same class. However, I soon realized that working in the Eikaiwa industry was so much more than being present in the classroom and teaching English. My role as a teacher included different responsibilities that I was not initially aware of when I started teaching at the Eikaiwa school. This led to myself feeling burned out and not understanding why I had those feelings. I also noticed my colleagues exhibiting signs of exhaustion, both physically and emotionally. After leaving the Eikaiwa industry, those feelings and observations stayed with me and drove my curiosity in wanting to understand more about burnout in teaching. Furthermore, I wanted to understand how Eikaiwa teacher experiences could contribute to burnout. While reading on the topic of burnout, I learned about role conflict and role ambiguity and how they can be predictors of teacher burnout. Research on role conflict and role ambiguity has identified symptoms of burnout in the teaching field by showing stressors caused by the workplace environment. This has given researchers a clearer picture on how stressors can lead to burnout within the teaching profession. One part of my MA study was to identify if role conflict and role ambiguity are present in teachers working within the Eikaiwa industry by analyzing their experience through workplace issues.

UNDERSTANDING ROLE CONFLICT AND ROLE AMBIGUITY

Rizzo et al. (1970) defined a role to be “a set of expectations about behavior for a position in a social structure” and said expectations are “ascribed to the role by the focal person filling that position or

by others who relate to the role or simply have notions about it” (p. 155). A teacher’s role will have different meanings depending on the type of teacher. For example, Eikaiwa teachers can have responsibilities beyond teaching regarding student recruitment or selling additional school materials to students that are not shared by primary or secondary school teachers.

Reflecting on my own time in the Eikaiwa industry, I realized that I had more than one role. I was a teacher, an office administrator, a teacher trainer, and a promoter for the company. I found that each role in itself had its own set of expectations and responsibilities. I also realized that these roles did not fit together and created stress because I was trying to not only complete my tasks on time, but also to do a good job by completing the tasks fully. The stress I experienced was role conflict. Rizzo et al. (1970) defined role conflict as the “compatibility and incompatibility in the requirements of the role, where congruency or compatibility is judged relative to a set of standards or conditions which impinge upon role performance” (p. 155).

Another issue I found myself facing was not understanding what my roles were. I knew I was a teacher, but other responsibilities that were expected of me did not fit within the teacher role. Other expectations included completing administration work by communicating with the head office, promoting the school by posting advertisements in mailboxes, or asking students to sign up for additional classes. Whenever I was asked to take on a new role, I didn’t fully understand what I was expected to do. I would ask myself, what do I write to the head office? Should I be formal or be direct? How do I sell additional classes? Should I keep asking students to sign up for more classes if I don’t fill in every available class time? These questions and the lack of clarity are forms of role ambiguity. Role ambiguity is focused into two parts: (a) the predictability of one’s behavior and (b) the clarity of behavioral requirements which would serve as a guide to provide knowledge on which behavior is appropriate (Rizzo et al., 1970). I found their study interesting because it also addressed issues regarding organizational and management practices, leadership behavior, satisfaction, anxiety, and propensity to leave the job.

THE EIKAIWA INDUSTRY

The Japanese word *Eikaiwa* means “English conversation” but also refers to an English language school in Japan that offers English language classes to both adults and children (Kubota, 2020). Eikaiwa schools offer language classes to both children, starting as young as 6 months old (AEON, n.d.), and adults. Lessons are offered in private or group formats. The content for each class can vary in terms of topics, but can focus on speaking, listening, reading, grammar and vocabulary (AEON, n.d.; ECC, 2022) as well as helping students prepare for language proficiency tests.

TEACHER EXPECTATIONS IN WORKING AND NON-WORKING HOURS

In a typical 40-hour work week, Eikaiwa teachers are contracted to work a minimum of 25 teaching hours (AEON, n.d.) to as many as 37 (NOVA, n.d.). Non-teaching responsibilities can include lesson planning, promoting and selling of company materials, counseling students, making textbook recommendations, making student progress reports, and cleaning the school. Because planning lessons can be time consuming, teachers are encouraged to practice “good time management skills and flexibility” (AEON, n.d.). Although books and teaching materials are provided by the school, teachers can be expected to create their own extra materials needed for the classes they will be teaching (Sakamoto, 2014). These materials can include copies of book chapters, vocabulary cards, and any kind of visual material needed to support the teaching of their lesson (Sakamoto, 2014).

There are instances where Eikaiwa teachers are put under extreme pressure by their schools. For example one teacher was “required to come up with lesson plans and teaching materials,” making over 2,300 letter and vocabulary cards within a 2-month time span after 10 days of training (Sakamoto, 2014). This particular case was investigated by the Kanazawa Labor Standards Inspection Office and it was revealed that the teacher had worked an estimated 82 hours at home to create

the cards (Sakamoto, 2014). The father of the teacher “applied to the Kanazawa Labor Standards Inspection Office for recognition that his daughter’s death was caused by her job” (Sakamoto, 2014). In my experience, I was contracted to work 28-32 teaching hours over a 40-hour work week. During certain times of the year, I had a schedule of 34-38 teaching hours a week. In these cases, I worked overtime. However, when I asked for compensation, my manager scolded me for making such a request. Even though I ended up being paid for this work, I was told to explicitly discuss such a request before actually making it. In addition, I also worked at home because I felt that I had to in order to prepare for my lessons. This experience made me question my priorities in my role as a teacher and an employee. I needed to complete my lesson plans and to do so, I needed to work overtime. However, I found myself questioning whether I was a good employee if I couldn’t finish my work within working hours. I also was unclear on the rules of when it is appropriate to ask for overtime compensation. Now I reflect on it and I believe I was experiencing both role conflict and role ambiguity. After reading about role conflict and role ambiguity as well as teacher burnout, I wanted to help Eikaiwa teachers by researching and exposing which workplace issues led to experiencing role conflict and role ambiguity so that teachers can understand how this could lead to teacher burnout.

MY RESEARCH FOCUS

This study was part of a MA thesis I completed in understanding burnout as experienced by Eikaiwa teachers. My aims in the MA thesis were to uncover specific stressors related to role conflict and role ambiguity that participants may have experienced during their time working in the Eikaiwa industry, understand the connections between participant experiences and symptoms of burnout, and highlight the potential causes that have led to their decisions in continuing to work in the Eikaiwa industry, leave the industry, or quit teaching altogether.

For my MA thesis, I utilized two methods of data collection: a survey consisting of 21 questions and a follow-up interview. The first seven questions of the survey elicited the participants’ background information: name (optional), gender (optional), age, country of origin, educational background, and the number of years of teaching in Eikaiwa and non-Eikaiwa settings. In addition to the participants’ background information, the survey included eight questions regarding their Eikaiwa responsibilities. The participants rated their Eikaiwa experiences on 5-point Likert scale items 1 being the lowest rating and 5 the highest. The topics the items covered included relationships with managers, relationships with co-workers, fair pay, comfortableness at work, and overall satisfaction with the position. They were also asked to provide any additional information regarding their experience. The follow-up interview included questions that asked participants to provide further details on their Eikaiwa experiences. For example, if a participant indicated that they had had poor relationships with managers, I would ask them to provide more details and to explain why they rated that topic with a 1.

Fifty-six people who met the selection criteria answered my survey. The selection criteria first included a willingness to be interviewed. Second, they had to have Eikaiwa teaching experience (not, for example, teaching English conversation at a university). Third, they needed to have at least one year of experience in the Eikaiwa industry. Fourth, I aimed to include non-Japanese and Japanese teachers, so I checked their nationality. Lastly, I considered their answers to the survey items that were related to possible signs of burnout with a minimum score of 1 on the 5-point Likert-scale indicating numerous potential signs of burnout. I calculated their average score across these items and used it to help identify prospective interviewees. In the end, 10 people agreed—via email correspondence—to be interviewed. I should point out that three of the survey respondents quit the teaching field altogether at the time of their interviews, therefore none of the participants were referred to as teachers in my study.

THE MAIN ISSUES THE CURRENT AND FORMER TEACHERS EXPERIENCED

I analyzed the experiences of the survey respondents by comparing them to the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The MBI is a questionnaire to measure the intensity and frequency of the three symptoms of burnout which are Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Reduced Personal Accomplishment. I also compared experiences to items in a role conflict and role ambiguity questionnaire developed by Rizzo et al. (1970). The survey respondents showed similarities in experiencing both role conflict and role ambiguity during their time while working in the Eikaiwa industry. The respondents also showed signs of experiencing teacher burnout. Here I focus on how the respondents experienced role conflict and role ambiguity.

ROLE CONFLICT

Role conflict, the dueling pressures regarding the completion or incompleteness of the teacher's roles, appeared when discussing workplace issues for seven survey respondents. Five participants experienced role conflict when confronted with lesson preparation versus the amount of time within their working hours to plan the actual lessons. In an interview, one former teacher who had six and half years of experience working in the Eikaiwa industry said his lessons suffered because of the lack of time he had to prepare while finishing his other office responsibilities. He said that during the weeks he had 40 lessons, he could not organize his work time efficiently to complete everything. He explained he felt he was doing something wrong because he could not organize his time very well. This example showed the conflict that many teachers face about whether to complete office responsibilities as an employee or to prepare for their lessons in their role as a teacher.

ROLE AMBIGUITY

Role Ambiguity, the unclear expectations within a teacher's role, appeared when discussing workplace issues with seven participants. Two survey respondents talked about how their training was focused only on observing and emulating the lessons of outgoing teachers. They both expressed not understanding the teaching expectations before they entered the classroom; they felt unprepared and uncertain of their roles. Another two participants experienced Role Ambiguity relating to the issue of how to encourage students to purchase additional lessons, on top of the student's weekly scheduled lesson, as well as unclear financial goals for the school and the kind of lessons to sell.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE TEACHERS

The participants who had experienced role conflict and role ambiguity had also experienced the three symptoms of burnout: Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Reduced Personal Accomplishment. Schwab and Iwanicki (1982) found in their research that role conflict and role ambiguity can be predictors of symptoms of burnout. In a similar way, participants in my study experienced burnout because of conflicting roles and unclear expectations. Three participants that experienced role conflict and role ambiguity have remained working for the Eikaiwa industry. Two participants who experienced role conflict and role ambiguity have left the Eikaiwa industry, but have continued to work in the teaching profession. Those who have remained teaching in Eikaiwa or a different teaching field said the reason they continue to teach, despite experiencing burnout, is because they enjoy teaching. Three participants who experienced role conflict and role ambiguity have completely left the Eikaiwa industry and the teaching profession altogether. Their reasons for leaving were that the responsibilities of education were too big, there was too much stress and exhaustion, and in one case they did not have a teaching license to continue teaching outside of Eikaiwa.

FURTHER QUESTIONS AND MY OWN SOLUTIONS

My MA study showed that teachers working in the Eikaiwa industry experienced symptoms of burnout through workplace issues that correspond with role conflict and role ambiguity. The results of my survey showed that teachers experience role conflict, for example, when they are forced to choose between preparing for lessons or finishing other school responsibilities which can impact the quality of their lessons. Other workplace issues that can correspond to role ambiguity such as having unclear expectations regarding an Eikaiwa school's policy on selling lessons can also lead to teachers experiencing symptoms of burnout. Although some teachers who experienced role conflict and role ambiguity have remained in the Eikaiwa industry, it is also causing teachers to leave the teaching profession completely.

After completing my study, I found myself asking more questions. If role conflict and role ambiguity can lead to Eikaiwa teachers experiencing burnout, how can the workplace issues that were discussed leading to these experiences be prevented? Furthermore, what are some solutions for Eikaiwa teachers who are already feeling the effects of role conflict and role ambiguity? Although the respondent's experiences highlighted some workplace issues that were examples of role conflict and role ambiguity, I believe there may be other topics that haven't been explored that also lead to role conflict and role ambiguity in the Eikaiwa industry. By discussing these other issues, teachers can uncover why they might be experiencing role conflict, role ambiguity, and burnout.

As part of my MA work, I did not discuss possible solutions with the participants. However, after the completion of my study, I found that I became more aware of my own workplace issues and how to prevent experiencing role conflict and role ambiguity. One example where I avoided experiencing role ambiguity was when I was presented with a new employment contract that was unclear regarding expectations about the role I would be performing. I therefore asked the employer for more clarity and made sure that the updated clarification was part of the contract so that both I and my employer were aware of my actual responsibilities. Another example where I navigated my way through an experience of role conflict was by acknowledging that I had two dueling roles within my workplace. For each responsibility, I had to prioritize what I felt was more important and be confident in my decision when following through to complete different tasks. Prioritizing and also communicating with my managers about the roles and their expectations helped reduce the potential of experiencing burnout. These solutions are not going to solve every workplace issue, but by acknowledging my role(s) and understanding potential problems that can lead to role conflict and role ambiguity, I have found that I am not experiencing burnout symptoms as intensely as I was before my study. This does not mean I can avoid burnout completely, but I can have more control in how workplace issues can affect my well-being.

Although I enjoyed my experience working at Eikaiwa schools, teaching students, and making life-long friendships with my co-workers, I left the Eikaiwa industry feeling exhausted. Furthermore, some of my former Eikaiwa co-workers are no longer teaching. They explicitly told me that because of their experience they no longer want to be in that kind of work environment. I felt sad for future students who would miss out, because I believe they were good teachers. If current Eikaiwa teachers are more aware of their roles in the Eikaiwa industry and how it is affecting them, I believe this awareness could be one step towards preventing teachers from leaving the Eikaiwa industry.

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