

Alex Burke: Mid-Career Scholar Award 2024

I would like to nominate Alex Burke for the JALT Mid-Career Scholar Award (Research). I remember vividly the first time I met Alex. She made me cry in a room with about 50 people. The next time she made me cry, it was in front of about 200 people. I met Alex for the first time in 2019 at the JALT November conference. It was the last year Andy Boon was poster chair, and I was shadowing him to take over the role full-time from 2020 on. Alex's poster that year was "Dyslexia, ADHD & Language Classrooms: How to Help," which caught my eye. I am mildly dyslexic and have severe ADHD, among other neurodiverse issues. In her poster, she had the term "neurodiversity." It was the first time I had seen that term.

Since moving to Japan in 2007, I had shoved my neurodiversity down. I never discussed my ADHD or other neurodiverse issues with anyone, not even my wife. I never sought therapy, treatment, or support until that fateful day when I met Alex. We sat and talked for an hour straight, sharing stories and struggles. For the first time in over a decade, I felt like I wasn't alone in my daily neurodiverse existence. This was the first time she made me cry.

Fast forward many years down the road to the May JALTCALL 2024 conference that I chaired. Alex Burke, Davey Young, and Melodie Cook had recently published the book "Barrier-Free Instruction in Japan." I was so proud of Alex and wanted to support her and the others by giving away a copy at our book raffle. Alex was in attendance that day to sign the copy of the book. I had no intention of crying that day. I was not emotional. It was a great day, and the conference was going splendidly. It took me totally by surprise. I began to choke up as I stood on the stage in front of 200 people with the mic in my hand to introduce Alex and her book. All of a sudden, I could not get the words out of my mouth. "Why," you are probably wondering. Since that first day in 2019, Alex started a chain of events that would eventually lead me to find and reunite with my birth family, and I largely attribute that to something that Alex started and unlocked within me.

Along with the many discussions we would have over the years about ADHD and neurodiversity, she also started ADHD support groups for teachers like me here in Japan. She inspired me to take an introspective journey. To read books about my ADHD. I began to try to understand myself better. Why can't I sit still in a meeting? Why am I overly sensitive in specific social interactions? Understanding these things and why they occur helped me deal with them. After nearly 30+ years of suffering from ADHD, I finally began to understand so much more about myself. Puzzle pieces were falling into place, making sense for the first time. But something inside was still amiss. My ADHD or dyslexia did not explain certain emotions and feelings that date back to childhood. And then it happened in August of 2022. One night, I had what could only be described as a minor mental breakdown. Not one like you think about on TV or in the movies. What happened that night is what adoptees call "coming out of the fog." Some adoptees never come out. Some come out slowly over months or years. Or, for some like me, it happens like a gunshot. In an instant, a mental wall of denial came crashing. This denial? A common symptom of trauma and... it became clear to me that the thing that still felt amiss was PTSD, complex-PTSD from childhood,

from the day I was taken away from my birth mother. I sat in bed sobbing; everything started to make sense now. Why I subconsciously hated birthdays. Why I suffer so terribly from separation anxiety. Why, no matter where I am in the world or who I am with, I feel out of place. Puzzle piece after puzzle piece fell into place in my mind that night.

I immediately began to research trauma and PTSD, but more importantly, I started to look for my birth mother, and I found her just 3 short months later. I have since reunited with my birth mother and a brother and sister I never knew I had. I have joined adoptee support groups and met and made friends with many JALT members who are also adoptees. I attribute this entire turn of events to Alex Burke and a journey she started for me on that fateful day in 2019. And continued to foster in me the support and tools I would need that led me to this life-changing roller coaster. And there I was, in front of 200 people, I could not hold back the tears when introducing Alex to the room. This was my subconscious saying, "Can you believe how this woman has changed your life?" And because of her, I can talk publicly now about my struggles and triumphs. Feeling less than, feeling shame, feeling broken, pushing it all down for 40 years was anything but healthy.

I am just one person that her research and work has affected. And look what an effect it had on me. Her mission has been to spread awareness, show support, and provide tools to every student and teacher in Japan.

The impact Alex has had on neurodiverse research and awareness in our field is well-recognized by her peers as well. Her 2019 poster, "Dyslexia, ADHD & Language Classrooms: How to Help," won her a best poster award at JALT International. She won another best poster award in 2020 at the national conference for "Neurodiverse, Studying and Teaching Language." She was awarded her first two Michele Steele Best of JALT Awards for separate presentations in 2019, "Supporting Dyslexic Students: Inclusive New Teaching Methods" and "Inclusive Teaching: make a difference for the 1 in 10 neurodiverse learners in Your Mainstream Class." The following year, she was awarded her third Michele Steele Best of JALT Award. In 2021 alone, she would go on to speak or present 15 times, including a plenary speaking role at the CUE conference. Alex is also a founding officer of the Accessible Language Learning SIG. In the May 2022 issue of the TLT, Alex was published, writing about neurodiversity in our students, and again, In the November 2023 issue, writing about removing barriers to reading.

Despite being a textbook example of a neurodiverse person, "neurodiverse" was terminology I was not familiar with until I met Alex Burke. Now, in 2024, you would be hard-pressed to find a teacher in JALT who is not familiar with the terminology, and this is thanks to Alex and her research and mission to ensure spreading accessibility for not just students but teachers as well. She has changed the level of accessibility options seen in conferences and the websites all across JALT. I have read articles and attended presentations that were directly influenced by the work that Alex introduced to us.

I have only mentioned her highest accolades and a brief slice of all the articles she has

written, presentations, workshops she has conducted, and the lives she has touched. Her work is far from done. But never in my 20 years in Japan have I come across a JALT researcher whose ripples can be witnessed, experienced, and felt so broadly, not only across our field but also in the daily lives of many students and teachers.

Robert Dykes