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**BALANCING AUTONOMY AND PRESSURE: THE IMPACT OF ROLE STRESS ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM OF SCHOOL TEACHERS**

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**ABSTRACT**

The study aims to find out the impact of role stress on academic freedom of school teachers. The academic freedom scale and role stress scale were used to survey 329 secondary school teachers of Punjab. The collected data has been analysed using correlation and regression analysis. The Pearson product moment correlation analysis revealed that academic freedom has negative relationship with role ambiguity and role overload. The role overload component of role stress emerged as significant predictor of academic freedom among school teachers. Thus, there is a dire need to reduce role stress by improving academic freedom that could lead to higher retention rates for teachers.

**KEYWORDS:** Academic Freedom, Role ambiguity, Role conflict, Role Overload, School Teachers.

**INTRODUCTION**

Teaching is a multiple role profession. The parameters and characteristics of multiple roles are ever changing. These multiple roles have corresponding number of identities (Reitzes & Mutran, 1994). Teacher has to play various roles such as observer, educator, presenter, communicator, motivator, counsellor, facilitator and evaluator. The job of teaching has become far more difficult because of the failure of other people to understand the complexity and responsibility of this profession (Friedman & Farber, 1992).

Teachers are inherently prone to stress. Teachers are expected to assume multiple and mutually opposite roles such as, instructing students in academic context, upholding classroom discipline, taking of social and emotional needs of students, and occasionally meeting conflicting demands of students, parents, society and administrators (Smylie, 1999).

The teacher plays a significant and major role in teaching-learning process. He is equally responsible for developing social behaviour in young ones, disseminating values, making them conscious about the facts and inculcates sense of critical thinking in them. The aim of education is not merely the development of cognitive abilities of the child and academic success but also building character, creating holistic and well-rounded individuals equipped with 21st century skills. So, teachers truly shape the future of children and, therefore, the future of nation (National Education Policy, 2020).

### **Academic Freedom**

Academic freedom is freedom given to the teachers to teach in a manner which they consider professionally appropriate, conduct research, draw conclusions and publish their work as well as present their perspective through extramural speech without interference from regulating authorities or censorship. Academic freedom is a fundamental part of education system as it allows free exchange of ideas and academic conversations. Through academic freedom, new ideas could be brought at the forefront of academic discussions (Donahue et al., 2020).

It is precondition to conduct academic activities as it enables academicians to teach, do research and publish their work without being afraid of anything. Academic freedom is two-faced concept. On the one side it offers protection, whereas, on the flip side it is a self-regulation for the sake of teaching and inquiry (Karki, 2015).

The extent of academic freedom allowed at school results not only in the number of ideas taught but also for the number of spokespersons and programs in schools, the quantity and quality of books and media explored (Barger, 2010). Thus, it is about the rights of the teachers to teach the subject matter, choose course content, present their viewpoint on any matter without being afraid of any sort of punishment and offer them protection from the external organizations.

### **Role Stress**

Stress is an environmental factor that affects an individual adversely. It is an external force operating on a person. It is a state of change in an internal system which is a direct result of external strain (Perlman & Hartman, 1982). Schuler (1982) defined stress as "a perceived dynamic state involving uncertainty about something important". According to Miller (1983), stress is likely to arise when an individual perceives environmental demands as overwhelming, feeling that those demands exceed their personal abilities and available resources to respond adequately.

A role is the framework of behaviour that employees believe are anticipated from him (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991). Role can be defined as set of obligations put forth by significant others and the individual occupying a position in an organization.

Role stress is described as a misfit between one's skills and the demands of his role. It has been defined as a gap between a person's role expectations and what is occurring within the role (Rashid, 2013). Role stress is the result of problems faced by an individual in role performance. It decreases or eliminates with the confrontation or resolution of a problem (Nisha, 2014). Thus, it is a form of stress which a person experiences due to multiple roles played by him.

Khan & Quinn in 1970 categorized role stress into three major types: expectation generated stress comprises of role ambiguity and role conflict; expectation resource discrepancies' which include role overload, responsibility, authority dilemma and inadequate information, and role and personality (Dhyani, 2017).

Role ambiguity is the uncertainty faculty members face about their responsibilities and expectations in an academic environment. This ambiguity stems from vague and conflicting demands arising from different stakeholders such as parents, students and administrators (Liagn & Lee, 2022). Unclear expectations from a role leads to role ambiguity while, role conflict occurs when there is a disagreement between what the individual perceives as expected behaviours and what others expect from them.

Role ambiguity can be seen as a lack of clarity about the most effective ways to carry out job. Role conflict, on the other hand, happens when employees came across competing information that makes it hard to accomplish expected responsibilities (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Role ambiguity indicates how unclear or uncertain the expectations for a single role can be. There may be ambiguity around the specific behaviours expected in a role, as well as uncertainty regarding the expected consequences of these behaviours (Cook et al., 1981).

Role overload is a work condition where people perceive role demands are exceeding with time, energy and capabilities (Rizzo et al., 1970). It is a condition of a person where there is a set of obligations that require him to invest more efforts than he can. It is related with an array of negative consequences such as psychological strain, lack of commitment, low work performance and reduced organizational citizenship behaviour (Tang & Vanderberghe, 2021).

Academic freedom has direct relationship with ambiguity, overload, and conflict as the restricted freedom makes the teachers vulnerable to stress. Autonomy helps the teachers to cope with exhaustion as it acts as a tool for self-empowerment. Higher levels of freedom in school environment leads to lesser workload stress (Pan et al., 2023). The study conducted on

secondary school teachers by Pearson & Moomaw (2005) highlighted that empowered and autonomous teachers were less stressed. Low job autonomy, problematic power-sharing, lack of training for professional development were major sources of creating role conflict and role ambiguity (Khanal et al., 2022). Academic freedom of school teachers in relation to role stressors has not been studied extensively in India especially in Punjab region. Thus, keeping in mind the need, the present study has been undertaken to examine the relationship of role stress with academic freedom.

### **Objectives**

- To study relationship of role stress (in terms of role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload) with academic freedom among secondary school teachers of Punjab.
- To study role stress (in terms of role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload) as predictors of academic freedom among secondary school teachers of Punjab.

### **Hypotheses**

- There will be no significant relationship of role stress (in terms of role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload) with academic freedom among secondary school teachers of Punjab.
- Role stress (in terms of role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload) as predictors of academic freedom among secondary school teachers of Punjab.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The descriptive survey method has been used to study relationship of role stress with academic freedom of school teachers. Pearson product moment correlation has been calculated to study relationship of role stress with academic freedom of school teachers. To find out role stress as predictor of academic freedom, regression analysis has been employed.

### **Participants**

For the specific purpose of this study, data has been collected from 329 secondary school teachers of Amritsar, Patiala and Sangrur districts of Punjab. There were 135 male and 194 female teachers.

### **Tools Used**

- **Academic Freedom Scale:** Academic freedom scale by Kaur and Kaistha (2024) has been used to study the academic freedom enjoyed by secondary school teachers of Punjab.

This is 24 items scale divided pertaining to four areas namely, institutional climate, teacher-principal relationship, teacher-teacher relationship and teacher-student relationship.

- **Role Stress Scale:** Peterson and his colleagues in 1995 studied role stress in terms of role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload. The scale comprised of 31 items.

## RESULTS

The present study aims to explore the relation of role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload components of role stress with academic freedom of school teachers. The table 1 shows the results of correlation analysis along with mean and standard deviation on role stress (in terms of role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload) and academic freedom of school teachers.

**Table 1**

**Correlation matrix: Role Stress and Academic Freedom. (N=329)**

Variables	Academic Freedom	Role Stress		
		Role Ambiguity	Role Conflict	Role Overload
Academic Freedom	1	-0.160*	-0.071	-0.133*
Role Ambiguity		1	0.484**	0.470**
Role Conflict			1	0.616**
Role Overload				1
Mean	63.87	35.23	30.84	13.35
SD	9.71	9.97	5.85	4.31

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

It may be observed from table that academic freedom has negative and significant relationship with role ambiguity ( $-0.160$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and role overload ( $-0.133$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) component of role stress. While it has no significant relationship with role conflict ( $-0.071$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ) component of role stress.

**Table 2**

**Regression Analysis: Role ambiguity, Role Conflict and Role Overload as predictors of Academic Freedom.**

Variable Entered	R	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> Change	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F-value	Variance
1.	0.179	0.032	0.032	0.027	6.035	3.2%

As per the results presented in table 2, it may be seen that there was a positive relationship between the dependent variable (academic freedom) and independent variables (role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload) of secondary school teachers with  $R= 0.179$ , an  $F= 6.035$ , a significance level of  $p<0.05$ . This shows that the study model explains 3.2% of variation in academic freedom among school teachers by the independent variables (role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload), which is statistically significant (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

**Table 3**

**Model Coefficients (with Academic Freedom as Dependent Variable).**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t-Value
	B	Std. Error	Beta	
Constant	68.714	2.242		30.643**
Role Ambiguity	-0.136	0.048	-0.140	2.825*
Role Conflict	0.101	0.092	0.061	1.095
Role Overload	-0.235	0.124	-0.105	1.899

\* $p<0.05$ , \*\* $p<0.01$

The results presented in table 3 revealed that the regression coefficient between independent variable role ambiguity and dependent variable academic freedom was statistically significant,  $r=-0.136$ ,  $t= 2.825$ ,  $p<0.05$ . This means that academic freedom of school teachers decreases by 0.136 for one unit increase of role ambiguity. However, the regression coefficient between role conflict and academic freedom was not statistically significant with  $r= 0.101$ ,  $t= 1.095$ ,  $p>0.05$ . So, the academic freedom of school teachers changes by 0.101 for one unit change in role conflict but this change was not statistically significant. Similarly, for role overload and academic freedom, the regression coefficient came out to be  $r=-0.235$ ,  $t=1.899$ ,  $p>0.05$ , which is not statistically significant. Thus, academic freedom of school teachers decreases by 0.235 for every one unit decrease in role overload but this change is not statistically significant.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the study showed that academic freedom has a negative and significant relationship with role ambiguity and role overload components of role stress. However, it has a negative but statistically not significant correlation with the role conflict component of role stress. Further, role overload is a significant predictor of academic freedom. Hence, it may be inferred that an increase in role overload of teachers decreases their academic freedom.

The findings of the present study are supported by Shah & Haseeb (2019) who found the negative relationship of autonomy with stress due to the workload, role ambiguity and role conflict. Houston et al. (2006) highlighted in their study that faculty members experience high role overload because of institutional expectations of research and teaching. The negative correlation coefficient between role overload and academic freedom emphasizes the need for universities to address the prevalence of role overload among faculty members to preserve their well-being. Similarly, Evans (2014) contends that expectations from faculty members about higher research productivity, management of administrative activities, and student engagement lead to role overload, which consequently limits their academic freedom. These findings align with the current study's conclusion that role expectations beyond abilities can negatively influence the professional freedom of teachers.

The present study also emphasizes that academic freedom is imperative to maintain a dynamic and effective teaching environment (Donahue et al., 2020). Teachers are more likely to generate creative ideas and engage students in meaningful discussions when they have fewer boundaries and more freedom to experiment. However, their ability to experiment with teaching methodologies and research is reduced significantly when they are faced with overwhelming expectations. Therefore, it is crucial to address role stress, especially role overload and role ambiguity, to maintain a productive academic environment.

Further, Tang & Vanderberghe (2021) showed the association of psychological strain with role overload and shed light on how work performance and well-being are impacted by excessive workload. This further supports the findings of the present study that it is crucial to lower role stress for enhancing the academic freedom of school teachers. Additionally, the research conducted by Jackson & Schuler (1995) revealed that role ambiguity considerably reduces job satisfaction and organizational commitment, which can also lower teachers' ability to make decisions independently.

The findings of Kaur (2022) demonstrated that teachers who suffer high role stress find it more challenging to maintain their professional commitment. Thereby indicating that overflowing expectations may hinder their academic freedom. Further, Barger (2010) in his study also contended that a lack of a supportive work environment often results in the inability to conduct research freely. These viewpoints highlight wider implications of role stress on performance and satisfaction of faculty members.

## CONCLUSION

The present study examines the impact of role stress, in particular role ambiguity and role overload, on the academic freedom of school teachers. The reason behind this may be the multiple role demands and excessive expectations of the administrative staff, students, and parents as well. These expectations create an environment where it becomes difficult for teachers to practice autonomy, and consequently, the quality of education gets impacted as delivering creative and engaging lessons becomes hard for the stressed teacher. On the contrary, lesser role stress leads to more enjoyment of academic freedom and ultimately delivery of high-quality subject matter.

Educational institutions ought to focus on redefining administrative policies to reduce ambiguity in role expectations and the workload of teachers. Implementation of well-defined job duties, allocation of required resources, and promotion of professional development programs can assist teachers in carrying out their duties effectively. Policies should be framed to ensure that teachers have the necessary freedom in pedagogical and research matters to foster a more balanced and supportive work environment.

Moreover, reduced role stress among teachers can increase job retention and satisfaction, which will be beneficial for both teachers and students. Further, intervention studies aimed at mitigating role stress and its influence on academic freedom and teacher effectiveness could be done.

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