



## TRUSTED PROFESSIONALS OR EXPENDABLE FUNCTIONARIES? EXPLORING THE SOURCES OF ROLE STRAIN AMONG TEACHERS AT AN ELITE HIGH SCHOOL

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### Abstract

In this qualitative study, I examine the sources of role strain among teachers at The Richmond Academy of Science (the Academy) – one of the most exclusive English-medium international schools in Bangalore, a city in southwest India. I address the following question: How does the Academy's position, as one of the premiere international schools, impact teachers' interactions with students, parents, and senior administrators? The analysis of interviews with 24 teachers at the Academy indicates that structural aspects of the school, such as its dependence on recruiting students from wealthy families, inform how students, parents, and senior administrators interact with teachers. In some cases, teachers are treated as trusted professionals whose opinions are valued, whereas in other instances, they are treated as expendable functionaries whose job involves fulfilling the goals set by others – namely parents and senior administrators. Teachers' attempts to satisfy these conflicting expectations lead to role strain, which they express as resignation and frustration. Interrogating how teachers at one elite school experience their work provides important insight into how schools' structural characteristics and the behaviour of key stakeholders shape teachers' professional experiences.

**Keywords:** Teaching; Teachers; Family-School Interactions; Private Schools

## PROFISSIONAIS DE CONFIANÇA OU FUNCIONÁRIOS DISPENSÁVEIS? EXPLORANDO AS FONTES DE TENSÃO ENTRE OS PROFESSORES DE UMA ESCOLA SECUNDÁRIA DE ELITE

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### Resumo

*Neste estudo qualitativo, examino as fontes de tensão entre os professores da Richmond Academy of Science (a Academia) – uma das mais exclusivas escolas internacionais de inglês em Bangalore, uma cidade no sudoeste da Índia. Abordo a seguinte questão: Como é que a posição da Academia, como uma das principais escolas internacionais, influencia as interações dos professores com os alunos, os pais e os administradores? A análise das entrevistas com 24 professores da Academia indica que os aspectos estruturais da escola, como a sua dependência do recrutamento de alunos de famílias com mais recursos económicos, influenciam a forma como os alunos, os pais e os administradores interagem com os professores. Nalguns casos, os professores são tratados como profissionais de confiança cujas opiniões são valorizadas, enquanto noutros casos, são tratados como funcionários dispensáveis cujo trabalho envolve cumprir os objetivos estabelecidos por outros – nomeadamente os pais e os administradores seniores. As tentativas dos professores para satisfazer estas expectativas contraditórias levam a uma tensão de papéis, que eles exprimem sob a forma de resignação e frustração. Questionar como os professores de uma escola de elite vivenciam o seu trabalho fornece uma visão importante de como as características estruturais das escolas e o comportamento dos principais intervenientes moldam as experiências profissionais dos professores.*

**Palavras-chave:** Ensino; Professores; Interações família-escola; Escolas Privadas

## Introduction

[The Academy] is a golden opportunity for any student to get into any of the Ivy League universities or any of the equally good universities that are not part of the Ivy League.

This quote comes from Parvati, a high school teacher at The Richmond Academy of Science (the Academy). The Academy is an English-medium international school located in the eastern suburbs of Bangalore, a city in southwest India. The school opened in the early 2000s and is among the pioneers of international education in the area. It educates students from preschool through high school. Students in grades 9 and 10 study the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) curriculum. Then, in the last two years of high school, they complete the requirements for the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme – commonly referred to as the IB. In its more than 20-year history, the Academy has earned accolades that place it among the top international schools in the country and the world.

Tuition at the Academy is upwards of \$10,000 USD per year in a country with a per capita GDP around \$2,485 (World Bank, 2024). Only the most affluent families can afford to educate their children at this school. The Academy's ability to attract wealthy parents depends on the dedication of its talented teachers, who work directly with students: advising them about course selection, aiding them in the process of applying to college, and designing engaging lesson plans. The work of teachers produces students capable of earning the high marks on board examinations and the admission to competitive colleges that support the school's status. Teachers' work is thus deeply intertwined with the Academy's image as one of the best international schools in Bangalore and its ability attract affluent parents capable of paying the school's steep tuition fees.

Between May and June 2015 and then March 2017 through January 2018, I completed interviews with 24 Academy educators and junior-level administrators (e.g., instructors, admissions personnel, and the head of college counselling) who

work directly with high school students (those enrolled in grades 9 to 12). They all interact with current or prospective students on a weekly, if not daily, basis. I refer to this group as “teachers” throughout the rest of this article. Among the sample of teachers I interviewed, twenty-one are from India, two are from the USA, and one is from the UK. Most have a graduate degree, and many have been teaching at the school for nearly a decade. I learned that Academy teachers must consistently demonstrate their professional competence by producing students capable of earning high marks on board examinations and gaining admission to prestigious colleges and universities. As will be discussed later, failure to produce high performing students may lead to teachers losing their jobs.

While all the teachers I interviewed expressed a genuine passion for their work, I noticed that many recounted a litany of responsibilities and interactions with students, parents, and senior administrators that left them feeling emotionally exhausted or frustrated. These teachers' experiences prompted me to ask the question: How does the Academy's position, as one of the premiere international schools, impact teachers' interactions with students, parents, and senior administrators?

I found that the Academy's efforts to maintain its status as one of the top international schools results in role strain for the school's teachers. Michelle Hindin (2007, Key Concepts section, para. 12) defines role strain as “the difficulty of meeting the normative expectations of the role that an individual either chooses or is pressured to play.” For teachers, role strain, which is also referred to as intra-role conflict, arises when they face challenges in meeting the conflicting expectations different groups place on them (Richards et al., 2018). Academy teachers experience role strain because they are treated as alternately trusted professionals or expendable functionaries. When others – parents, students, and senior administrators – expect them to fulfil the role of a trusted professional, teachers engage in meaningful conversations about how to best promote student progress. On the other hand, teachers' ability to

fulfil their role as trusted professionals is curtailed by factors that include benchmarks for students' grades set by the school's senior administrators and occasionally obstructionist and obdurate behaviour from parents. In moments where teachers' opinions are ignored, marginalized, or otherwise deemed irrelevant, they are put into a role by others that is more akin to that of an expendable functionary. A school's structural characteristics (Breidenstein et al., 2020) and how key stakeholders treat teachers (Richards et al., 2018) influence teachers' experience of role strain. The inconsistent treatment teachers encounter results from three conditions. One, the Academy's need to continuously attract wealthy families. Two, the pressures senior administrators place on teachers to produce the student outcomes needed to appeal to affluent families. Three, teachers' limited ability to address the dismissive and demeaning behaviour they occasionally encounter from students and parents. The vacillation between being treated as a trusted professional or as an expendable functionary produces role strain for Academy teachers as they struggle to adapt to these conflicting expectations of their professional role. As I outline in the next three sections, teachers vocalize their experiences of role strain by expressing resignation about and mild frustration with their circumstances.

### **Promoting Student Academic Achievement: Course Selection**

To help students achieve the highest marks possible in their classes, teachers counsel students about which courses to take. I spoke with one teacher, Parvati, about how she advises students who may be struggling academically. One of the biggest problems she encounters is students who enrol in math classes that are too advanced for them.

The Academy offers three tiers of mathematics courses: a higher-level course (top-tier), and two standard-level courses – Mathematics Methods (mid-tier) and Mathematics Studies (lower-tier). Parvati proactively works with struggling students to get them to take a more appropriate, lower-level math course. She describes how she does so by saying:

So, that's when we tend to counsel them and we say, 'You're not able to manage this particular subject. You struggle with it. You're going to end up getting a very low score and that will add up to your overall score, which might affect your placement at university.'

She told me that "We generally say, for students who intend to go into medicine, there's no requirement to take math higher-level, you can comfortably go in for math standard-level and Math Studies." To help get her point across, she likes sharing the example of an Academy alumna who earned admission to Ireland's Royal Society for Surgeons and did so having taken a standard-level mathematics course. Overall, students are receptive to the counselling they receive from Parvati (and others). Parvati shared that "In the present Grade 12, we have the majority of students being sensible enough and shifting to SL [standard-level] mathematics. We had almost 50% of students taking SL in mathematics."

Examples of students moving to a less rigorous math class demonstrate trust in their teachers' professional knowledge; however, students switch their math class at different points in the academic year. Some switch almost immediately, after having a conversation with their advisors, whereas others take up to one year to change their class. Parents' varied willingness to let their children switch to a less rigorous math class may explain the variation in this behaviour pattern.

Darpana, the 11<sup>th</sup> grade IB coordinator, shared that she often must counsel parents, in addition to students, when she advises her students to complete a lower-level math course. Counselling parents often takes a lot of time, she acknowledged, but leads to at least some parents allowing children to move to a less rigorous math class. In cases where parents and, consequently, students remain adamant about staying in a class above their ability level, she acknowledges her powerlessness to change the situation and says, "I just let go." For parents who refuse to permit their children to move to a more appropriate math class she simply says, "My job is to tell you. What you do with it is finally your call." Darpana acknowledges her relative powerlessness in situations where parents disregard

her professional advice. In these moments, parents' expectations of her as an expendable functionary become clear. While she may have an opinion about her students' competence, her role is simply to enact parents' wishes to the best of her ability. These circumstances may be especially troubling for Academy teachers because they are evaluated based on their students' academic outcomes (e.g., grades on board examinations). Having too many students enrolled in math classes above their ability level may result in low board examination scores, which may put teachers' jobs at risk.

### **Facilitating Access to Competitive Colleges and Universities: College Counselling**

The Academy is unique in having a dedicated staff of junior-level administrators and instructors who advise students about where to apply to college, help organize their recommendation letters and provide feedback on their college essays. The college counselling office works reasonably well with most parents during students' college application process. However, there are a vocal minority of parents who make their jobs more difficult. This minority engages in what I refer to as 'demanding' behaviour (Atterberry, 2022). 'Demanding' behaviour is "characterised by parents' repeated attempts to structure their children's schooling experiences that somehow affect the normal operation of the school" (Atterberry, 2022, p. 120). These instances of 'demanding' behaviour are notable because they highlight how some parents see teachers not as professionals with whom they should work closely but rather as functionaries who should capitulate to their commands.

One of the best examples of parents exhibiting this type of behaviour comes from Yvonne, the school's head of college counselling. She shared with me how the father of one student would make frequent calls to the college counselling office. She said, "He was kind of going on and on and on. Every day, he would say, 'I sent you this, so you'll look over everything, send it back to me.' This whole thing." He felt comfortable saying this to the school's staff because he expected the college counselling office to follow his directions when it came to determining how best to prepare his child

to apply for college. He was once bold enough to tell Yvonne, "I pay your salary. You will do what I ask you to do." This father believed that paying money to the school – in the form of tuition and fees – entitled him to dictate how the professionals hired by the school would work. In our conversation, Yvonne alluded to the idea that his behaviour was more aligned with how parents may interact with independent college counsellors (external to the Academy), but that this was not appropriate conduct for parental behaviour with school faculty and staff. As a result, she and her staff "had to have several difficult conversations with that parent" to socialize him in appropriate interactions with the college counselling department. His behaviour eventually changed.

Parents infrequently exhibit 'demanding' behaviour. It is more common for them to say or do things that make teachers feel insignificant. For instance, despite the effort that the college counsellors dedicate to helping students apply to college, parents do not necessarily recognize the importance of their work and often hire private college counsellors for their children anyway. Yvonne shared with me that the college counselling team has "had many, many examples at the end of the day when they [the students] finally get the admission," and parents do not credit the team for their work. Some parents feel so confident about the irrelevance of teachers' work that they openly share their opinion with the teachers. Yvonne told me, "We've had even a parent tell us to our face during a one-on-one meeting, 'Well, he got that admission not because of you guys, but because he was working with the consultants all along.'"

Yvonne describes the impact this has on her work as "disheartening." She expressed a sense of hopelessness and frustration about changing the situation by saying:

And you kind of think, alright, and that's the way that it is. Parents are going to see that it's the consultant's energy and effort that got the admission and not you. That definitely puts an additional pressure because then you kind of think, is it worth it?

### **Demonstrating Teaching Effectiveness: Limits on Pedagogical Innovation**

Teachers are ultimately accountable to the school's senior administrators: the principal, senior principal, and chairperson. The individuals who hold these roles do not work with students on a day-to-day basis but oversee the functioning of the school. One way in which teachers demonstrate their accountability to the senior administration is through professional meetings where the heads of the department talk about student outcomes. Robert, the head of the arts department, described the experience of presenting student outcomes at one of these meetings as akin to "a quarterly earnings report by a corporation where we're expected to kind of talk about those results and what went into it, what we did differently."

According to Robert, the focus on results stifles pedagogical innovation. He pointed out that "if your grades aren't at a certain standard, you might not get your contract renewed and especially if you have kids that can be very problematic. So, at the back of your mind, you start thinking very objectively about the results of your students." While he has some concerns about the Academy's culture of teaching to the test, he also recognizes his inability to change this facet of the school. Additionally, Robert's stepson is a student at the Academy, and he does not want to compromise his child's enrolment by failing to meet the Academy's rigorous standards for academic achievement. He navigates these circumstances by leaning into the Academy's results-oriented culture. Robert shared with me:

I'm interested in authentic learning to the extent that I can be, but at the bottom line I know that, and the students understand. The students understand that they also want to do whatever they think will get them the highest results.

While he may want to engage in more pedagogical innovation and what he refers to as "authentic learning," he knows that what ultimately matters are students' results. Consequently, his teaching is geared toward guaranteeing that his students will perform well on their board examinations. Efforts

like these meet the needs of students (and their parents) who want to demonstrate high levels of academic achievement, help the school maintain its position as one of the best international schools in Bangalore, and – most importantly – enable teachers to keep their job.

### **Concluding Thoughts: Why Examining Teachers at Elite Schools Matters**

The Academy's relatively vaunted position within Bangalore's educational landscape is due to the work of its teachers. The Academy's teachers help fulfil the goals of parents who want their children to attend some of the best colleges in the world and nurture the dreams of its students who desire to study at prestigious colleges and pursue meaningful careers. The school's teachers also buttress the Academy's relatively high status among other English-medium international schools, which helps to justify its steep tuition and enables it to attract wealthy families.

Because teachers' work is central to meeting the goals and aspirations of parents, students, and senior administrators, one might expect them to have a relatively prestigious position within the school itself; however, this is not always the case. Sometimes, teachers are treated like trusted professionals. This treatment occurs when they are giving advice to students about their courses and students act upon this advice for their own benefit. When teachers engage in meaningful conversations with senior administrators about their pedagogical techniques they are also treated as trusted professionals. In other cases, parents, students, and senior administrators treat teachers like expendable functionaries by ignoring their advice, not acknowledging their work, and deeming their experience insignificant. Teachers often lack the ability to change these circumstances. For example, teachers' limited power to rebuke disrespectful parents is demonstrated by Yvonne's story about the parent who boldly claimed that their child's college admission was the result of working with an independent consultant – not the hard work of the people in her office. Meanwhile, as Robert

shared, teachers who fail to meet the benchmarks set by the senior administrators may risk not having their contract renewed and losing their job. Therefore, as his example highlights, teachers are more likely to teach in a way that will facilitate their ability to meet the benchmarks established by the school, even if that means not implementing innovative, and possibly better, teaching techniques. Academy teachers constantly manoeuvre between performing the role of a trusted professional and an expendable functionary. At times, their opinions are valued, whereas at other times, they are expected to simply perform the task at hand. Navigating between contradictory expectations produces role strain for Academy teachers.

School structure (Breidenstein et al., 2020) and the treatment of teachers by key stakeholders (Richards et al., 2018) affects teachers' experience of work. As this study shows, role strain is context specific and will therefore differ from school to school. Thus, it is important for scholars to continue to investigate the sources of role strain for teachers in hopes that by doing so we can improve working conditions for all teachers.

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