# Teachers' Moral Dilemmas in Balancing Academic Standards and Inclusive Commitments: A Qualitative Study in Pakistani Schools
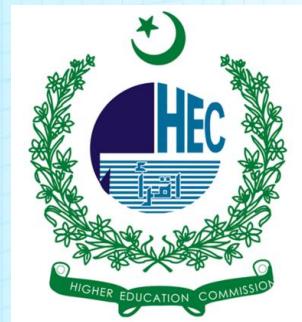
**\*¹Uzma Rafique**
**²Anoosha Maryem**
**³Shazia Aslam**

\*¹Department of Education, University of Management and Technology, Lahore. Corresponding Author Email: Uzzmalik78@yahoo.com
²Department of Sociology and Criminology, University of Sargodha. anooshamaryem4751@gmail.com
³Associate Professor, Department of Applied Psychology, Govt. Queen Mary Graduate College, Lahore, Pakistan

## Abstract

Educators teaching in mainstream classrooms often have to juggle conflicting professional demands on academic achievement and ethical realms of duty towards multiple students. This paper analyses the ethical challenges faced by the teachers working in Pakistani primary and secondary schools as they struggle to adopt standardized academic requirements and inclusion educational commitments. The issue of the research problem focuses on the tensions in ethics that can exist with the institutional accountability systems in contrast to the professional judgment of teachers concerning equity and student support. The main purpose of the research was to investigate how educators perceive, mediate and react to such dilemmas in the daily teaching practice. Applying a qualitative research design, single-semi structure interviews with teachers in inclusive schools in both public and private educational institutions in Pakistan were part of the process of data gathering. It was assumed in the study that the contextually oriented decision-making of morality is influenced by institutional norms, curriculum requirements and the availability of resources with boundary conditions being set by examination-oriented schooling structures. The results reflect identical issues of dilemmas pertaining to grading, grading pacing, grading accommodations, and fairness, even though the findings correspond with those in other global studies but they demonstrate factors-specific to the education system in Pakistan. The paper concludes the existence of unresolved moral tensions as a source of teacher stress and haphazard practice of inclusion by contributing to the importance of ethical support systems and policy congruence in inclusive education.

**Keywords:** Teacher ethics; Moral dilemmas; Inclusive education; Academic standards; Professional judgment; Qualitative inquiry; Pakistan schools

**Introduction**

Inclusive education environments tend to place teachers in more challenging accountability situations which focus more on academic results, standardized evaluation, and measurability of outcomes. The educational systems around the world have been putting stress performance tracing in terms of examinations, benchmarking and in fulfilling this, both the instructional priorities as well as professional identities

of the teachers have been defined (Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2010). Simultaneously, the concepts of inclusive education propose ethical aspects of equity, responsiveness, and support of various learners (Florian, 2019; Ainscow, 2020). Studies have shown that such competing demands usually lead teachers to a situation where a pedagogical decision is shaped with moral meaning (Hansen, 2001; Kelchtermans, 2009). Primary and secondary education in Pakistan is defined by suspicion examination-based curriculum and high standards of performance which establishes a difficult environment in which inclusive practice can occur (Singal, 2008; Shah, 2015).

One of the major assumptions of the policy discourse is that teachers can effortlessly embrace the inclusive practice and be able to maintain consistency in the academic standards. Nevertheless, there are ethical and moral aspects of teaching that imply that the integration is not as simple and value-neutral (Sockett, 2012). Although teacher dilemmas regarding inclusion and assessment have been explored internationally, most of those studies are located in the Western environment (Norwich, 2013; O'Flaherty and Gleeson, 2014). In Pakistan, the currently available studies have addressed structural issues and attitudes of teachers towards inclusion, but more little has been done on the moral reasoning and ethical decision-making process by teachers (Singal, 2008; Ehsan, 2018). The existing gap has led to the following research question: How do teachers in Pakistani schools experience and cooperate in moral dilemmas in reaching academic standards, and in walking the inclusive commitment at the same time? The answer to this question lends an ethical and inclusive education scholarship into uncharted areas.

This study aims at discussing the moral issues in the work of the teachers in the inclusive primary and secondary schools in Pakistan as they juggle between the academic standards and the drive to provide inclusive education. Based on the qualitative methodology, the study pre-empts the voice of the teachers to explore how the ethical dilemmas arise in the decisions that involved grading, curriculum pace, assessment accommodations, and fairness. The results indicate that a repetitive pattern of moral dilemma is formed due to the pressure of examination, expectations of the institution, and limits of resources. Through the documentation, the study is able to provide moral and ethical knowledge in the field of education and research on

inclusive education especially in the Global South. The structure of the article is as follows: the second section is the review of the relevant literature, and then the methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

## Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

The practice of teachers in inclusive classrooms is becoming a moral and ethical practice which is influenced by the conflicting demands of the institutions. This review of the literature explores the studies on teacher moral dilemmas, inclusive education, academic standards, and accountability pressures, but especially how teachers have to reconcile ethical tensions in examination-driven systems. The guiding question of the current study is the subject of the review: How do teachers experience and react to moral dilemmas in their effort to balance academic standards and inclusive commitments? A synthesis of the international literature, combined with the work of Pakistan and similar Global Souths, the presented review determines the prevailing themes and theoretical models as well as gaps in the study that become the subject of qualitative research.

### 2.2 Ethical Aspects of Teaching

Teaching has always been understood as a moral act, which contains evaluations of justness, concern, and accountability (Hansen, 2001; Sockett, 2012). Even when teachers present their work as technical processes, everyday choices, especially the ones concerning assessment, discipline, and support of students, according to scholars, are ethical in nature (Fenstermacher, 1990; Campbell, 2003). Moral dilemmas occur when the teachers have to take in decisions between two values that are in conflict like equity and uniformity or care and accountability (Strike, 1995). It has also been found that these dilemmas are exacerbated in inclusive schools, where the teacher has to address the needs of different learners without jeopardizing the demands of the institution (Norwich, 2013). This literature defines that there is an ethical complexity of teaching yet lacks a situational exactness.

### 2.3 Ethical Tension and Inclusive Education

The inclusive education literature also focuses on moral obligations towards equity, participation and social justice (Ainscow, 2020; Slee, 2011). Nonetheless, researchers

add that inclusion is often a cause of conflicts between ideals and practice, especially in assessment and curriculum implementation (Florian, 2019; Messiou, 2017). Educators indicate that they experience moral discomfort in cases where they are asked to use standardized assessment standards to underachieve learners, according to their learning needs (O'Flaherty and Gleeson, 2014). Such tensions are tensions of more profound value clashes set within education systems that give priority to comparability and performance rather than responsiveness and care. Although such dilemmas arise in international studies, they usually address them as isolated problems instead of production of structures.

## 2.4 The Teacher/Student Relations, Standards, Accountability, and Teacher Performativity

The accountability regimes have remarkably altered the moral landscape of teachers giving preference to measurable results and performance measures (Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2010). The studies of teacher performativity lay an emphasis on the limitation of professional judgment and ethical agency imposed by audit cultures (Perryman, 2009; Hardy, 2015). In testing-based systems, educators indicate that they assign precedence to syllabus coverage and test preparation, are prepared to override inclusion commitments by doing so (Kelchtermans, 2009; Day and Gu, 2014). These stigmas strengthen the issue of moral dilemmas by preparing ethical care as a professional risk, instead of a professional responsibility. Nevertheless, to a larger extent this study is concentrated in the western education systems.

## 2.5: Moral Reasoning and Professional Identity of Teachers

The research on teacher identity provides evidence to say that moral dilemmas are closely related to pro-professional self of teachers (Kelchtermans, 2009; Sachs, 2005). When personal beliefs and uniqueness in teaching contradict with institution expectations, teachers usually feel emotionally distressed, guilty, or dissonance (Hargreaves, 1998; O'Connor, 2008). This dissonance is further enhanced in inclusive settings when individuals are urged to maintain equal treatment and equality alongside differentiation (Norwich, 2013). According to qualitative research, pragmatic compromise or silent resistance are some of the coping mechanisms which teachers find themselves in as a way of coping with ethical tensions (Lasky, 2005).

Such results highlight the necessity to research moral dilemmas as socially and institutionally-located phenomena.

### 2.6 Global South and Pakistan Moral Dilemmas

The Global South research points to the role of resources shortage, big classes and continuous curriculum as a complication in the ethical needs of educators (Miles and Singal, 2010; Grech, 2011). Research shows that in Pakistan teachers work in extremely centralized systems based on examinations and have little room to exercise their own discretion at work (Shah, 2015; Singal, 2008). Pakistani studies that have been conducted so far have focused mostly on inclusion barriers and teacher attitudes, whereas very little research has investigated moral reasoning or ethical conflict (Ehsan, 2018; Hayat, 2016). Such a gap clouds the definition of fairness, inclusion and responsibility by the teachers on the locally localized cultural and institutional backgrounds.

### 2.7 Synthesis and Research Gap

In the literatures, there are five themes, which are interconnected, namely, (a) teaching as a moral practice, (b) ethical tensions in inclusive education, (c) how constraints on teacher agency affect accountability, (d) how moral dilemmas and professional identity are related, and (e) the lack of Global South voices. Although the theoretical models are indeed strong, international scholarship does not offer sufficient qualitative, context-sensitive studies of the experiences of teachers in inclusive classrooms and their context-specific method of negotiating moral issues. The current paper fills this gap by discussing the ethical rationale of teachers in the Pakistani primary and secondary education system and offers empirically summarized knowledge to the literature of moral and inclusive education.

### Research Methodology

This paper examined the ethical issues that teachers in inclusive primary and secondary schools in Pakistan face through the challenges of creating a balance between academic standards and obligations of inclusive education. The goal of the research was to know how teachers perceive the ethical contradictions in the assessment, curriculum pacing, grading and equity in examination based systems. Since emphasis was on moral reasoning, lived experience and meaning-making,

qualitative interpretive research method was taken. The study was based on primary data and descriptive as well as exploratory design that is suitable in investigating the complexity of ethics and professional judgment in question (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The qualitative approach was chosen to portray the voices and moral contemplations of teachers that cannot be properly investigated by means of quantitative measures or policy analysis in particular.

Data were recruited in the public and private primary and secondary schools of Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Sample [approximately 30-40] was made up of teachers who were currently engaged in the teaching of inclusive classes. Direct exposure to inclusion and assessment-related decisions in teachers was obtained with the help of purposive sampling. Semi structure interviews were used as the method of data collection and this method enabled the participants to express their moral conflicts and professional judgments as well as their coping strategies in their own terms. The interview questions were based on experiences in regards to grading decision, coverage of the curriculum, examination pressure, and perceived fairness. Informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were also upheld as ethical approval was sought from concerned authorities during the research.

Audio-taped interview was transcribed and analyzed through thematic analysis. The methodology of analysis was the six-phase process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) starting with the familiarization and initial coding, the succession of themes, review, and their improvement. There were aspects to coding, which was centered on recurring moral dilemmas, ethical justifications, emotional response, and institutional constraints. Data were systematized and analyzed by qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo). Constant comparison between the cases, memo-writing, and reflexive involvement with the data contributed to the improvement of the analytic rigor in order to provide transparency and consistency in the development of the themes.

Qualitative interpretive methodology was chosen because it has the strength of capturing reason of ethics, professional judgement, and complexity of the context. The semi-structured interviews were flexible in discussing sensitive moral issues and they could provide comparability among participants. The major strength of the

method is its thoroughness and richness of the context; but there are weaknesses such as the use of self-reports and no classroom observation. These limitations were treated in the way of close probing, comparison across cases and reflexive analysis. However, the approach is still a good concept that can be used to study the moral dilemmas of teachers in the inclusive and examination based system of education in Pakistan.

**Results**

In this section, the findings will be represented by presenting the results obtained through semi-structured interviews with teachers, who work in inclusive primary and secondary schools in Pakistan. The findings seek to respond to the study topic on the nature of teacher experience and negotiations with moral predicaments in trying to deal with academic standards and commitments of inclusiveness. Results would be placed under thematic themes that would always appear in all participants and school settings.

**4.1. Grading and Assessment related Dilemmas**

One of the major themes in interviews was moral tension caused by grading and assignment choices. Teachers said they were unsure of whether to use a standard grading structure or to modify the assessment requirements of the students with different learning needs. Respondents provided scenarios where accommodation was viewed as contradicting with other students on the issue of fairness. In the case of examination-oriented grades, teachers indicated increased pressure to have standardized results. These were dilemmas that were being reported in the public and the private schools and were especially pertinent during the board examination. Table 1 (to be added here) is the summary of the common assessment-related dilemmas that are reported.

**4.2 Curriculum Pacing**

There were always moral conflicts of teachers with the pace of the curriculum. Respondents listed the pressures to go through the prescribed syllabus on a certain schedule which sometimes involved neglecting the needs of students who may need more time or other forms of instruction. According to teachers, the team experience of reducing the speed of instruction to allow inclusion often led to the issue of lagging behind curriculum tracks. This quandary was reported in subjects disciplines

especially mathematics and science. According to teachers, most decisions about pacing were not institutionalized, adding to ethical ambiguity.

### 4.3 Pressure to Examine and Institutional Expectations

One area of serious moral tension was revealed to be performance on exams. According to the reports of teachers, there was institutional focus on test scores, school rankings, and rates of passing, which affected the choice of instruction and evaluation. Participants cited the instances where the accommodations were not made in an inclusive manner because of fears of unsuccessful examination results. Students in smaller schools were under more pressure by parents and school administration to focus on academic achievements. These strains were always detected, and these are inter-provincial and inter-school.

### 4.4 Emotional Reactions to Ethical Problems

Teachers gave a variety of emotional reactions related with moral dilemmas such as guilt, stress, frustration, and moral discomfort. Respondents said that internal conflict came when the institutional expectation was contradicted with personal perspective of fairness and caring. There were also teachers who expressed the emotional exhaustion, experienced because of being subjected to frequent ethical decision-making without sufficient support. Such emotional reactions were observed without references to the teaching experience or the subject specialization.

### 4.5 Coping Strategies and pragmatic Compromises

The educators indicated that they could use different coping mechanisms to address ethical issues. These were informal accommodation, selective flexibility in marking, and unspoken accommodation of inclusive practices, at the confines of a classroom. Respondents spoke of striking a balance between competing demands based on pragmatic compromises other than official policy directions. These were not documented strategies that were usually individualized and different among the teachers and schools. Teachers remarked that these strategies helped create an opportunity to overcome ethical conflicts situationally, but it did not exclude the internal conflicting situations.

### 4.6 Data Limitations Observed

It has some limitations that the results can be interpreted. Information was premised

on the self-reported accounts, which could be reflecting perceptions of the participants, and not what they observed. Observations in the classroom were not observed and there was no opportunity to check behaviors reported. Also, the research involved several provinces and school types thus the results might not be a representative of all the education systems in Pakistan. These restrictions are accepted without further interpretation and dealt with later in the Discussion section.

## Discussion

### 5.1 Summary of Major Findings

This paper has given an insight into issues of moral dilemma among teachers in inclusive primary and secondary schools in Pakistan concerning a compromise between the academic requirements and the inclusive promises. The results reveal that educators regularly experience conflicts of ethics pertaining to fairness of grade, pace of the curriculum, pressure in exams and expectations of the institution. Such dilemmas were also accompanied by emotional feelings of stress, guilt and moral discomfort. Educators used the pragmatic coping mechanisms such as informal accommodations and selective flexibility to balance conflicting needs. All the findings taken collectively demonstrate that moral dilemmas are not isolated events but being a cumulative and inbuilt component of inclusive teaching practice.

### 5.2 Interpretation of Findings

The results indicate that moral dilemmas in the conduct of teachers emerge due to structural incongruity in the education systems that require standardization and inclusion, at the same time. The teachers are put as moral agents whose roles require a balancing of institutional demands and professional values of care and fairness. The dependence on personal and non-formal methods of coping points at the fact that the ethical decision-making is not supported on the policy basis to the greatest extent. This puts individual teachers in charge of systemic contradictions, which exacerbates moral working conditions and career anxiety.

### 5.3 Correlation to Existing Literature

These results are consistent with the literature indicating teaching to be a moral and ethical practice, which is an institutional context (Hansen, 2001; Campbell, 2003). Other such tensions have been reported as accountable tensions with inclusion in

examination based systems, in which teachers feel moral pressure when ethical caring collides with performance expectations (Ball, 2003; O'Flaherty and Gleeson, 2014). The emotional facets that are described by participants are related to studies on the emotional labor and identity of teachers (Hargreaves, 1998; Kelchtermans, 2009). This research adds to the existing literature with empirical evidence on the case of Pakistan, which is not well represented in the literature on teacher ethics and inclusive education (Singal, 2008; Shah, 2015).

## 5.4 Limitations of the Study

There are a number of shortcomings that must be recognized. The research used self reported data on interviews which might constitute subjective interpretations of moral dilemmas. Lack of classroom observations does not allow direct analysis of the manifestation of ethical decisions in practice. Also, the study involved teachers of various provinces and types of schools, though the sample of qualitative is limited to generalization. These shortcomings indicate the caution to be used in generalizing the respective findings to related contexts.

## 5.5 Implications to the Theoretical and Practical

Theoretically, this research can play a role in the scholarship of moral and inclusive education by predicting the occurrence of the ethical tension as a structural characteristic of inclusive schooling, instead of as an individual weakness. In practice, the results emphasize the necessity of institutional solutions promoting ethical decision-making, including participative evaluation standards and professional discussion forums. Specifically, none of the teacher education and in-service training programs in Pakistan may be missing the line that explicitly discusses moral dilemmas and ethical reasoning in inclusive settings.

## 5.6 Alternative Explanations

Another way to explain the results is that teachers might have reported the instances of dilemmas as a demonstration of the overall discontent with the working conditions as opposed to the tensions associated with the inclusion. Also, the differences in leadership and support system in schools can have an impact on the level of ethical stress in teachers. These options indicate that there are a number of factors that interact to cause moral dilemma with organizational culture and leadership practices

being among them. Returning to the research question, that is, how do teachers in Pakistani schools experience and mobilize moral dilemmas in balancing academic standards and inclusive commitments, the findings indicate that teachers find a way out of these dilemmas through pragmatic compromise and personalized judgement. The paper proves that insufficiently resolved ethical conflicts are a typical characteristic of inclusive instruction in the systems in which the study is conducted, which are characterized by the examination-focused approach, and the necessity of systemic congruity between the academic criteria and the values of inclusiveness.

**Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to investigate the ethical issues which teachers in inclusive primary and secondary schools in Pakistan face, in their efforts to resolve academic standards and the responsibility of inclusive education. The study was a response to the nagging conflict between accountability systems that focus on examinations and ethical duty of teachers to the varied learners. Returning to the main idea of the work, the results prove that the development of inclusive teaching in Pakistan is formed due to the lack of a set of ethical issues instead of the absence of guiding policies and the institutional sponsorship.

The research indicated that educators frequently face ethical dilemmas connected with equity of grades, schedule curriculum, accommodations in assessment and pressure in examinations, with emotional strain and disquiet tendencies. These results are relevant to the study of morality dilemma as an organizational aspect of comprehensive education as opposed to a teacher deficiency. The study reminds the audience by revisiting the larger issues proposed in the introduction that an inclusive education cannot be propagated solely by technical solutions. The potential use of this study would be reflected in applying it to the Pakistani educational policy, teacher education, and school leadership. To reconcile the academic standards and inclusive values, it is necessary to support them in an ethical framework, inclusive assessment policies, and professional moral discussion space. Future studies should focus on institutional and leadership mechanisms that will alleviate ethical stress and help teachers to make inclusive commitments without attaining professional integrity.

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